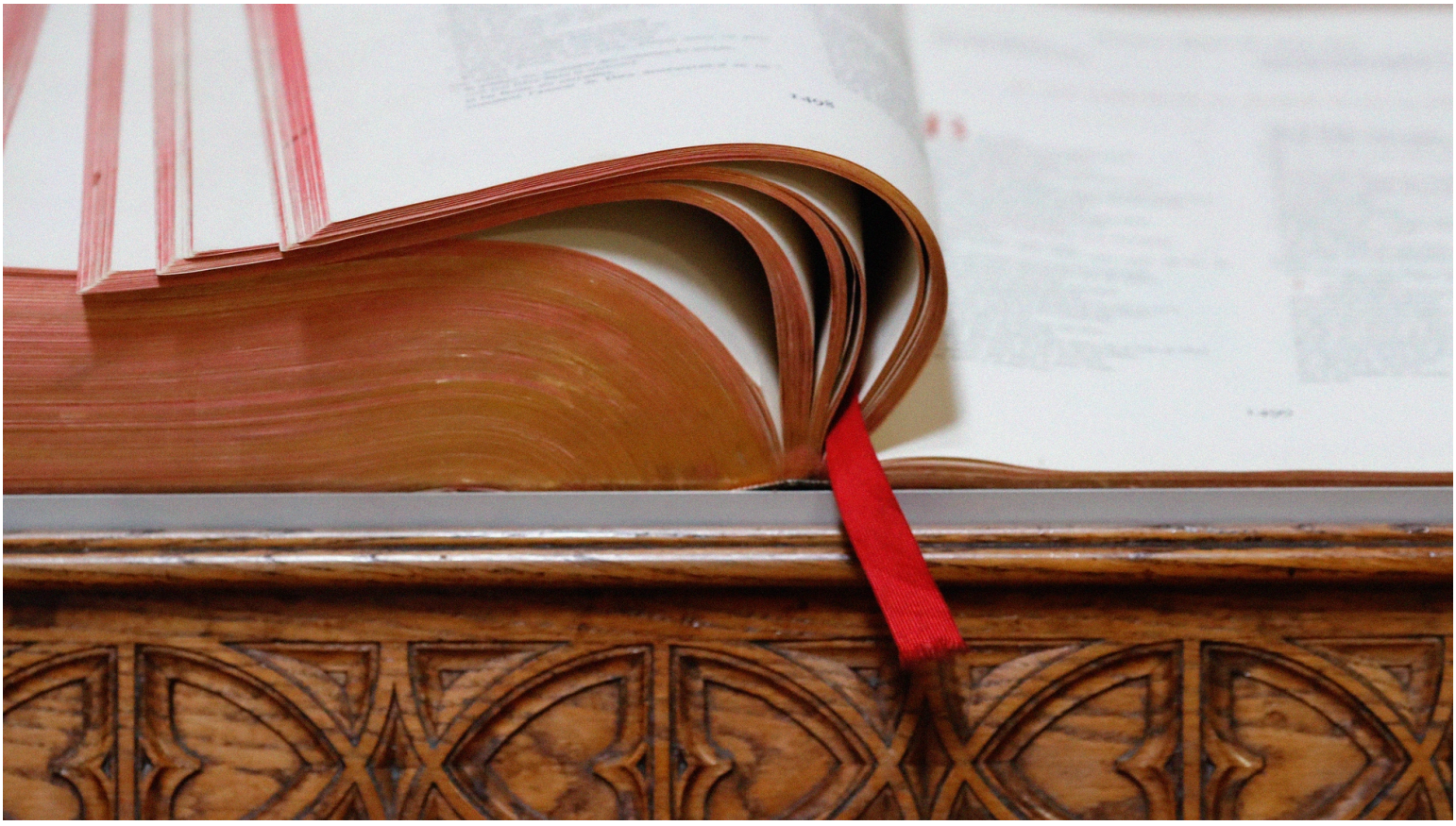
IDEAS

American Christians Face a Choice

The faithful can still repair the wreckage they have wrought.

