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### Making Evangelicals Great Again? American Evangelicals in the Age of Trump

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#### Recommended Citation

Gasaway, Brantley W.. "Making Evangelicals Great Again? American Evangelicals in the Age of Trump." *Evangelical Review of Theology: A Global Forum* (2019) : 293-311.

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# Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

Volume 43 • Number 4 • October 2019

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WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

*Department of Theological Concerns*

Published by



# Making Evangelicals Great Again? American Evangelicals in the Age of Trump

*Brantley W. Gasaway*

In contemporary American political culture, many people regard evangelicals as essential constituents of the Religious Right and assume that religious conservatism necessitates political conservatism. These stereotypes are understandable. In recent decades, a growing and now overwhelming majority of white evangelicals have aligned themselves with the Republican Party and conservative political ideology. According to exit polls, 70 to 81 percent of white evangelicals have voted for Republican candidates in presidential and mid-term elections since 2004.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, conservative evangelicals and Religious Right leaders have dominated the attention of the media, politicians, and general public. In turn, ‘there’s a lot of perceptions that the term evangelicals means “Christians who vote Republican”’, reported David Kinnaman, president of the evangelical polling firm Barna Group.<sup>2</sup>

Yet such impressions fail to capture the nuance and diversity of American evangelicals’ political engagement. Not only do they virtually ignore non-white evangelicals, but they also overlook the small but vigorous faction of politically progressive evangelicals—an evangelical left, so to speak—who have both challenged the conservative majority of white evangelicals and tried to change the popular perception of evangelicals. When they have felt unable to ignore this progressive evangelical minority, Religious Right leaders have used various strategies to dismiss or dis-

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<sup>1</sup> Danielle Kurtzleben, ‘Are You an Evangelical? Are You Sure?’ *National Public Radio*, December 19, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/19/458058251/are-you-an-evangelical-are-you-sure>; Jessica Martinez and Gregory A. Smith, ‘How the Faith Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis’, *Pew Research Center*, 9 November 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>; Elizabeth Podrebarac Scrupac and Gregory A. Smith, ‘How Religious Groups Voted in the Midterm Elections’, *Pew Research Center*, 7 November 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact->

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[tank/2018/11/07/how-religious-groups-voted-in-the-midterm-elections/](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/07/how-religious-groups-voted-in-the-midterm-elections/).

<sup>2</sup> Kurtzleben, ‘Are You an Evangelical? Are You Sure?’

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credit their positions. But an incident in April 2018 was probably the first time that the threat of arrest became a tactic.

Shane Claiborne, a prominent progressive evangelical activist and co-founder of a group called Red Letter Christians, had sent a letter to Jerry Falwell Jr., the president of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. Founded by the late Jerry Falwell Sr., a televangelist who galvanized the rise of the Religious Right in the 1970s, Liberty University has always presented itself as a bastion of religious and political conservatism. In recent years, Falwell Jr. has become one of President Trump's most ardent evangelical supporters. He was the first Religious Right leader to endorse Trump during the Republican primaries, and he regularly appears in the media to defend the president against critics.

Claiborne wrote to Falwell as he was planning to come to Lynchburg in early April 2018 for an event that organizers were calling 'A Revival of Jesus and Justice'. In his letter, Claiborne asked Falwell if they could meet to pray together. He also asked for permission to bring people from the revival onto Liberty's campus to join students in a prayer vigil.

Instead of a direct reply from Falwell, Claiborne received an official notice from the Liberty University Police Department, declaring that Claiborne was restricted from all Liberty University properties and events. If he violated this restriction, the notice warned, Claiborne would be arrested for trespassing and punished by up to 12 months in jail and a fine of up to

\$2,500.<sup>3</sup>

Although Claiborne insisted that his request was sincere, he should not have been surprised that Falwell treated it as disingenuous. Claiborne and his fellow progressive evangelicals had specifically chosen Lynchburg as their site to protest the support for Trump expressed by Falwell and other Religious Right leaders. Claiborne had labelled this type of Christianity as 'toxic evangelicalism', and the Red Letter Christians advertised their Lynchburg revival as an alternative to 'the distorted Christian nationalism that many white evangelical leaders have become known for'. Thus Falwell had good reason to regard the Lynchburg revival as a thinly veiled attack on the theology and politics of conservative evangelicals like him.<sup>4</sup>

The organizers of the two-day Revival of Jesus and Justice succeeded in capturing the media's attention, giving them an opportunity to highlight progressive evangelicals' distinctive political theology and agenda. Speakers and workshops addressed poverty, racial injustice, immigration reform, mass incarceration, American militarism and LGBTQ justice. Journalists from the *New York Times*,

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<sup>3</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, 'For Many, Christianity and Trumpism are Synonymous. These Evangelicals are Pushing Back', *Vox*, 12 April 2018, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/4/12/17216258/lynchburg-rally-red-letter-revival-shane-claiborne-jerry-falwell-jr-liberty-university>.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Jenkins, 'Christian Group Plans "Revival" to Protest "Toxic Evangelicalism"', *Religion News Service*, 8 February 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/02/08/christian-group-plans-revival-to-protest-liberty-u-and-toxic-evangelicalism/>.

*National Public Radio*, *Vox* and other media outlets attended the Lynchburg revival and portrayed it as the 'site of a battleground over the future of American evangelicalism'. For progressive evangelicals, one reporter summarized, 'the evangelical establishment's embrace of Trumpism—unbridled capitalism, xenophobic nativism, and a willingness to engage with white supremacy—goes against everything Jesus stands for.' Thus the Lynchburg revival was part of progressive evangelical leaders' persistent efforts to counter the partisan politics of the Religious Right and, during the current presidential administration, to debunk popular perceptions of evangelicals as faithful followers of Donald Trump.<sup>5</sup>

This article describes the ways in which the politically progressive minority of US evangelicals have reacted both to President Trump's administration and to most white evangelicals' remarkable support of Trump himself. Not surprisingly, progressive evangelicals vociferously opposed Trump's candidacy and tried to dissuade other evangelicals from voting from him. In the wake of his election, leaders of the evangelical left mobilized to protect the people and policies that seemed most threatened by

the new administration. This article summarizes the proposals, protests, and petitions of progressive evangelicals with respect to four broad issues: racial justice, immigration, healthcare and economic policies. On the whole, the current political context has exacerbated a long-simmering identity crisis among progressive evangelicals, as they measure the costs of identifying with a religious tradition and label that has become popularly associated with white Christian supporters of Donald Trump.

