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## **In His Name: White Evangelicals, The Republican Party, and Their Support and Endorsement of Donald Trump – Documentary Podcast**

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In His Name: White Evangelicals, The Republican Party,  
and Their Support and Endorsement of Donald Trump – Documentary Podcast

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to provide historical context to the rise of White Evangelicals political involvement in the United States and how it evolved to support and endorse Donald Trump for president in the 2016 election. Three major factors led to this: White Christian Nationalism, traditional family values, and racial resentment. The podcast is a story told in three parts, addressing the history of these elements starting before America was even a nation to today. This project seeks to address the past, acknowledge what led to Donald Trump's election in 2016, and reckon with White Evangelicals ought to do today.

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## DEDICATION

To Emily Moore, for supporting me and believing in me. I'm beyond grateful to have you as my partner and best friend, I love you dearly. To my parents, Mark and Myra Moore, for consistently encouraging me to pursue creative endeavors and providing relentless support. To Andrew Bodenbach, who let me play countless clips of tape over the course of this project. To Mike Caroleo, who has been a great friend since our days in Greenville and played a key role in helping me creatively in this project. To Kendal Orrantia, who designed the amazing logo for the podcast. To Jacob Amundson, whose class my freshman year of college first opened my eyes to understand the relationship between Christian culture and media. To Dr. Rob Wells, who took a flyer on me, an old guy with a crummy undergraduate GPA and the bare minimum GRE score, and constantly encouraged my work and made me the journalist I am today. And to those who are reading this and listening to the podcast, I hope you feel convicted, challenged, and ready to create a more equitable and Christlike world today and forever. This project challenged my faith and past experiences in a way that is hard to describe, but I believe that I am a better human and citizen at the end of this, and I hope you feel the same way about yourself after this, too.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In 2016, Donald J. Trump was elected president of the United States of America. For some Americans, this came as a huge shock. Not for Penny Edgel, who said, “I told everyone who would listen that Donald Trump could take it all”(2017, p. 1). The same was true for Angie Maxwell, who held a series of talks called “The Inevitability of Donald Trump” during the 2016 Republican primary (2021). The reality is that the groundwork that led us to a Trump presidency has been laid for centuries, dating back to the Puritans coming to New England in the 1600s believing they were inhabiting a “new Israel” (Gorski, 2021).

The rise in influence of White Evangelicals in politics came with the Moral Majority, an evangelical Christian movement spearheaded by Southern Baptist preacher and founding president of Liberty University Jerry Falwell, Sr., when they took on their first American presidential candidate Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election (Williams, 2010). Falwell’s goal was to lead a coalition of White Evangelicals, mostly southerners who were staunchly anti-abortion, to align behind the Republican party. Over a quarter of a century, this movement went from being a small group of preachers into a sizeable voting bloc—more than one in four Americans—that played a pivotal role in elections big and small (Pew Research Center, 2021).

The three major factors that account for White Evangelicals support and endorsement of Donald Trump are White Christian Nationalism, traditional family values, and racial resentment. Collectively, these three factors are what the Trump campaign drew on in the 2016 election, both from historical precedence as well as new circumstances. Some voters may have been driven by just one of these factors, some two, and some may have been driven by all three. It’s also worth noting that voters and Trump alike may not explicitly be White Christian Nationalists, Pro-Life

activists, or racists. These characteristics are at a minimum things that are performed, if not fully actualized (Maxwell, 2021).

### **Personal History of Evangelical Culture**

Over the course of the last decade, I have been wrestling with the impact Christianity—specifically White Evangelical Christianity—plays in our political landscape. To say I grew up in a supermajority white community is an understatement. According to the United States Census data from 2019, there are just 26 people who identify as Black in my home county, constituting just .5% of the population (*U.S. Census Bureau Demographic and Housing Estimates*, 2019). This project has resulted in some deep personal reflection on my upbringing and life experiences.

I grew up in a Baptist church with the stereotypical White Evangelical experience. Although my church was not a part of the Southern Baptist Convention, our theological standing was nearly identical. The major tenets of this denomination of Christianity were foundational in what was taught from the pulpit at my church. We were taught that all people were sinners who deserved to go to Hell, a place of eternal damnation and fire. Jesus Christ, the son of God, was the savior of the world, God incarnate. Jesus came down to Earth, lived a sinless life, was crucified for our sins, and three days later Jesus rose from the dead.

The other major tenets of White Evangelicalism we were taught were less theological and more cultural in nature. “Secular” music is bad. Women can’t be pastors. Gay people are an abomination. Abortion is murder. Sexual purity is non-negotiable, and a man would not want to be with a woman who had sex before marriage. America was and is a Christian nation. You as a Christian will be judged and persecuted for your beliefs, and you should take pleasure in that.

This was my experience growing up, especially in my church’s youth group. I only listened to Contemporary Christian Music. I was at the church most days of the week, and when

I wasn't there, I was spending time at my youth pastor's house. When it came time to choose a college, the only schools I looked at were the ones advertising in the Christian music magazine.