By Peter Wehner



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Robert Jeffress, the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, has long been one of Donald Trump's most fawning supporters. By his own account, one reason for his loyalty is that Trump embodies an ethic—cruel, vengeful, and mendacious—that Jeffress and many millions of evangelicals and fundamentalists not only tolerate but welcome.

In an NPR interview in 2016, Jeffress explained, "I don't want some meek and mild leader or somebody who's going to turn the other cheek. I've said I want the meanest, toughest SOB I can find to protect this nation. And so that's why Trump's tone doesn't bother me."

Three years later, Jeffress said that evangelicals "don't want to see this warrior removed from his place of leadership in our country." And earlier this year, after Trump's expletive-laden Truth Social post on Easter, Jeffress once again rushed to his defense. "If President Trump were a third-grade Sunday school teacher in our church, that might be a problem, but he's not a third-grade Sunday school teacher," he said. "He's the president of the United States, and presidents sometimes have salty language."

The justifications offered by Jeffress, by the evangelical leader Franklin Graham, and by countless white evangelicals and fundamentalists who voted for Trump—north of 80 percent in three consecutive elections—amount to something like this: America is engaged in an existential, even cosmic struggle; the enemy is composed of secular, progressive forces who are agents of evil;

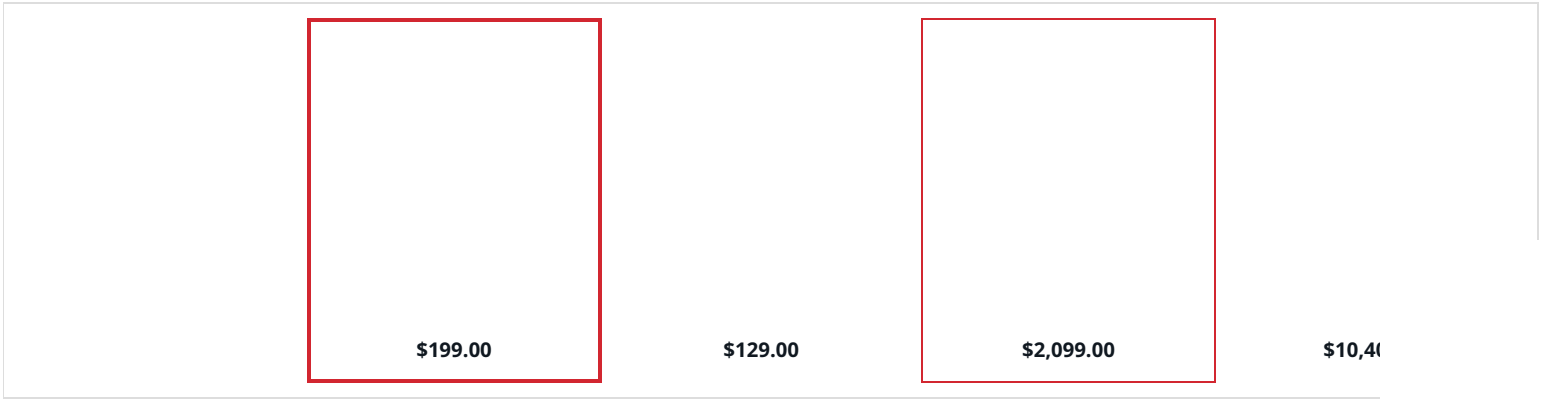
and Trump's combativeness and ruthlessness are not vices but necessary virtues. He has been called by God for this moment. Trump's son Eric said that his father "literally saved Christianity."

Peter Wehner: The evangelicals who see Trump's viciousness as a virtue

During the 2024 campaign, Trump reposted a video titled "God Made Trump" on Truth Social and screened it at his rallies. The narrator begins in the same vein as the talk-radio pioneer Paul Harvey's famous monologue, "So God Made a Farmer," by intoning, "On June 14, 1946, God looked down on his planned paradise and said: 'I need a caretaker.' So God gave us Trump."