Progressive evangelicals have not been the only ones troubled by Trump and the ways in which most white evangelicals have embraced him. This article highlights how a small but vocal number of more moderate and conservative evangelical leaders have taken various political positions that align with the goals of progressive evangelicals. Not least, a fair number of these other anti-Trump evangelicals have also questioned the value of continuing to identify as 'evangelical' in the current climate of American politics.

This mutual disillusionment and the presence of partially overlapping political concerns could serve as a common ground enabling progressive and other anti-Trump evangelicals to co-operate in countering pro-Trump evangelical conservatives. However, the persistence of conflicting approaches to abortion and same-sex marriage, as well as their participation in different religious networks, diminishes the likelihood of such a partnership. I conclude this article with reflections upon progressive evangelicals' perennial efforts to 'reclaim' the evangelical tradition in the US from its association with political conservatism.

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<sup>5</sup> Burton, 'For Many, Christianity and Trumpism are Synonymous'; Laurie Goodstein, 'Anti-Trump Evangelicals Confront Their Brethren', *New York Times*, 23 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/23/us/anti-trump-evangelicals-lynchburg.html>; Sarah McCammon, "'Lynchburg Revival' Activists Warn of Rising 'Christian Nationalism'", *National Public Radio*, 7 April 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/04/07/600565196/lynchburg-revival-activists-warn-of-rising-christian-nationalism>.

## I. The Contemporary Progressive Evangelical Movement

Contemporary progressive evangelicalism emerged as a reform movement within the larger network of modern evangelicalism in the United States. In the late 1960s, a small group of disgruntled leaders began calling on evangelicals to abandon narrow religious preoccupations and apolitical conservatism. Outside of strident anti-communism, most American evangelicals in the mid-twentieth century had come to regard social and political action as distractions from their primary task of evangelism. They associated progressive politics with theological liberalism and the Social Gospel, believing that only an aggregate of spiritual and moral reforms of individuals would alleviate social problems.

In addition, because many evangelicals had embraced dispensational premillennialism, they also believed that social and political activism could do little to stem the cultural decline that they expected to occur before Jesus' imminent second coming. In contrast, pioneering progressive evangelical leaders insisted that the Bible calls people to care not only for people's spiritual welfare but also for their physical and material needs. Inspired by the civil rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam War, they urged fellow evangelicals to take political and social action to redress injustices and inequalities.

In 1973, a group of these progressive evangelical leaders signed the 'Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern'. This manifesto marked the public coalescence of the progressive evangelical

movement and established it as a recognizable minority within evangelical circles.<sup>6</sup>

At the end of the 1970s, however, the newly emergent Religious Right captured the public's attention and pushed most evangelicals to support conservative political causes and candidates. Leaders of the Religious Right built their movement around campaigns to oppose perceived assaults on America's Christian heritage and traditional standards of family and sexuality. Yet progressive evangelicals maintain that the Bible calls Christians to care as much about combatting poverty, ending racism, working for peace, defending human rights and protecting the environment as they do about abortion and same-sex marriage. As a result, progressive evangelicals have argued, Christians should prioritize reforming injustices and inequality in their public engagement.<sup>7</sup>

The evangelical left has remained a minority faction within evangelical circles over the past four decades. Yet its most visible and vocal representatives have served as gadflies, offering an alternative to the Religious Right and developing biblical arguments to persuade American evangelicals to

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<sup>6</sup> Brantley W. Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); David R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals*.

support progressive public policies.<sup>8</sup>

This analysis of the progressive evangelical movement focuses on a network of prominent representatives such as Sojourners and its president Jim Wallis; Red Letter Christians, co-founded by Shane Claiborne and well-known progressive evangelical Tony Campolo; activists such as Lisa Sharon Harper; and the organization Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA), led for many decades by Ron Sider and currently by its executive director Nikki Toyama-Szeto. Collectively, the writings and activities of these representatives serve as a lens through which to view and to interpret the evangelical left's contemporary public engagement.

## II. Evangelicals and the Election of Donald Trump

When Donald Trump won the US presidency in 2016, he received more than 80 percent of the votes cast by white evangelicals. A complex combination of factors motivated this overwhelming support for Trump. Dedication to the Republican party made it likely that most white evangelicals would vote for its nominee over any Democratic candidate. Hillary Clinton in particular seemed an especially untenable option. Due to the distaste for her politics and personality that began during her years as First Lady in the midst of the 1990s culture wars, three-quarters of evangelicals cited dislike of Clinton as a primary reason

why they supported Trump.<sup>9</sup>

Many prominent conservative evangelicals such as Franklin Graham, Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, author and radio host Eric Metaxas, Family Research Council president Tony Perkins, and theologian Wayne Grudem urged Christians to overlook Trump's history of personal immorality since he pledged to appoint pro-life Supreme Court justices who would also protect their religious liberty in an increasingly secularizing culture. For evangelical laity, polls indicated that improving the economy and national security were the most important issues determining their vote, and Trump's campaign promises of economic populism, combatting Islamic terrorism, immigration restrictions and border control targeted these concerns.<sup>10</sup>

Many white evangelicals' insensitivity to racial bigotry and expressed fears for growing racial diversity within the United States made them tolerant (and perhaps, in some cases, supportive) of Trump's appeals

<sup>8</sup> Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals*; Joel A. Carpenter, 'Compassionate Evangelicalism', *Christianity Today* 47, no. 12 (December 2003): 40-42.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey, 'The Deep Disgust for Hillary Clinton That Drives So Many Evangelicals to Support Trump', *Washington Post*, 9 October 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/09/the-deep-disgust-for-hillary-clinton-that-drives-so-many-evangelicals-to-support-trump/>.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Noble, 'I'm an Evangelical. The Religious Right Leaders Who Support Trump Don't Speak for Me', *Vox*, 24 October 2016, <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2016/10/24/13361582/trump-religious-right>; Myriam Renaud, 'Myths Debunked: Why Did White Evangelical Christians Vote for Trump?' *Sightings*, 19 January 2017, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/myths-debunked-why-did-white-evangelical-christians-vote-trump>.

to white identity politics. Finally, Trump's slogan 'Make America Great Again' resonated deeply with white evangelicals' own nostalgic view of America as a Christian nation.<sup>11</sup>