I attended Greenville College (now University) in Greenville, Illinois. I wanted to pursue a degree in music, and I also wanted to stay relatively close to my hometown, so Greenville seemed to be a good fit. I started college in 2008, which was the year Barack Obama first ran for president. Two specific memories stick out to me during the fall of my freshman year revolving around the election. The first came over a holiday weekend break in October. I had voted absentee recently and cast my ballot for the Democratic candidate. Politics didn't come up much in my circle of friends, but most of us knew who had voted for whom. On this holiday weekend, I decided to go with one of my friends to his hometown and spend time with him. At one point over the weekend, we were in a vehicle with his parents, and he thought it would be funny to tell his mother that I had cast my vote for Barack Obama. His mother turned around from the front seat of the van, stared at me for a moment, and told me, "Oh, so you voted for a baby killer?" He started laughing hysterically, and I just sat there in silence feeling betrayed by my friend.

The second memory was the day after the election when it was announced Barack Hussein Obama would be the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. My first class of the day was my freshman orientation class, which was a film studies class taught by a professor in the art department. He walked into the classroom, sat in his chair, and asked if we all saw the news and noted that America elected its first African-American President. A student from the back of the room shouted out a clarification: Obama was half Black. The rest of the class was stunned by this statement, including the professor. He changed the subject pretty quickly after that remark.

During my four years in college my horizons broadened. I met and befriended people who didn't grow up like me, didn't talk like me, didn't have white skin, had experiences I had

never had, and the way I understood God changed as well. God is more than just a litmus test, a right or wrong belief system or a political tool. Belief in God, the omnipotent and omniscient, meant that there were some things I couldn't fully understand as a human, which left some grey areas. I had to acknowledge that there were some things I did not know that God did, and I was not always at liberty to decide what God did or didn't stand for politically. It was incorrect to assume that a candidate or even an entire political party was God's choice based solely on a few political issues.

People of color had been abstract caricatures in my life, heavily influenced by the media I had consumed. Phrases like "I don't see color" or "I'm colorblind" were meant to come across as my attempt to show I was not racist but were just excuses to not acknowledge the hurt and damage people who looked like me had committed to minority communities. White Evangelicals have never attempted to reconcile the generational wrongs they have done to people of color, and I hope this project can be just a small step in the right direction for people who look like me to stop making excuses.

## **II. Literature Review**

As with much qualitative research, the grounded theory method will be the basis of the research used in this thesis. Grounded theory uses systematic standards to provide a theory (or theories) that are "grounded" in data, hence the name. Grounded theory method uses inductive reasoning to perform data analysis during the collection process, which is typically in-depth interviews in the case of documentary research. Once data collection has begun, concepts and themes start to emerge. From there, those themes are categorized, finding macro-level relationships, which eventually leads to a theory that is fine-tuned with incoming data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

One of the main advantages to grounded theory method, especially in qualitative research, is that some data analysis occurs during data collection. This is especially helpful when performing interviews, as you can use the information you have just gathered to better inform both past and future interviews. It can also help determine whether you need similar sources to ones you've already interviewed, or if you should find sources who can contrast the data you've received.

Grounded theory method also provides constant comparison, which is critical for qualitative research. This comparison happens on a data-to-data level, where you can compare interviews to each other and see what similarities and what differences you may be finding. This comparison can also happen on different planes; you can use the themes you have established based on a collection of interviews and compare that to new incoming interviews that have yet to be categorized to discover if they validate those themes or even provide insight into new themes (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

### **Categorizing and Understanding Evangelical Christianity**

Western Christianity can be divided into two major categories: Catholicism and Protestantism. Protestants subdivide even further into two major denominations: Mainline and Evangelical. One major distinction between Evangelicals and Mainliners involves a spiritual rebirth, which often leads Evangelicals to refer to themselves as "Born-Again Christians." In Mainline churches, such as Methodist and Lutheran churches, baptism is done in infancy, as a sign of the covenant of God as well as a commitment by the family (Wall & Wesley, 1780). In Evangelical churches, there is an understanding that this sacrament is credobaptism, which is to say that baptism takes place once there has been a conversion to the belief that Jesus Christ saved you from your sins (Wright et al., 2009). Baptism is the public announcement of this conversion

experience in the Evangelical church. Therefore, once this conversion experience occurs, you have been spiritually “born again,” according to the scripture in the Bible which says, “Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again... no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit’” (John 3:3-5 New International Version). Born-Again Christianity therefore depends on a literal individual conversion moment or experience, which many believers can pinpoint to a specific church service or revival experience.

One way to understand White Evangelicals sociologically is through their “cultural toolkit” (Swidler, 1986). The cultural toolkit acts like a filter, allowing some things to be sharply in focus while other things are blurry and hard to distinguish in the background (Jones, 2020, p. 97). Michael Emerson and Christian Smith (2000) used the cultural toolkit to articulate three main tools used by White Evangelicals: freewill individualism, relationalism, and anti-structuralism.