But after mostly following Harvey's script, changing the specifics to apply to politics, the video takes a sharp turn. "God had to have somebody willing to go into the den of vipers," the narrator says. "Call out the fake news for their tongues as sharp as a serpent's. The poison of vipers is on their lips—and yet stop. So God made Trump."

And then, departing even further from the original, it explains that the Almighty was not yet done: "God said, 'I need somebody who will be strong and courageous. Who will not be afraid or terrified of the wolves when they attack. A man who cares for the flock. A shepherd to mankind who won't ever leave nor forsake them. I need the most diligent worker to follow the path and remain strong in faith and know the belief of God and country.'"



It's important to understand, however, that Trump didn't fundamentally *change* the sensibilities of many evangelicals as much as he *embodied* them. The Calvin University historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez believes that large swaths of the evangelical world embraced Trump as their "ultimate fighting champion." They were looking for a rugged warrior-protector to rally around, and a decade ago, they found him.

The result has been wreckage.

WHY EVANGELICALS EMBRACED TRUMP, despite his having lived a dissolute, hedonistic lifestyle, is a long and complicated story. Part of the answer is that Trump realigned his previously held views on a range of issues, including abortion and judges, to put himself in lockstep with the Christian right. But in both the 2016 and 2024 GOP primaries, Trump's competitors were at least as conservative on these issues as he was, and had been for much longer than Trump. Yet he still won the votes of many self-identified Christians—so something else was going on.

One advantage that Trump enjoyed stemmed from the importance placed within significant parts of the evangelical and fundamentalist worlds on male authority and "headship," on "man as protector" and woman as a "helpmeet," and the corresponding disdain for "feminized" Christianity. Many figures within evangelicalism have promoted an aggressive, domineering, even abusive view of manhood—affixing to it, as Du Mez argues, the label *biblical*. They

celebrate a "warrior mentality."

The Christian author John Eldredge's influential 2001 book, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul*, argued that men were created by God to long for "a battle to fight, an adventure to live, a beauty to rescue." The desire to be a warrior, he believes, is "hardwired into every man." And Eldredge had only disdain for men who adhered to a traditional understanding of Jesus's message. According to Eldredge, "a hesitant man is the last thing in the world a woman needs. She needs a lover and a warrior, not a Really Nice Guy." The Wild at Heart website declares, "You are a warrior, and your destiny is to join the Great Warrior in his battle against evil." And also that "Christianity does not ask men to become altar boys; it calls them up as warriors."

I've witnessed firsthand how churches have embraced the ethos of male dominance. Even theologically conservative women have left such churches because of the patriarchal mindset that defines women in relation to male authority. Those women didn't feel seen or respected.

But if this ideology repels some Christians, it has clearly attracted many others. And Trump's domineering, loutish approach to women spoke to its adherents in a way that few, if any, of his rivals could match.

But that's hardly the only reason Trump became a revered figure among many American Christians. For decades, they felt looked down on, mocked, and

dishonored by elite culture. Tremendous distrust and resentment built up within them, a longing to strike out at the individuals, institutions, and movements they came to hate. They wanted vengeance. Trump understood this. "I am your warrior. I am your justice," he told his supporters during the 2024 campaign. "And for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution."

Stephanie McCrummen: The most interesting part of Trump's prayer rally

Trump's contempt and cruelty toward his enemies has been an important part of his appeal to his Christian base. Many of Trump's supporters relish his dehumanization of those they despise. Trump might be a bully, but he's *their* bully. They longed for a restoration of status, for a "fighter" who would help them regain cultural dominance. Trump's promise to them was a simple, direct appeal to power: "I will tell you, Christianity is under tremendous siege, whether we want to talk about it or we don't want to talk about it," Trump said in 2016. Christians make up the overwhelming majority of the country, he told his supporters, but "we don't exert the power that we should have." As president, Trump promised, "Christianity will have power."