Progressive evangelicals worked in vain to prevent Donald Trump's election. In the early months of 2016, as it became apparent that he would win the Republican nomination for president, the evangelical left began to denounce Trump's candidacy. Sojourners' Jim Wallis and Lisa Sharon Harper, ESA's Ron Sider, ethicist David Gushee, Shane Claiborne, and many other progressive evangelicals joined ecumenical leaders in April 2016 to issue 'Called to Resist Bigotry—A Statement of Faithful Obedience'. While recognizing legitimate political disagreements among Christians, signers of this statement argued that Trump's campaign had created 'a moral and theological crisis' that faithful Christians from across the political spectrum should unanimously condemn. "The ascendancy of a demagogic candidate and his message, with the angry constituency he is fueling, is a threat to both the values of our faith

and the health of our democracy', they declared. 'Donald Trump directly promotes racial and religious bigotry, disrespects the dignity of women, harms civil public discourse, offends moral decency, and seeks to manipulate religion.'<sup>12</sup>

In response to media reports showing high levels of evangelical support for Trump, a wide range of progressive and moderate evangelical leaders issued another statement and petition on Change.org a month before the election. In it, they argued that evangelicals could not vote for Trump in good conscience, and they decried 'the media's continued identification of "evangelical" with mostly white, politically conservative, older men'. The signers concluded, 'We must respond when evangelicalism becomes dangerously identified with one particular candidate whose statements, practice, personal morality, and ideology risk damaging our witness to the gospel before a watching world.'<sup>13</sup>

In a final effort to persuade other evangelicals, Ron Sider wrote an article in *Christianity Today*—the most prominent US evangelical magazine—in which he publicly endorsed Clinton. This is 'the most important presidential election in my lifetime', the 76-year-old Sider wrote, and he

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**11** Robert P. Jones, 'The Evangelicals and the Great Trump Hope', *New York Times*, 11 July 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/11/opinion/campaign-stops/the-evangelicals-and-the-great-trump-hope.html>; Nancy D. Wadsworth, 'The Racial Demons That Help Explain Evangelical Support for Trump', *Vox*, 20 April 2018, <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2018/4/30/17301282/race-evangelicals-trump-support-gerson-atlantic-sexism-segregation-south>; Andrew L. Whitehead, Samuel L. Perry, and Joseph O. Baker, 'Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election', *Sociology of Religion* 79, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 147–71.

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**12** Jack Jenkins, 'Major Faith Leaders Declare Trump "Racist, Bigoted, and Hateful"', *Think Progress*, 29 April 2016, <https://thinkprogress.org/major-faith-leaders-declare-trump-racist-bigoted-and-hateful-548e21a8173f/>.

**13** 'A Declaration by American Evangelicals Concerning Donald Trump', *Change.org*, 6 October 2016, <https://www.change.org/p/donald-trump-a-declaration-by-american-evangelicals-concerning-donald-trump>.



painted Trump as a uniquely unqualified, unjust and potentially destructive candidate. As election results revealed, however, nearly all white evangelicals disagreed with him.<sup>14</sup>

Since the 2016 election, Trump has maintained strong support from Christian conservatives. In poll after poll, white evangelicals have been the demographic group giving him the highest job approval ratings, with well over 70 percent still viewing his administration positively through summer 2019. Conservative evangelicals have described President Trump as their protector and advocate. They have felt vindicated as Trump has fulfilled campaign promises to appoint pro-life Supreme Court justices and lower-court judges, endorsed policies to safeguard their religious liberties, passed tax cuts and sustained a strong economy, and lowered immigration rates. Falwell called Trump evangelicals' 'dream president', while David Brody of the Christian Broadcasting Network labelled him the 'most evangelical-friendly United States president ever'. In recent months, Religious Right leaders and organizations have begun preparing to campaign vigorously for Trump's re-election in 2020.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ron Sider, 'Why I'm Voting for Hillary Clinton', *Christianity Today* 60, no. 8 (October 2016): 55-56.

<sup>15</sup> Christina Zhao, 'Nearly Three-Quarters of White Evangelicals Approve of Donald Trump', *Newsweek*, 22 July 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/nearly-three-quarters-white-evangelicals-approve-donald-trump-1450610>; Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "'Their Dream President': Trump Just Gave White Evangelicals a Big Boost', *Washington Post*, 4 May 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/>

Immediately after the 2016 election, progressive evangelicals declared their intention to join the resistance against Trump's administration. In *Sojourners*, Jim Wallis called Trump 'the most dangerous man' elected 'to the White House that we have seen in our lifetimes'. He urged progressive evangelicals and other anti-Trump Christians to actively protect those likely to be targeted by the new administration: undocumented immigrants, people of colour, Muslims, women of all races, and LGBTQ folks. 'One of the saddest aspects of the election for me', Wallis reflected, 'is the fact that most white evangelicals voted for a man whose life has embodied the most sinful and shameful worship of money, sex, and power and who represents the very worst of what American culture has become'.<sup>16</sup>

Evangelicals for Social Action expressed similar concerns. While

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[wp/2017/05/04/their-dream-president-trump-just-gave-white-evangelicals-a-big-boost/](http://wp/2017/05/04/their-dream-president-trump-just-gave-white-evangelicals-a-big-boost/); David Brody, 'In Donald Trump, Evangelicals Have Found Their President', *New York Times*, 24 February 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/24/opinion/sunday/donald-trump-evangelicals-president.html>; Tom McCarthy, 'Faith and Freedoms: Why Evangelicals Profess Unwavering Love for Trump', *The Guardian*, 7 July 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jul/07/donald-trump-evangelical-supporters>; Julie Zauzmer, "'He Gets It': Evangelicals Aren't Turned Off by Trump's First Term", *Washington Post*, 13 August 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/evangelicals-arent-turned-off-by-trumps-first-term--theyre-delighted-by-it/2019/08/11/3911bc88-a990-11e9-a3a6-ab670962db05\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/evangelicals-arent-turned-off-by-trumps-first-term--theyre-delighted-by-it/2019/08/11/3911bc88-a990-11e9-a3a6-ab670962db05_story.html).