Freewill individualism means that “individuals exist independent of structures and institutions, have freewill, and are individually accountable for their own actions.” Individualism is a critical element of a believer’s faith because the ultimate manifestation of Evangelical Christianity is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Practicing their faith in a church community is secondary to that personal relationship with Jesus and their personal salvation. Relationalism means that all problems are rooted in poor relationships between individuals rather than institutional behavior or unfair laws. White Evangelicals believe that all problems—and solutions—are the product of personal relationships with each other as humans. Anti-structuralism means that there is a distrust of institutions being the blame for social problems, because the real source of blame belongs with sinful individuals (Jones, 2020, pp. 97–98).

This is an oppositional stance to structuralism, which is a theory of culture that structure is more important than function. White Evangelicals are unwilling to accept the possibility structural racism or racial inequality at an institutional level could be an alternative to a breakdown in personal relationships. However, that blindness to structural disadvantages disappears around an issue like affirmative action because such a program can impact them as white people directly (Emerson & Smith, 2000).

To summarize, the sharpest focus in the lens for White Evangelicals is based around personal relationships. This is why many White Evangelicals discuss their religious beliefs through this language, including the idea of having a personal relationship with Jesus. All problems—and solutions—can be provided by creating better personal relationships. What falls in the background, fuzzy beyond recognition, is the systemic and institutional racism and the justice system that consistently disenfranchises people of color.

### **English Settlers and The Promised Land**

English Puritans first came to America in the 1600s, looking to escape the rule of the British monarchy. When they landed in America, they used biblical parallels to help articulate their experiences. They thought of themselves like the Israelites from the Old Testament: a new chosen people, coming to a land that God had given them and their journey over the ocean was like fleeing a pharaoh in the book of Exodus (Gorski, 2021).

This metaphor kept going for the Puritans when they interacted with the Native people whose land they had intruded. When relations were good initially, the Puritans saw them as a lost tribe of Israel, meaning they saw each other as family or together on this journey. But as conflict arose, often violent, some Puritan theologians start to justify that the Native people were the

Canaanites or the Amalekites, which were the enemy tribes that God instructed the Israelites to strike down in the Bible (Gorski, 2021).

Similar events happened in the Virginia colony, where white people were enslaving Native and Black people. White people would use the Bible to rationalize the slavery of people of color, claiming that they were “heathens” who were uneducated and simply property. These slaveowners would bring their slaves to church with them, and soon the slaves began to hear the Gospel message and become Christians themselves. While the slaveowners were glad that their slaves were accepting their religious beliefs, the definition of what made a slave began to get complicated. If they accepted Jesus as their savior and became Christians, the definition of what made them heathens began to disappear (Gorski, 2021).

### **Fundamentalists**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these born-again Christians took on the moniker of “Fundamentalists.” The name, as noted by LeRoy Moore, Jr. (1968, p. 196), comes from an editor of the nationally circulated Baptist paper called *Watchman-Examiner* in 1920 who suggested that “those who still cling to the great fundamentals and who mean to do battle royal for the fundamentals shall be called ‘Fundamentalists’” (Laws, 1920).

In 1925, that battle took center stage around America’s education system. The state of Tennessee had passed HB 125, more commonly known as The Butler Act, which was a law prohibiting schools from teaching evolution in public schools. The law was challenged within the year in a famous case that took place in Dayton, Tennessee. Former Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, who had become an adamant supporter of anti-evolution teachings late in life, acted as the prosecution for the state of Tennessee in the case. The defense was run by the

American Civil Liberties Union, with famous attorney Clarence Darrow as the lead defendant (*Scopes v. State (Tenn. Sup. Ct.) - UMKC School of Law*, 2021).

The media coverage from this case left Fundamentalists feeling mocked, as they were portrayed to be uneducated and backwards. Following the trial, we start to see Fundamentalists taking a different approach: instead of trying to change the public system, they build their own subculture in private settings. By 1930, Bryan College, founded by William Jennings Bryan, is established in Dayton Tennessee as a private Christian college with the goal of teaching from a Christian worldview. Bryan College is just one institution within a whole network of colleges and universities that spring from the aftermath of the Scopes Trial (Maxwell, 2021).

### **Billy Graham's Political Influence**

Billy Graham was one of the most prominent evangelical preachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and his combination of religion and politics was direct: saved souls lead to a saved nation (Hummel, 2016, p. 1). Graham's mission as an evangelist was relatively simple: his crusades would gather tens of thousands of people in auditoriums and stadiums, where Graham would preach a message calling for individual salvation and atonement for each participant (2016, p. 2).