For many evangelicals and fundamentalists, that power would be wielded as part of a spiritual battle, not just a political one, and the stakes could not have been higher. They felt themselves on the losing end of a decades-long culture war, particularly in the realm of human sexuality. The left was out to destroy America, and to destroy Christianity. Trump would wield the sword on their behalf. Sometimes he was described as a modern-day Cyrus, a Persian king and a pagan in the Hebrew Bible whom God nevertheless anointed and would use for his purposes. At other times, Trump was compared to King David, a notorious sinner God still loved and used. Whether Trump was himself a godly man was irrelevant; the Almighty would use him for godly purposes. That, at least, is the story they told themselves.

The more merciless, lawless and foulmouthed Trump became, the more his support among conservative evangelicals grew. By 2024, Trump won a higher percentage of the white evangelical vote than any previous president in history, including Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. The fusion between Trump and evangelicals was complete, and it didn't happen by accident. He was the rider on the white horse many of them had been hoping for. What they may not have quite realized is that they summoned something closer to William Butler Yeats's "rough beast." They loosed anarchy upon the world.

How can American Christians begin to repair at least some of the immense damage they have done?

The ancient tradition of Christian humanism has, in times past, helped Christianity recover its bearings. The framework rests on the claim that the deepest affirmation of what it means to be human is found in the incarnation; in the belief that every person is made in the image of God, which is the grounding of human dignity; and in the conviction that learning, scholarship, and the cultivation of the arts and the imagination can themselves be expressions of faith and acts of devotion.

THE ROOTS OF CHRISTIAN HUMANISM go back to the early Church, to figures such as Origen, who integrated Platonism with Christian theology, and the Cappadocian Fathers.

Although these figures would never have referred to themselves as Christian humanists—that term didn't gain currency until many centuries later—they were Christian humanists, in substance if not in name. They believed classical culture and Christian faith could be allies. They wished to place human reason, philosophy, and classical education in the service of Christian revelation.

Over the centuries, others built on this foundation, including Thomas Aquinas during the High Middle Ages. But Christian humanism as a phenomenon flourished most during the Renaissance. Desiderius Erasmus, a Catholic theologian, promoted the concept of *docta pietas*, or "learned piety." What he called the "philosophy of Christ" prioritized inward transformation and a pure heart over rigid theological dogma. For Erasmus, theology and philosophy went together; humanism could be a means to build up the *philosophia Christi*. The main aim, however, was not to improve the intellect but to live in imitation of Christ.

By the 20th century, Christian thinkers such as Jacques Maritain, T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, W. H. Auden, and Simone Weil were drawing on the Christian-humanist tradition to critique their own culture and to outline a plan for moral and spiritual regeneration.

As the scholar Alan Jacobs has argued in *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis*, each of them strove to make sense of a world at

war and in chaos, and to create meaning within it. They "worked with astonishing energy to rescue their world for a deeply thoughtful, culturally rich Christianity," Jacobs writes, "and to rescue that Christianity for their world." A cultural crisis created an unusual opportunity for Christian humanism to be given a new hearing. Some of us hope that it may happen yet again.

Christian humanism isn't an easy concept to understand, in part because the noun and the modifier are inherently at odds. Enlightenment humanism is generally understood as anthropocentric, whereas Christianity is theocentric. The humanistic impulse tends to make reason the final authority, whereas Christianity is a revelatory faith.

If humanists view the things of this world as ends in themselves, Christianity aims to treat them more as passing things. Historically, humanists, especially since the Enlightenment, have defined themselves against religion generally, and against Christianity specifically. But the hostility runs in both directions. Many Christians have been just as wary of "Athens"—a shorthand reference to human philosophy and worldly learning—as humanists have been of the church. In the words of the early Christian theologian Tertullian: "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"

Tertullian was arguing that the Christian faith should be kept separate from corrupting, worldly influences. He didn't want Christians to elevate human philosophy above divine revelation. Many Christians today share his concerns. But advocates of Christian humanism would say, in response, that Athens can serve Jerusalem and that humanism, when religiously grounded, can serve the Christian faith and the common good.