<sup>16</sup> Jim Wallis, 'Resistance and Healing', *Sojourners* 46, no. 1 (January 2017): 14-17.

pledging to pray for Trump, Ron Sider wrote, ESA planned to challenge the unjust policies it anticipated from his administration. Not least, Sider worried that the election results would damage evangelicals' reputation and thus their public witness. Evangelicalism 'is now publicly and intimately identified with a political campaign that denied the science of global warming, tolerated and even appealed to racism, promoted lies (e.g. denying that President Obama is a US citizen), demonstrated despicable treatment of women and embraced economic policies that will overwhelmingly help the very rich', he lamented. 'Increasingly, that is what "evangelical" means to large numbers of Americans. That agenda contradicts biblical teaching and leads many millennials to turn away from the evangelical church and even to reject Jesus.'<sup>17</sup>

After Trump's inauguration, many prominent progressive evangelicals signed a public letter to the President issued by the group Faith in Public Life. Over 800 ecumenical Christian leaders promised to pray for Trump but also warned him that, if he continued to promote division, fear and policies damaging to the vulnerable and marginalized, they would not hesitate to oppose him.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ron Sider, 'President-Elect Trump: a Response from ESA', *Evangelicals for Social Action*, 9 November 2016, <https://www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org/faith-and-public-life/president-elect-trump-a-response-from-esa/>.

<sup>18</sup> Kimberly Winston, 'Christian Leaders to Trump: We're Praying for You, But ...', *Religion News Service*, 1 February 2017, <https://religionnews.com/2017/02/01/christian-leaders-to-trump-were-praying-for-you->

In May 2017, Wallis responded directly to Falwell's statement that Trump represented evangelicals' dream president. 'Falwell means a president like Trump is a dream for white evangelicals like him, not evangelicals of all races, not the wonderfully multiracial global body of Christ' who feel astonished and betrayed 'that 81 percent of white American evangelicals voted for Donald Trump', Wallis declared. He challenged all other evangelicals to condemn 'the moral hypocrisy and racial idolatry of the white evangelicals of America's Religious Right who fail to see racism, poverty, hunger, health, the treatment of refugees and immigrants, and a biblical commitment to social justice as gospel issues.' While not comprehensive, this list of issues named by Wallis—racism, immigration, health care and economic justice—reflects the primary concerns of progressive evangelical leaders since Trump's inauguration.<sup>19</sup>

### III. Opposition to the Trump Administration

As long-time advocates for racial justice, contemporary progressive evangelical leaders have consistently condemned the overt and covert forms of racism that they believe Trump's

but/; Jack Jenkins, 'Trump's National Prayer Breakfast Begins with Religious Protests', *Think Progress*, 2 February 2017, <https://thinkprogress.org/trumps-national-prayer-breakfast-begins-with-religious-protesters-58142ecfe6ea/>.

<sup>19</sup> 'Jim Wallis Speaks Out on Jerry Falwell, Jr. and Donald Trump', *Sojourners*, accessed 15 August 2019, <https://sojo.net/about-us/news/jim-wallis-speaks-out-jerry-falwell-jr-and-donald-trump>.

administration has encouraged. Just after Trump's inauguration, Jim Wallis declared that Trump's election 'provides both a great danger and a real opportunity to finally deal with race in America', and that 'racial reconciliation will be an act of repentance and resistance in the Trump era'. The racialized protests and violence in Charlottesville in August 2017 became a flashpoint for such resistance. As white nationalists gathered for their 'Unite the Right' rally, several progressive evangelical leaders such as Lisa Sharon Harper joined ecumenical clergy in Charlottesville to conduct counter-protests. In the aftermath, President Trump equivocated in his response, claiming there were 'fine people on both sides' of the Charlottesville protests. In response, progressive evangelicals issued explicit condemnations. 'Because this is not the time for ambiguity, we reject the idol of white supremacy, of neo-nazism, and of a nationalism that places country before God', ESA proclaimed. Leaders from Sojourners and Red Letter Christians issued a similar 'Theological Declaration' that renounced 'white nationalism, white separatism, white supremacy ... and any and all movements that abide by the logics of domination and colonization'.<sup>20</sup>

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**20** Jim Wallis, 'Studying Racism as an Act of Repentance and Resistance in the Trump Era', *Sojourners*, 16 February 2017, <https://sojo.net/articles/studying-racism-act-repentance-and-resistance-trump-era>; 'ESA Statement in Response to Charlottesville', 22 August 2017, <https://www.evangelicalsfor-socialaction.org/esa-statement/>; 'Theological Declaration on Christian Faith & White Supremacy', 6 September 2017, <https://www.redletterchristians.org/theological->

In 2018, progressive evangelicals predictably denounced President Trump's racist remarks describing several African nations, Haiti, and El Salvador. But beyond Trump's rhetoric, leaders have also criticized the racialized inequalities exacerbated by the Trump administration's policies. 'The historical sin of racism lingers on in America today, continuing and evolving in our social systems of economics and education, policing and criminal justice, housing and gentrification, voting rights and suppression, in our racial geography and, painfully, in the continued segregation of our churches, which adds to our own complicity', declared a statement titled 'Unity Declaration on Racism and Poverty' that many progressive evangelicals endorsed.<sup>21</sup>

These responses by the evangelical left to rising racism and white nationalism have been connected to their opposition to the Trump administration's immigration and refugee policies. Much of their initial activism focused on defending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme, which protected from deportation hundreds of thousands of young adults, often called 'Dreamers', who were brought to the United States illegally as children. When President Trump pledged to end DACA, progressive evangelicals mobilized. 'Jesus says welcome the stranger. Donald Trump has just said "no" to this clear call from Christ in his decision to turn away 800,000

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declaration-on-christian-faith-white-supremacy/.

**21** 'Unity Declaration on Racism and Poverty', October 2018, <http://circleofprotection.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/unity-statement-racism-and-poverty-2018.pdf>.

young Dreamers who were brought to this country by their parents when they were children—and who have no other home’, Jim Wallis declared. Sojourners partnered with the Interfaith Immigration Coalition to lobby Congress and to organize campaigns on behalf of immigrant rights. In December 2017, an array of progressive evangelical leaders from ESA, Red Letter Christians, Sojourners, and other socially concerned Christian organizations organized a public demonstration in Washington, D.C. in support of Dreamers and other immigrants.<sup>22</sup>

The family separation policy enacted by the Trump administration in April 2018 especially outraged progressive evangelicals, particularly as Attorney General Jeff Sessions and White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders invoked biblical justifications in defending it. Joining with ecumenical partners, leaders such as Wallis, Tony Campolo, Ron Sider and long-time evangelical community activist John Perkins condemned the ‘misuse and violation of the Word of God to defend a morally indefensible policy’. They also called on churches ‘to teach and preach about this moral crisis, organize candlelight prayers at the offices of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and at local Congressional offices, and prayerfully consider

<sup>22</sup> ‘Statement by Jim Wallis on DACA Decision’, 5 September 2017, <https://sojo.net/about-us/news/statement-jim-wallis-daca-decision>; John Seel, ‘A Prayerful Embrace: ESA Joins in a National DACA Action’, 7 December 2017, <https://www.evangelicalsfor-socialaction.org/compassion-and-justice/prayerful-embrace-esa-joins-national-daca-action/>.