These crusades being led by Graham were a modern-day revival, an American Baptist tradition that dates back to the Colonial era (Smith, 2014). In the tradition of his forefathers, Graham's message was to "preach the Gospel:" that all of humanity was sinful and destined for an eternity in Hell, but Jesus Christ came to Earth as a man and died on the cross for the sins of all who believed. If a person came to accept that message, they would be saved from Hell and would instead spend eternity in Heaven with God the Father. This message was prominent in revival-based sermons.

Graham's work entered the political realm in earnest following a meeting with President Harry S. Truman, which took many attempts to land. The meeting did not go well. He showed up in an exuberant "pistachio-green" suit and hand-painted tie, overstayed his welcome, and was escorted out of the Oval Office to a waiting White House press corps. He went on to relive the meeting, even reenacting his prayer by getting down on one knee. Graham left that meeting eager to line up a new presidential candidate that would align with the values of White Evangelical voters. That man was former military general Dwight D. Eisenhower, who scored sixty percent of evangelicals votes nationally in the 1952 election (Du Mez, 2020, p. 34).

The fusion of revivalism and nationalism started to become evident with the actions Eisenhower took during his presidency, with the encouragement of Graham as a spiritual advisor. Eisenhower became the first sitting president to attend the National Prayer Breakfast in 1953, led the charge to add the phrase "under God" to the pledge of allegiance in 1954, and signed a bill requiring "In God We Trust" to appear on all American currency by 1955 (D. K. Williams, 2012, pp. 26–27). Despite Eisenhower's policies, he did not see himself as an evangelical, but rather saw civil religion as useful to combat the communism fears around the Cold War (Du Mez, 2021). In fact, Eisenhower was quoted as saying, "our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is" (1952). While the phrase may have been clumsy, Eisenhower meant that he believed that within the broadly shared Judeo-Christian framework, he didn't care whether someone was an observant Jew, a Unitarian, or a devout Evangelical, all of those beliefs were compatible with American democracy (Williams, 2021).

### **White Evangelicals and Abortion**

In the years leading up to the Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade*, the campaign opposed to abortion was rooted in New Deal Liberalism (D. K. Williams, 2015). For decades, the only religious group that showed an interest in the anti-abortion movement were Catholics. In 1971, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), America's largest group of Evangelicals, passed a resolution encouraging its members to work for legislation that allows the possibility of abortion under such conditions as rape, incest, and other carefully scrutinized evidence that the pregnancy may be harmful to the mother. In 1974, one year after the Supreme Court ruling on *Roe v. Wade*, the SBC reaffirmed their position. The same happened in 1976. (Balmer, 2014). W. A. Criswell, a former President of the Southern Baptist Convention and the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, applauded the ruling, saying this is the right decision on the part of the Supreme Court (Balmer, 2021).

### **Jerry Falwell, Christian Schools, and Segregation**

By 1978, Jerry Falwell had taken on the role as the new leader and revivalist from Graham. Falwell was a household name due in large part to his presence on televisions nationwide. During the 1950s there was a rise in televangelists, a portmanteau of television of evangelist, thanks in large part to pastors like Oral Roberts, Rex Humbard, Robert Schuller, and of course Jerry Falwell (D. K. Williams, 2012, p. 44). Falwell's television persona differed from most of his contemporaries; many of the more charismatic preachers shouted at their audience, but Falwell spoke calmly and used uplifting personal anecdotes. He preached about the divinely ordained system of capitalism and that hard work led to success (Williams, 2012, p. 45).

Falwell not only opened churches, but he also started schools as well. By 1967 he had started Lynchburg Christian School and in 1971 had opened what is now Liberty University, the largest Christian university in the world (Forbes, 2021).

Falwell initially was an apolitical pastor who believed it was his job to save souls. In the weeks after the civil rights marches in Selma, Alabama in 1965, Falwell responded from the pulpit: “Believing the Bible as I do, I would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ and begin doing anything else—including the fighting of Communism, or participating in the civil rights reform... Preachers are not called to be politicians, but to be soul winners” (Duffy, 2007).

In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that all public schools must be desegregated following the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. In places like Mississippi, localities dug their feet on full integration of public school as late as 1976. However, many white families didn’t wait for action to be taken in public school settings. There was a swift move by both the White Citizens’ Councils as well as white churches to create private white-only schools, known as “segregation academies” (Jones, 2020, p. 48). In 1969, a group of African American parents in Mississippi sued the Treasury department to prevent three new K-12 schools from receiving tax-exempt status due to their discrimination policies. In that first year of desegregation in 1969, the number of white students enrolled in public schools in Holmes County, Mississippi dropped from 771 to 28. In 1970, that number fell to zero (Balmer, 2014).

On June 30, 1971, a United States District Court issued its ruling in *Green v. Connally* in regards to tax-exempt status for these schools: “Under the Internal Revenue Code, properly construed, racially discriminatory private schools are not entitled to the Federal tax exemption provided for charitable, educational institutions, and persons making gifts to such schools are not

entitled to the deductions provided in case of gifts to charitable, educational institutions” (Balmer, 2014).