They would say, too, that the life of the mind and the life of faith are not in opposition. People of faith can absolutely benefit from a serious engagement with scholarship, classical learning, and the arts, with what the poet Matthew Arnold referred to as "the best which has been thought and said in the world." They are not a distraction from sacred things but instead can be an expression of them.

Moreover, Christian humanists believe the sacred-secular divide that many Christians embrace is not just artificial but profoundly misguided. They see engagement with the world as a divine commission. The incarnation dignified the material world, which is good, though in constant need of repair and healing. Christianity, then, is not a separatist, otherworldly faith. As the Psalmist says, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it."

But at the very core of Christian humanism is a belief in the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings, who are made in the image of God, and in the pursuit of a society that respects and values the intrinsic and equal worth of the individual, regardless of social status.

Tyler Austin Harper: There is already a word for the deep moral failures of AI

The philosopher and theologian David Bentley Hart says that Christianity brought a moral revolution to a world that assessed a person's value based on things such as birth, class, and power, where the weak were despised. "It is practically impossible for us today to appreciate the magnitude of the scandal that many pagans naturally felt at the bizarre prodigality with which the early Christians were willing to grant full humanity to persons of every class and

condition," Hart wrote.

There were, of course, non-Christian sources of human dignity that predated Christianity—Judaism is the most obvious and shining example; Stoicism another—but Christianity added immeasurably to them.

But this needs to be acknowledged too: Christianity has often betrayed its commitment to the *Imago Dei,* the belief that people are made in the image of God and therefore have inherent, equal dignity and worth. The moral failures of Christianity make for a long and horrifying list: the Inquisition, the Crusades, and the witch trials; the persecution of Jews, Indigenous peoples, and gay people; the defense of slavery on biblical grounds by major figures such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield; the role of the Reich Church in Nazi Germany and the Dutch Reformed Church in apartheid South Africa; the complicity of Christian churches in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda; the role of the Russian Orthodox Church under Patriarch Kirill, who has called Vladimir Putin's leadership "a miracle of God"; and the cover-up of sexual abuse by the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations. Christianity has an awful lot to answer for, lament over, and learn from.

So what does Christian humanism offer today's world? Any answer starts from within the faith. The first task is to help people who claim to follow Jesus better align their lives and attitudes with his. Christian humanism offers an urgent corrective to those who equate Christian success with the seizure of power. Instead, it takes as its model Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, which was the work of the lowliest of servants, and Jesus's declaration that the blessed are the meek and the merciful, those who mourn and are pure in heart, who are peacemakers and hunger and thirst for righteousness. The British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, who converted to Christianity late in his life, pointed out that Jesus's entire ministry was directed *against* the pretensions of earthly power.

Christian humanism, by virtue of its openness to serious scholarship and the importance it places on the "life of the mind," provides a needed alternative to the anti-intellectualism and black-and-white thinking that characterizes much of modern American Christianity.

A dozen years ago, I spent time with a close friend, Steve Hayner, shortly before he died. Steve, who was president of Columbia Theological Seminary, told me, "We can neither afford an ill-defined center nor overly defined edges." He meant that Christianity cannot abandon its core convictions about objective truth, grounded in God and most fully revealed and embodied in Christ. But it is precisely their firm grip on the center that should allow Christians to be comfortable with complexity, and even with uncertainty and mystery on the edges, where the truth can be glimpsed only "through a glass, darkly," in the Apostle Paul's words. This combination of serene confidence and epistemic modesty—this comfort with shades of gray—is rare among contemporary Christians.

For much of the past half century, evangelical engagement with the world has instead been shaped largely by fear—a fear of losing cultural and political influence, and with it a whole way of life. Those fears are not entirely unfounded, and in some cases they are rooted in a longing to protect children and deeply held values. But this siege mentality breeds suspicion of outsiders and a defensiveness toward the world. Many Christians seek to keep a hostile

world at bay by discouraging inquiry and critical thinking, by empowering theological enforcers, and by drawing narrow doctrinal boundaries.

But other Christians exhibit a confidence and calm assurance in Christ that allows them to engage with the world with less fear and defensiveness. They believe Jesus is Lord of all; that truth and beauty, wherever they are found, help us see God better; and that in the end, all shall be well. This puts them, and those around them, at ease. It is the opposite of a culture-war mentality.