non-violent civil disobedience at appropriate places in the days ahead’. Wallis, Shane Claiborne, and others associated with Sojourners and Red Letter Christians were themselves arrested on June 26 for civil disobedience outside the White House as they protested the family separation policy. Evangelical progressives have tried to demonstrate that Trump’s immigration policies are, in Wallis’ words, ‘anti-family, anti-American, and anti-Christ’.<sup>23</sup>

Universal access to affordable health care has long been a priority for progressive evangelicals, and leaders had championed passage in 2010 of the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare. During Trump’s campaign, he promised that he would ensure health coverage for everybody and not enact cuts to Medicaid and Medicare. But in early 2017, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office judged that the health care bill proposed by Republicans and supported by Trump would result in over 24 million people losing health coverage over the next decade. Denouncing Trump as a liar, progressive evangelicals called for petitions and protests against final passage of

<sup>23</sup> “Suffer the Little Children”: The Separation of Immigrant Children from Their Parents Is Not Biblical’, <https://sojo.net/about-us/news/separation-immigrant-children-their-parents-not-biblical-reclaiming-jesus-elders>; Adam Taylor, ‘At What Cost to Our Soul?’ *Sojourners*, 26 June 2018, <https://sojo.net/articles/what-cost-our-soul>; Jim Wallis, ‘Trump’s Immigration Policies Are Anti-Family, Anti-American, and Anti-Christ’, *Sojourners*, 15 February 2018, <https://sojo.net/articles/trump-s-immigration-policies-are-anti-family-anti-american-and-anti-christ>.

the bill. Sojourners urged Christians to contact their congressional representatives while praying ‘that God would move the hearts of our elected officials so that they would be open to hearing the stories of those affected by their harmful policies’.<sup>24</sup>

In a series of direct-action protests in July, Lisa Sharon Harper, Red Letter Christians executive director Don Golden, and other evangelical progressives were arrested as they disrupted Congress and blockaded the offices of Republicans. In September, Senators Lindsey Graham and Bill Cassidy proposed a bill to repeal the Affordable Care Act. The bill never reached the floor for a vote, however, and Jim Wallis claimed that the opposition of faith leaders played a pivotal role in this process. ‘Jesus tells us that how we treat the most vulnerable in society, including the poor and the sick, is how we treat Christ himself’, Wallis wrote. ‘The moral test and the biblical test of any system is how it treats the poorest and most vulnerable—how a health care system treats those who are sick.’ Throughout 2018, progressive evangelicals continued to work against legislation and policies designed to undermine or to dismantle the Affordable Care Act.<sup>25</sup>

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**24** ‘Here’s What You Can Do Right Now About the Senate Health Care Bill’, 23 June 2017, *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/articles/here-s-what-you-can-do-right-now-about-senate-health-care-bill>.

**25** Don Golden, ‘#Faith4Healthcare: On Being One with the Vulnerable’, *Red Letter Christians*, 26 July 2017, <https://www.red-letterchristians.org/faith4healthcare-on-being-one-with-the-vulnerable/>; Jim Wallis, ‘Millions Could Still Lose Health Care. Here’s How You Can Stop It’, *Sojourners*, 25 September 2017, <https://sojo.net/articles/millions->

Defending inexpensive access to health care has represented just one part of progressive evangelicals’ broad commitment to economic justice for the poor. Throughout 2017, leaders opposed the budget priorities and tax cuts supported by President Trump and Republicans. Working alongside ecumenical allies as part of an anti-poverty coalition called Circle of Protection, representatives from Sojourners, ESA, and Red Letter Christians campaigned against the combination of increased military spending, reductions in social service programs and lower taxes on the wealthy. ‘The poor and vulnerable ... are at great risk in President Donald Trump’s proposed budget’, proclaimed Jim Wallis at a March news conference and prayer vigil organized by Circle of Protection at the Capitol.<sup>26</sup>

Though progressive evangelicals continued to lobby and to protest over the following months, Republicans passed Trump’s budget in October and prepared to pass massive tax cuts. Outraged, evangelical progressives joined ecumenical and inter-faith allies to oppose the tax reform bill. During a protest in the Capitol in late November, Wallis quoted prophetic biblical passages about the oppression of the poor before he was arrested. ‘The treatment of the poor and vulnerable is lifted up in the Bible more than 2,000 times. And it is these people, the ones our Scriptures call us to protect and serve, who will be most

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[could-still-lose-health-care-here-s-how-you-can-stop-it](#).

**26** Jim Wallis, ‘Truth That Bears Repeating: A Budget Is a Moral Document’, *Sojourners*, 30 March 2017, <https://sojo.net/articles/truth-bears-repeating-budget-moral-document>.

hurt by the results of this disastrous tax bill', Wallis proclaimed. 'The bill suffers from deeply immoral logic: to blow a hole in the deficit by giving huge tax cuts to the rich and corporations, that will ultimately be paid for by the poor. ... This is a shameful hypocrisy, callous calculation, and immoral act.' For evangelical progressives, the enactment of this bill in late 2017 represented yet another moral failure of the current presidential administration.<sup>27</sup>

#### IV. 'Reclaiming Jesus'—but Retaining 'Evangelical'?

In their efforts to persuade both other Christians and politicians, progressive evangelical leaders regularly issue statements that convey their vision of faithful political engagement. In May 2018, Jim Wallis, Tony Campolo, Ron Sider, African-American community activist John Perkins and several other progressive evangelicals joined a small group of mainline Protestant leaders to release a statement entitled 'Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis'. The document communicated both their exasperation and their hopes in this age of Trump. 'We are living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches', the statement began. The

<sup>27</sup> Jim Wallis, 'Great Injustice Calls for Great Action', *Sojourners*, 28 November 2017, <https://sojo.net/articles/great-injustice-calls-great-action>; 'Circle of Protection Leaders Speak Out Regarding Passage of Tax Bill', *Sojourners*, 20 December 2017, <https://sojo.net/about-us/news/circle-protection-leaders-speak-out-regarding-passage-tax-bill>.

authors recounted their condemnation of a wide range of injustices, including 'the resurgence of white nationalism and racism in our nation on many fronts, including the highest levels of political leadership'; 'the growing attacks on immigrants and refugees, who are being made into political targets'; unjust 'attempts to deny health care to those who most need it'; and 'the growing national sin of putting the rich over the poor'.