Bob Jones University, a Christian college in Greenville, South Carolina, stood its ground despite the ruling. In 1970, the Internal Revenue Service under Republican President Richard Nixon sent a letter to determine whether the institution was discriminating who was admitted based on race. The university president, Bob Jones, responded that his university did not admit Black students. On January 19, 1976, the IRS revoked the institution’s tax exempt status (Balmer, 2014).

Falwell was enraged by this move on the part of the federal government, essentially reversing his stance from a decade prior to say, “the idea that religion and politics don’t mix was invented by the devil to keep Christians from running their own country” (Stearns, 2007). This change of tone is notable, especially when compared to the quote earlier in his career. Falwell, and by extension White Evangelicals, were willing to stay out of politics when it involved black ministers and civil rights work. However, when the status quo of white supremacy was being challenged, Falwell and White Evangelical leaders decided it was time to take political action (Jones, 2020).

### **Paul Weyrich and the Moral Majority**

Paul Weyrich was a conservative political activist and co-founder of the conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation. Weyrich had tried out several different issues to motivate White Evangelicals to consolidate as a one voting bloc, including pornography, feminism, and prayer in schools. “I was trying to get those people interested in those issues and I utterly failed,” Weyrich said in an interview. “What changed their minds” was the federal government’s intervention “against the Christian schools, trying to deny them tax-exempt status on the basis of

so-called de facto segregation” (Blumenthal, 2017). Weyrich attempted to blame Carter’s administration, but the action took place under the Republican administrations of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford.

Weyrich partnered with Falwell and started the Moral Majority in 1979, promoting “pro-family” issues (Blumenthal, 2017). They pulled in Francis Schaeffer, an Evangelical theologian who had recently collaborated with pediatric surgeon C. Everett Koop to produce a series of films entitled *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* The film series turned the issue of abortion from an abstract idea into a Christian battle; the fight against abortion was a fight for the return of Christian values in government and society, or as Falwell might have put it, a way to give Christians back their own country (Williams, 2015, p. 464).

President Jimmy Carter had made strides to reduce the incidence of abortions, by simplifying adoption procedures, advocating for better sex education, and reducing the stigma of unwed pregnancies. The Moral Majority was not impressed. If he was not willing to bring forward a constitutional amendment to put a halt on abortions, then they would not be supporting him (Balmer, 2014).

Meanwhile, Ronald Reagan signed one the most liberal abortion acts in American history within his first six months as governor of California in 1967. The Therapeutic Abortion Act in California raised the number of abortions in the state from 518 in his first year in office to an average of 100,000 in his remaining years in office. Reagan later admitted abortion was “a subject I’d never given much thought to” (Kengor & Doerner, 2008).

### **Reagan’s Two Speeches**

Two major speeches late in the 1980 presidential campaign solidified the support of White Evangelicals for Ronald Reagan. The first was on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1980, at the Neshoba

County Fair in Mississippi. Reagan's campaign had been promoting the idea of "colorblindness" and a denial of structural racism during his speech. His view was that America had passed civil rights legislation and it was time for America to move beyond race. Coming out of a season of Christian private schools having their tax-exempt status questioned, White Southerners were worried that more federal regulations would continue to challenge their way of life. In this speech, Reagan derides those on welfare, claiming that people getting help from government entities are trapped, and that bureaucracy creates the cycle for those people to stay on welfare. The picture he was painting for his audience was not one of struggling single white mothers living in mobile homes in the Deep South. Reagan's coded language of welfare queens and "young bucks" painted a picture in their minds of Black people cheating federal agencies to avoid work and live off the government. His most famous quote from this speech comes right after that, saying, "I believe in state's rights; I believe in people doing as much as they can for themselves at the community level and at the private level" (Neshoba Democrat, 2011). The people of Mississippi—as well as the people on the Reagan campaign—know what is meant by the phrase "state's rights." In the 1964 election, Reagan campaigned for the segregationist and Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, where he promoted "individual rights," which would shift to "state's rights" by 1980 (J. Williams, 2004). The term, to put it succinctly, was a dog whistle to segregationists (Greenberg, 2007).

The second speech came just a few weeks later, on August 22<sup>nd</sup> at Reunion Arena in Dallas, Texas. Reagan was speaking at the Religious Roundtable, where he famously told a room full of Evangelicals, "Now, I know this is a non-partisan gathering, and so I know that you can't endorse me, but I only brought that up because I want you to know that I endorse you and what you're doing" (Reagan, 1980). Reagan notes that his "stuck on a desert island book" would

obviously be the Bible, as well as his anti-pornography stance. However, not once does he mention abortion in his speech (Balmer, 2021).

Reagan won the 1980 presidential election, overwhelmingly winning the White Evangelical vote by a 62%-30% margin (Harris, 1980). Falwell and the Moral Majority claimed the credit, suggesting Carter would have won the popular vote by one point had it not been for their political influence (Balmer, 2014).