There's a gaping need for a Christianity whose posture toward the world is more irenic and charitable, far less anxious and fear-driven—one that cultivates curiosity, including toward those outside the faith, and fosters a deep longing for knowledge and understanding. There's a need for Christians to take beauty seriously as a theological category and to hold the doctrine of human depravity in its proper place: as a truth that never diminishes the human dignity it assumes. The best ambassadors of the Christian faith are people who, because of their faith, find ways to re-enchant the world.

Whether what I'm describing belongs under the banner of Christian humanism or some different name, Christians must recalibrate how they see God's world and those who are made in his image. This is a generations-long undertaking. It involves reshaping not just beliefs but perceptions, the sensibilities and dispositions that lie beneath beliefs. It can be done only by creating a culture in which the best qualities of Christian humanism and the

concept of the *Imago Dei* are not just given lip service but cultivated and celebrated, in churches and beyond churches.

I see signs of encouragement. My wife, Cindy, and I recently attended the Understory Festival, a remarkable three-day gathering at Washington National Cathedral hosted by *Comment Magazine*. Writers, artists, musicians, pastors—more than 1,000 attended—gathered at a time of cultural fragility. The British theologian Luke Bretherton, in his remarks at the festival, said "to follow Christ is not simply to await salvation in some distant future but to begin participating here and now in forms of common life marked by justice, generosity, and mutual care."

THE SOCIOLOGIST OF RELIGION Rodney Stark, explaining how a tiny and obscure messianic movement became, over a few centuries, the dominant faith of Western civilization, pointed to the early Christians' "communal compassion" and dense social networks: their care for the sick, widows, and orphans; their welcoming of strangers and the outcast; and their willingness to form bonds beyond their own ranks rather than sealing themselves off.

During deadly plagues, Christians stayed to nurse the sick while others fled, and won the gratitude of those they saved. They created networks of belonging and social solidarity in cities torn apart by ethnic strife. They took in infants left exposed to die. They opposed gladiatorial games because the

games turned killing into entertainment and conditioned spectators to celebrate barbarism.

Christians also elevated the status of women—refusing the widespread practice of female infanticide, condemning promiscuity by husbands as well as wives, and insisting that marriage carried obligations running in both directions. The historian Garry Wills, in writing about the early church and the life of Jesus, observed, "The equality of men and women was a thing so shocking in the patriarchal society of Jesus's time that his own male followers could not understand it." And more revolutionary still was the reach of their love, which went beyond family and tribe and was extended to strangers and even enemies. It made Christianity the most inclusive faith of the ancient world.

Peter Wehner: Hegseth's unholy war

The Roman emperor Julian complained that the "impious Galileans" cared for pagans as well as their own poor, thereby increasing their popularity. He urged his fellow pagans to match the Christians' "benevolence to strangers." It was a tribute, from an enemy of Christianity, to the power of Christian charity. "Perhaps above all else," Stark writes, "Christianity brought a new conception of humanity to a world saturated with capricious cruelty and the vicarious love of death."

Will it do so again? In some places, it already is. Christians are showing themselves to be repairers of the breach. McLean Presbyterian Church, where my wife and I attend, set up a program to assist Afghan refugees in the immediate aftermath of the American withdrawal in 2021. Today the church partners with local organizations that assist the homeless, the elderly, and victims of abuse. It supports crisis pregnancy centers and overseas organizations that serve impoverished and vulnerable populations in places such as Romania and Kenya. Yet much of the very good work being done by followers of Jesus is overshadowed by many of the very bad things being done by followers of Jesus.

Frederick Douglass, who was born a slave, has been called the African American founder of the nation's second republic, the one born of the Civil War. A man of deep Christian faith, who suffered lashes and beatings at the hands of those who also claimed his faith, Douglass said, "Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference."

Narrowing the enormous difference between the Christianity of our land and the Christianity of Christ is the urgent calling of our time.

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