Although this statement served as a rebuke of President Trump, progressive evangelicals also hoped to challenge Christians who supported Trump to re-evaluate their 'theology of public discipleship and witness'. 'It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else—nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, [or] geography', they declared. While this statement did not say so explicitly, progressive evangelicals clearly believed that, because no one can serve two masters, Christians cannot follow both Jesus and Donald Trump.<sup>28</sup>

Yet the majority of white evangelicals have disagreed—a fact that has not only galled progressive evangelicals but also caused some to considering no longer identifying as 'evangelical' Christians. The shocking percentage of white evangelicals who voted for Trump tempted *Sojourners'* Lisa Sharon Harper to take that step the day after the election; 'I felt betrayed. I felt like that's just not who I am anymore. This group who voted for Trump is just not who I am', she said. Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo wrote an op-ed for the *New York*

<sup>28</sup> 'Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis', <http://www.reclaimingjesus.org/>.

*Times* in which they sought to disassociate themselves from the evangelical label. The reputation of evangelicalism has been ruined by its close association with Trump's successful campaign, they argued, and younger, non-white voices seem unwelcome or ignored within American evangelical circles.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, in the words of Claiborne and Campolo, 'Jesus-centered faith needs a new name.' They proposed the label 'Red Letter Christians' to indicate their faithfulness to the teachings of Jesus (which many Bibles print in red). 'We are committed to living out the words of Jesus, even if that sets us at odds with those evangelicals who have tended toward a cultural religion that has embraced Donald Trump with little or "no" prophetic judgment', Campolo wrote several months later.<sup>30</sup>

Numerous progressive evangelicals of colour, often active in progressive evangelical networks, have described not only discomfort but also a sense of betrayal within broader evangelical circles. 'If you voted for Trump, then his racism was just not a deal-breaker for you', ESA execu-

tive director Nikki Toyama-Szeto declared. 'A lot of folks are saying that "If this is what evangelical means, then I'm not that"' As scholar Melanie McAlister has summarized, 'For many evangelicals of color, the politics of white supremacy is now the dominant reality associated with a multiracial faith identity that they once comfortably (if not always enthusiastically) claimed.' Though progressive evangelicals have long occupied a marginal place within modern American evangelicalism, most white evangelicals' enthusiasm for Trump has caused some to explore or to create different religious and discursive communities.<sup>31</sup>

In opposing and criticizing Trump's candidacy and his administration, progressive evangelicals have been joined by some prominent conservative and moderate evangelicals. Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, fervently opposed Trump prior to the election. Moore called him 'an arrogant huckster' and compared Trump's campaign to 'reality television moral sewage'. He also described evangelical defences of Trump 'a scandal and disgrace' after the release of the Access Hollywood video that contained Trump's sexually predatory comments.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Emily McFarlan Miller, 'Can Evangelicals Unite after the 2016 Election?' *Religion News Service*, 16 November 2019; Tony Campolo and Shane Claiborne, 'The Evangelicalism of Old White Men Is Dead', *New York Times*, 29 November 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/29/opinion/the-evangelicalism-of-old-white-men-is-dead.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Campolo and Claiborne, 'The Evangelicalism of Old White Men Is Dead'; Tony Campolo, 'Why Evangelicals Voted for Donald Trump ... and Continue to Support Him', *Red Letter Christians*, 24 July 2017, <https://www.redletterchristians.org/why-evangelicals-voted-for-donald-trump-continue-to-support-him/>.

<sup>31</sup> Melani McAlister, 'A Kind of Homelessness: Evangelicals of Color in the Trump Era', *Religion and Politics*, 7 August 2018, <https://religionandpolitics.org/2018/08/07/a-kind-of-homelessness-evangelicals-of-color-in-the-trump-era/>.

<sup>32</sup> Mark Woods, 'Russell Moore: Trump, Clinton Both Represent "Reality TV Moral Sewage"', *Christian Today*, 9 May 2016, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/>

African-American pastor Thabiti Anyabwile, a prominent member of the Gospel Coalition network popular with Reformed evangelicals, rebuked Trump as a racist and his potential presidency as ‘intolerable’. Conservative media figures such as *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson and National Review writer David French denounced Trump despite viewing support for Hillary Clinton as untenable, while popular evangelical authors Philip Yancey and Max Lucado expressed incredulity and dismay that fellow Christians considered Trump fit for office. Even the conservative evangelical magazine *World*, under the editorship of Marvin Olasky, called Trump ‘unfit for power’ and argued that he should step aside for another candidate.<sup>33</sup>

An even broader range of con-

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russell-moore-trump-clinton-both-represent-reality-tv-moral-sewage/85670.htm; Russell Moore, ‘If Donald Trump Has Done Anything, He Has Snuffed Out the Religious Right’, *Washington Post*, 9 October 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/09/if-donald-trump-has-done-anything-he-has-snuffed-out-the-religious-right/>.

**33** Thabiti Anyabwile, ‘Can We Talk? Or, Why I Think a Trump Presidency Is Intolerable Even Though You Might Not Agree’, *The Gospel Coalition*, 6 June 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/thabiti-anyabwile/can-we-talk-or-why-i-think-a-trump-presidency-is-intolerable-even-though-you-might-not-agree/>; Harry Farley, ‘Christian Author Philip Yancey: Trump “Stands against Everything Christianity Believes”’, *Christian Today*, 26 September 2016, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/christian-author-philip-yancey-trump-stands-against-everything-christianity-believes/96353.htm>; Marvin Olasky, ‘Unfit for Power’, *World*, 11 October 2016, [https://world.wng.org/2016/10/unfit\\_for\\_power](https://world.wng.org/2016/10/unfit_for_power).

servative and moderate evangelical leaders have joined evangelical progressives in vocally opposing specific aspects of Trump’s administration. With respect to immigration, for example, World Relief—the humanitarian arm of the centrist National Association of Evangelicals (NAE)—issued an open letter in the *Washington Post* challenging Trump’s immigration and refugee policies. The letter was endorsed by a wide coalition of evangelical leaders such as *Christianity Today* president Harold Smith, Bill and Lynne Hybels of the Willow Creek Association, Southern Baptist Bible teacher Beth Moore, Latino evangelical leader Samuel Rodriguez, author Ann Voskamp and Wheaton College president Philip Ryken. Evangelicals across the political spectrum also expressed horror at the Trump administration’s family separation policy and lobbied for its reversal. Regarding healthcare, the NAE joined progressive evangelicals in opposing Republican efforts to repeal Obamacare. ‘Despite its impressive achievements, our health care system often fails to deliver affordable, life-saving help to many of our citizens’, president Leith Anderson said. ‘Any policy and funding changes should be evaluated by how they treat the most vulnerable among us.’<sup>34</sup>