### **President Reagan, President Bush, and President Bush**

Upon Reagan's inauguration, White Evangelicals were rewarded with an appointment for surgeon general: C. Everett Koop, who played a major role in the anti-abortion video series with Francis Schaeffer just a few years earlier. Other than this appointment, Reagan's administration was essentially just rhetoric. No taxpayer money was ever put towards funding abortions domestically, so claiming such action would have been misleading. Over the two terms and eight years in office, Reagan did not push for an overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, nor did he suggest a constitutional amendment to outlaw abortion, as the Moral Majority insisted that Jimmy Carter do during his time in office. In the 1988 primary, with White Evangelicals frustrated by the Republican party, they decided to run their own candidate with televangelist Pat Robertson. They felt they had garnered enough clout and power by this point to be able to sway the party with their choice, but Robertson failed to even come close to getting the nomination (Maxwell, 2021).

In the failure to secure Robertson as the nominee, White Evangelicals realized they had two choices, and understood that the authenticity element that wanted in an Evangelical candidate was less important than a candidate who could pass a litmus test of agreeing on the right issues, regardless of their personal convictions and beliefs (Maxwell, 2021).

In 1988, George H.W. Bush was elected president, garnering 71% of the Southern Evangelical vote, ushering in a new batch of politically activated young White Evangelicals (Smidt & Kellstedt, 1992). In 2000, Bush's son George W. Bush was the Republican candidate. By this point, the Republican party had clearly claimed its ground on the cultural issues that motivated White Evangelical voters, and the two were more aligned than ever before (Layman & Hussey, 2007).

Again, it's notable that during the timeframe of 1981-2009, 20 of those 28 years hosted a Republican President, and no substantial policy, constitutional amendments, or executive orders were instated to meaningfully end abortion writ large in America.

### **Donald Trump**

Donald Trump is well known for being well known. Trump took over as president of the family real estate business in 1971 and began to use The Trump Organization as an umbrella identity to encompass all of his real estate ambitions. His highs and lows are well documented in the media and is even considered by one writer as the "tabloid candidate" (Shafer, 2016). His most profitable venture was not his real estate endeavors but was his time hosting the reality television show "The Apprentice" for fourteen seasons (Poniewozik, 2020). He discussed running for President of the United States numerous times, starting as early as 1987 in an interview with the New York Times (Oreskes, 1987).

One event that vaulted Trump into the political spotlight was in 2011 when he stated on Good Morning America that he was skeptical that President Barack Obama—America's first Black President—was born in America. Trump claimed that nobody knew who President Obama was and the whole thing was very strange (Marr, 2011). He even suggested Obama might secretly be a Muslim, as though that were a bad thing (Jones, 2020, p. 13). Questioning President

Obama's citizenship had a long history—Trump was hardly the first to do so—but what made Trump's approach unique was his relentless media blitz. Trump went on any media outlet that would put his face on the television, from ABC's "Good Morning America" and "The View," to NBC's "Today Show," to Fox News's "On the Record." This went on for six full weeks (Parker & Eder, 2016).

On April 27, 2011, President Obama went into the Press Briefing Room of the White House, joking about how he couldn't get the major news networks to break in on important issues like national security, but they did so to discuss the site of his birth (The Obama White House, 2011). President Obama went on to confirm that he was in fact an American citizen, born in Hawaii, with affidavits and the longform birth certificate posted on the White House website (Pfeiffer, 2011). What was Trump's response? "We have to look at it, we have to see if it's real. Is it proper? What's on it? But I hope it checks out beautifully" (Associated Press, 2011). Trump refused to admit publicly that he believed President Obama was born in America as late as September 14, 2016, just two months before the election (Costa, 2016). Two days later, Trump conceded the point, admitting that President Obama was born in the United States, although he did claim, falsely, that it was his democratic opponent Hillary Clinton who had started the birtherism claims (Pramuk, 2016).

In 2015 Trump finally announced that he would officially be running for President of the United States as a Republican. Following his descent down a golden escalator, he made clear his political priorities in his opening press conference upon announcing his candidacy for President of the United States, insinuating that illegal immigrants and people of color were to blame for the problems of America (Phillips, 2017).

### **Trump and White Christian Nationalism**

If you were to look at the 2016 presidential nominees for the Republican party on paper, Donald Trump would not be expected to be the choice of White Evangelicals. Trump had committed adultery, which led to two separate divorces. He was caught on tape in a hot microphone moment bragging about sexually assaulting women. He was quoted saying he doesn't believe he has any reason to ask for forgiveness from God (Scott, 2015).

These factors initially led many prominent White Evangelical leaders to be concerned about his potential rise in the primary race. They preferred candidates like former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, Texas senator Ted Cruz, Florida senator Marco Rubio, or former neurosurgeon Ben Carson. Russell Moore, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, saw the vote either going towards Cruz or Rubio, depending on how charismatic of a Christian the voter was. In July 2015, Russell Moore said that he didn't know a single pastor who supported Donald Trump for President (Du Mez, 2020).

What those leaders did not take into account was the element of racial resentment that is deeply rooted in White Evangelicalism. Donald Trump was an excellent communicator when it came to distinguishing outsiders. His persistence around birtherism was a dog whistle that an African-American man whose middle name was Hussein could not inherently be trusted. On the campaign trail, Trump did this by affixing a definite article in front of social categories: "the Mexicans," "the Blacks," "the gays," among other examples (Gorski, 2017). This strategy was effective because it allowed Trump to wildly generalize and exaggerate about social groups as a tool to coalesce white people around his message. White Christian nationalism fits well with

Trump's attitude towards these groups because there is no individuality or nuance, only a faceless, homogeneous collection of humans (Gorski, 2021).

Kristin Kobes Du Mez writes, "For Evangelicals who had come to despise President Obama and all that he stood for, it was hard to imagine anything worse. And then Hillary Clinton declared her candidacy" (2020, p. 250). Evangelicals have never liked Clinton, most prominently during her time as the First Lady. They saw her as a model of what a woman should not be: she was a career woman who did not take her husband's last name for quite some time, she promoted healthcare reform, and was an advocate for women's rights. White Evangelicals rarely allow women in leadership roles in the church, especially not as lead pastors, and the idea of voting for a ferociously feminist woman for president was a threat to the White Evangelical lifestyle (Du Mez, 2021).

Eventually, White Evangelical leaders began to support Donald Trump during the primary. Jerry Falwell, Jr. and Robert Jeffress, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, were some of the earliest supporters, speaking alongside Trump at events leading up to his nomination. Wayne Grudem, the co-founder of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, initially opposed Trump but within a few months had written an article calling a vote for him a "morally good choice" and that, yes, he had been married three times and was unfaithful, but that made him a "good candidate with flaws" (Grudem, 2016a).

Some leaders did waver on their support following the release of the 2005 Access Hollywood tape where Trump was caught on microphone bragging about his attempts to sexually assault and harass women. Grudem wrote a new article in October stepping back from his original endorsement (Grudem, 2016b). Most leaders found ways to brush off this event. Ralph Reed, the former director of the Christian Coalition of America, said that as the father of

two daughters, he was disappointed by the tape, but Trump was still the better choice over Clinton (Bailey, 2016). Jeffress said that he might not choose Trump to be a children's Sunday School teacher, but that didn't mean he wouldn't be a good president (Green, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

As we look back on the long, complicated history of Christians in America—and even before America was a nation—exclusion and racism run rampant. Puritans in New England who invaded a foreign land viewed themselves as the chosen people of God and viewed Native people as enemy tribes who should be destroyed. Virginians viewed their Black slaves as heathens, who were too ignorant to be considered people. In 1844, a group of Baptist leaders from the South made the decision to form their own organization, the Southern Baptist Convention, explicitly separating from other Baptists who refused to allow them to own slaves (Jones, 2020, p. 2). Even in more recent history, Jerry Falwell preached after Bob Jones University's tax exempt status was revoked in 1967 that the idea of religion and politics not being allowed to be intertwined was an invention of the devil “to keep Christians from running their own country” (Stearns, 2007). What is the antecedent to the pronoun “their” in that sentence? Falwell is explicitly referring to White Christians (Jones, 2021).

In 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention decided it was time to apologize for its racism. They acknowledged that they could have done more to combat slavery, Jim Crow, and could have been more supportive of the civil rights movement. The resolution passed, and Reverend Gary Frost, a Black pastor from Youngstown, Ohio issued a brief statement, accepting the convention's apology on behalf of his Black brothers and sisters. 150 years of white supremacy was essentially absolved in just fifteen minutes of work (Jones, 2020, p. 54). Southern Baptist

Seminary president Al Mohler believes, “We the living cannot repent on behalf of those who are dead” (Mohler, 2015).

The final chapter of Robert P. Jones’s book *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* is called “Reckoning.” There are two branches of etymological meaning to the word reckoning. The Old English branch means to give a full verbal account of something. The Dutch and German branch hint at the idea of economic justice or a fair settling of accounts. White Evangelicals must experience a reckoning with their past in order to move on from the centuries of white supremacy that have plagued not only this nation, but this faith tradition. Mohler is right in part, we cannot repent from those who are dead, but that does not mean we have to keep perpetuating our forefather’s sins.

### **III. PRODUCTION NARRATIVE**

My research on the subject began in earnest in fall of 2019, in my journalism theory class. In spring of 2020, I began writing a thesis proposal and thinking about what sources would be a good fit and how I would arrange interviews. My initial plan was to work with remote producers and local radio stations to coordinate high fidelity interview recordings. By April 2020 that plan was thrown out the window thanks to a global pandemic. Once it became clear that the pandemic was not going away any time soon, I began to plan on doing all interviews remotely with the assistance of video conference software and iPhone voice memos to record each source locally. I planned to begin recording interviews in January 2021 and end recording in March 2021.