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**34** Kate Shellnutt, ‘Max Lucado, Beth Moore, and Hundreds of Evangelicals Call for Immigration Reform ... Again’, *Christianity Today*, 7 February 2018, <https://www.christianity-today.com/news/2018/february/max-lucado-beth-moore-evangelicals-immigration-dreamers-ref.html>; Harry Bruinius, ‘Family Separation: Evangelicals Add Their Voices to Opposition’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 June 2018, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2018/0618/Family-separa->



The widest consensus between more conservative and progressive evangelicals has been in their rebukes of Trump's apparent tolerance for and enabling of racism, especially after the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville. 'I condemn the forces of white nationalism, white supremacy and antisemitism that divide our country today, and I also condemn those who seek to politicize it all for their political gain', declared Samuel Rodriguez of the National Hispanic Leadership Conference, a member of Trump's Evangelical Advisory Board. Many others criticized Trump's unwillingness to explicitly denounce racism. 'The so-called Alt-Right white supremacist ideologies are anti-Christ and satanic to the core' and 'We should say so', Russell Moore wrote. In response to the visible rise of racism during Trump's presidency, the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and the Gospel Coalition held a joint conference in April 2018 focused on the urgent need for racial justice and unity.<sup>35</sup>

Like some progressive evangelicals, several conservatives have also

questioned the value of continuing to identify as an evangelical in the current political climate. Early in 2016, Russell Moore wrote an opinion piece for the *Washington Post* titled 'Why This Election Makes Me Hate the Word "Evangelical"'. He lamented the popular conflation of 'evangelicals' with an election-year voting bloc readily lining up behind Trump. While not ready to fully abandon the term *evangelical* as a religious identity focused on the good news that Jesus saves, Moore concluded, 'At least until this crazy campaign is over, I choose to just say that I'm a gospel Christian.'<sup>36</sup>

At the end of President Trump's first year in office, Peter Wehner, a senior fellow at the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center, published a similar argument in the *New York Times*. Wehner described how white evangelicals' support not only for Trump but also for disgraced Republican senatorial candidate Roy Moore in Alabama had led him and others he knew to no longer identify as an evangelical.<sup>37</sup>

In early 2018, InterVarsity Press published a book titled *Still Evangelical?* that contained essays by progressive, moderate, and conservative evangelicals questioning the value of the label in the aftermath of the 2016 election. Even international observers recognized how white evangelical support for Trump had produced an identity crisis for American evan-

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tion-Evangelicals-add-their-voices-to-opposition; Jack Jenkins, 'National Association of Evangelicals Blasts GOP Effort to Repeal Obamacare', *Think Progress*, 25 September 2017, <https://thinkprogress.org/this-time-even-evangelicals-are-blasting-the-gop-health-care-bill-1b3336946c06/>.

**35** "'This Is NOT the Way of the Cross': Christian Leaders Condemn White Supremacism', *Christian Broadcasting Network*, 13 August 2017, <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2017/august/this-is-not-the-way-of-the-cross-christian-leaders-condemn-white-supremacism>; 'MLK50: Gospel Reflections from the Mountaintop', *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/conference/mlk50/>.

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**36** Russell Moore, 'Why This Election Makes Me Hate the World "Evangelical"', *Washington Post*, 29 February 2016.

**37** Peter Wehner, 'Why I Can No Longer Call Myself an Evangelical Republican', *New York Times*, 9 December 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/09/opinion/sunday/wehner-evangelical-republicans.html>.

gelicals. Filipino Bishop Efraim Tintero, Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance, commented that the label ‘evangelical’ needed to be ‘reclaimed’ in the United States since it had become ‘identified more for political advocacy’ rather than ‘the demonstration and proclamation of the Gospel’.<sup>38</sup>

## V. Persistent Evangelical Divisions

One may wonder whether these shared concerns between progressive evangelicals and anti-Trump moderates and conservatives could lead to new forms of collaboration between these different factions of American evangelicals. Might Donald Trump indirectly inspire progressive and more conservative evangelicals to create new alliances or even a common vision for political engagement? Three factors—one political, one theological, and one sociological—make such potential partnerships unlikely.

With respect to political priorities, progressive evangelicals place significantly less emphasis on abortion than more conservative evangelicals. The evangelical left has typically identified as pro-life but, unlike conservatives, has refused to treat opposition to abortion as the primary issue guiding their electoral decisions and political

engagement. Progressive evangelical leaders define ‘pro-life’ broadly as protecting the sanctity of human life against all forms of violence and injustice. They also argue that pro-life advocates should support practical policies and programs that reduce the need for abortion, such as better access to contraceptives, health care, and economic support for pregnant women.<sup>39</sup>

Rarely do progressive evangelicals especially champion the protection of unborn life or endorse efforts to restrict abortion—a fact not lost on conservative evangelicals. In a 2018 article, for example, Billy Graham Center director Ed Stetzer criticized progressive evangelicals for their relative silence in debates about abortion. The differing approaches to abortion politics also put progressive and conservative evangelicals on opposite sides concerning the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. While conservative and moderate evangelical critics of Trump still celebrated the nomination of a pro-life judge, progressive evangelicals such as Lisa Sharon Harper and activist Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove argued, based on Kavanaugh’s record, that his constitutional interpretations and rulings would be devastating for minorities and poor people. The politics of abortion continue to place progressive evangelicals at odds with the majority of evangelical Christians.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Mark A. Labberton, ed., *Still Evangelical? Insiders Reconsider Political, Social and Theological Meaning* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018); Samuel Smith, “‘Evangelical’ Has Become Too Political and Needs to be ‘Reclaimed’,” says WEA Head, *Christian Today*, 9 October 2018, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/evangelical-has-become-too-political-and-needs-to-be-reclaimed-says-wea-head/130645.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals*, 128–62.

<sup>40</sup> Ed Stetzer, ‘Dear “Whole-Life” Progressive Evangelicals, Did You Forget “Pro-Life” and the Unborn?’ *Christianity Today*, 30 January 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2018/january/all-life-progressive-evangelical-pro-life.html>; Lisa

Second, progressive evangelicals' increasing theological affirmation of LGBTQ Christians also alienates them from most other evangelicals. Although they had long criticized the anti-gay politics of the Religious Right, in recent years more and more evangelical progressives such as Jim Wallis, Tony Campolo, David Gushee, and others have taken a much bigger step to the left, accepting theological arguments in support of same-sex marriage and for full LGBTQ inclusion and equality within churches. Even those who are not fully affirming, such as Shane Claiborne and the leaders of ESA, readily partner with LGBTQ and affirming Christians. In contrast, conservative evangelicals remain staunchly opposed to both theological and political recognition of gay rights and equality. Since the legalization of same-sex marriages in 2015, they have championed 'religious liberty' rights in an effort to exempt themselves from any perceived participation in or affirmation of gay marriages. Moreover, many conservative evangelicals regard LGBTQ-affirming Christians as heretics. This position severely dampens prospects for partnerships with progressive evangelicals who are committed to LGBTQ justice and equality.<sup>41</sup>

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Sharon Harper, 'Evangelical Women and Men Call for a Pause on Culture War', *Red Letter Christians*, 21 July 2018, <https://www.redletterchristians.org/evangelical-women-men-call-for-a-pause-on-culture-war/>; Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, 'The Evangelical Case Against Judge Kavanaugh', *New York Times*, 3 September 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/03/opinion/evangelical-brett-kavanaugh-civil-rights.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals*, 163–99, 272–73; David French, 'Yes, Ameri-

Finally, despite their ostensibly shared evangelical commitment, longstanding disagreements between progressive and more conservative evangelicals have led them to participate in different religious and social networks. As progressives became marginalized in the broader evangelical movement, they developed partnerships over the past three decades with politically liberal Protestants and Catholics. Conservative evangelicals, on the other hand, gravitated toward cooperation with conservative Catholics and Mormons. During Trump's presidency, the statements issued and endorsed by progressive evangelicals have usually been made in cooperation with mainline Protestants, and they have often protested alongside ecumenical allies in activities associated with the so-called Religious Left. Just after progressive evangelicals participated in the 2018 'Revival of Jesus and Justice' rally in Lynchburg, a separate gathering occurred at Wheaton College, involving moderate leaders concerned about 'the challenges of distortions to evangelicalism that have permeated both the media and culture since the 2016 election'. Most participants in this consultation shared progressive evangelicals' concerns about public perceptions of American evangelicals. Yet they could not reach enough of a consensus to issue a planned state-

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can Religious Liberty Is in Peril', *Wall Street Journal*, 26 July 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/yes-american-religious-liberty-is-in-peril-11564152873>; 'Thousands of Christians Respond to Nashville Statement With Emphatic "No"', *Sojourners*, 31 August 2017, <https://sojo.net/articles/thousands-christians-respond-nashville-statement-emphatic-no>.

ment on evangelicalism in the age of Trump, nor would most join the meetings and declarations of the evangelical left. Shared disillusionment with most white evangelicals' support for President Trump could not easily unite distinct factions of the evangelical movement.<sup>42</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

In late 2018, the most prominent progressive evangelical leaders issued yet another statement. Called 'The Chicago Invitation: Diverse Evangelicals Continue the Journey', the document intentionally built upon the 1973 Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern that helped to launch the contemporary progressive evangelical movement. Older white male leaders such as Jim Wallis, Tony Campolo and Ron Sider were joined by younger and non-white ones, such as Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Lisa Sharon Harper, Nikki Tomaya-Szeto and Soong-Chan Rah of North Park University.

The Chicago Invitation argues that 'the story that became nationally and globally dominant after the 2016 election was that 81 percent of "evangelicals" voted for Donald Trump, when, in fact, this group only represented the votes of white evangelicals. When evangelicals of color and younger evangelicals are accurately accounted for, the picture changes significantly'.

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<sup>42</sup> Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals*, 18–20; Katelyn Beaty, 'At a Private Meeting in Illinois, a Group of Evangelicals Tried to Save Their Movement from Trumpism', *New Yorker*, 26 April 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/at-a-private-meeting-in-illinois-a-group-of-evangelicals-tried-to-save-their-movement-from-trumpism>.

Imitating the 1973 declaration, the new statement declared its signers' commitment to 'biblical justice' and active resistance to racism, patriarchal sexism, homophobia, economic injustice and all forms of dehumanizing oppression.<sup>43</sup>

The Chicago Invitation illustrates how much the Trump administration and its white evangelical supporters have put progressive evangelicals on the defensive. In a political sense, they have been forced anew to defend those who seem most exploited and endangered by Trump's policies. But in a religious sense, they feel compelled to defend the integrity of the evangelical tradition. In an article accompanying the statement, Sojourners' Jim Wallis and Adam Taylor wrote:

We hope and pray that this invitation can foster desperately needed dialogue about the present-day diversity within the evangelical movement and can serve as a powerful antidote and corrective to a false narrative that has dominated our politics that defines evangelicals as white, Republican, and ardently pro-Trump. Evangelicalism is a much more diverse movement than the current media narrative represents. ... By correcting the public narrative to include diverse evangelicals, we can help rehabilitate the perception of evangelicals and enable our nation and the church to better cross the bridge into a more inclusive, multi-racial future that mirrors God's kingdom come.

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<sup>43</sup> 'The Chicago Invitation: Diverse Evangelicals Continue the Journey', [https://sojo.net/sites/default/files/chicagoinvitationformatted\\_final.pdf](https://sojo.net/sites/default/files/chicagoinvitationformatted_final.pdf).

Thus the Chicago Invitation was as much a public-relations effort as a religious and theological statement. Progressive evangelical leaders wanted to correct distorted perceptions and reclaim American evangelicalism as a more variegated and a more justice-oriented religious tradition. They were trying, from their perspective, to make the reputation of evangelicals great again.<sup>44</sup>

For the past four decades, progressive evangelicals have consistently tried to reclaim the evangelical tradi-

tion and label from those who they believe have hijacked it for right-wing political agendas. They have tried to persuade conservative evangelicals—as well as the media and larger public—that authentic evangelical Christianity should bring good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed. Like the prophets of old whom they love to quote, progressive evangelicals believe they are standing on the margins, calling the wayward back to faithfulness to God. The dominance of the Religious Right and evangelical conservatism has always made their appeals difficult to hear. Now, the unexpected appeal of Donald Trump to so many white evangelicals has made their task even more difficult.

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<sup>44</sup> Jim Wallis and Adam R. Taylor, "Toward a More Authentic Evangelicalism," *Sojourners*, October 3, 2018, <https://sojo.net/articles/toward-more-authentic-evangelicalism>.