#### **Preproduction | Fall 2020**

After writing a thesis proposal in the spring of 2020, I coordinated with Dr. Andrew Dowdle to create an independent study to spend time reading, researching, and diving into material for this project. This included works such as *The Making of Donald Trump* by David Cay Johnston,

*White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* by Robert P. Jones, *God's Own Party* by Daniel K. Williams, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* by Kristin Kobes Du Mez, and *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Un-American* by Andrew Seidel.

### **Interviewing the White Evangelical Experts | Winter 2021**

I knew that the White Evangelical perspective of the podcast would be my priority. In December and January, I began reaching out to potential sources and securing times to meet with them over Zoom. I confirmed interviews with Daniel K. Williams, Robert P. Jones, Kristin Kobes Du Mez, and Randall Balmer.

### **Interviewing Republican Experts | Spring 2021**

I had hopes of interviewing current or former Republican politicians for this podcast, and I believe it would have been much more likely had it not been for the global pandemic. I reached out to Senator Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania as well as former senator Jeff Flake of Arizona with no response. I also reached out to Frank Luntz, a conservative political pollster with no response either. I was able to secure an interview with Angie Maxwell, the Director of the Diane Blair Center of Southern Politics and Society, an associate professor of political science at the University of Arkansas. Her book *The Long Southern Strategy: How Chasing White Voters in the South Changed American Politics* was critical to my research and helped confirm the notion that racial resentment played a major role in winning over White Evangelical voters.

### **Interviewing Donald Trump Experts | Spring 2021**

I had read David Cay Johnston's biography of Donald Trump in the fall of 2020 and had planned on interviewing him for the podcast, but unfortunately, he was on a deadline for his newest book and was unable to schedule a time to talk. I came across Gwenda Blair's book *The*

*Trumps: Three Generations of Builders and a Presidential Candidate* early in 2021 and secured an interview with her for the podcast.

### **Recording the Interviews | Spring 2021**

Early in the pandemic I created a makeshift “studio” in my upstairs coat closet of my home. It’s small, full of puffy clothing, and just big enough to set up a chair and two stools to hold the recording gear and laptop. When it came time to interview sources for the podcast, I was excited for the opportunity to do some recording at KXUA, the student radio station with its new production studios. I recorded two of my eight interviews in the KXUA studios, using the studio equipment to record locally for my voice. The studio—of course—is a much different setup than I use at home, including a different digital audio workstation, so I ended up clipping nearly all of the audio of my microphone on both recordings because I was pretty unfamiliar with the equipment. Luckily the audio from my sources was recording separately and I was able to use all of that tape. I realized quickly that under the time constraints of my interviews as well as the limited access I had to use the KXUA studios, I could record much more effectively from my home studio.

From a preproduction standpoint, all of the interviews looked essentially the same. We would schedule a Zoom call to talk where we could see each other visually. I would record my side of the interview locally on my computer, I would ask them to record locally using their iPhone’s Voice Memo app, and I would also record the audio from the Zoom call. The audio from the Zoom call would be used as a tool to synchronize the two separate audio files and line up our conversation. Occasionally I had a source who was unable to record locally, and my only option was to use the audio from the Zoom call. Zoom has a feature in its software that allows

each participant's audio to be recorded separately, so even though the quality was not as good as if they had recorded locally and offline, I was still able to use that isolated audio.

### **Post-Production and Script Writing | Spring 2021**

Once I completed each individual interview, I spent time synchronizing the audio files and doing some simple cleanup. My process was to cut the dead air in between questions or responses on my end as well as cut any dead air on their side of the source's conversation. This simple edit made the audio much cleaner and easier to listen back to at a later date.

I waited until I had completed all eight interviews to begin post-production in any major capacity. Tiffany King, the very first reporting professor I had at the University of Arkansas, laid out the process for broadcast reporting that has always stuck with me: step one is to shoot, step two is to write, step three is to edit. The idea is that your first priority should be to shoot—or in my case, record tape—as much as you possibly can, and then record just a little bit more. With the eight interviews I recorded, I had over 11.5 hours of usable tape. This also prevents you from limiting yourself from asking more questions as a reporter. Your gut reaction may be that you've already asked a question to one source and received a good answer, so you'll hold back from asking a different source a similar question, losing out on the possibility that they may provide an even better answer to the question.

Once I finished recording interviews, I began to lay out what would be the best structure to tell this story over the course of three episodes. At first, I considered laying it out in a chronological fashion, but I decided some of the patterns and storylines would get too muddled by this. Instead, I decide to break up the episodes by the three major factors that played extensively into the story. This process allowed me to do some historical context in each episode while staying focused on how within each timeline and the presence of each theme played a

major role. Some timelines were much wider than others—for example, the first episode spanned from the 1600s and New England Puritans and stretched to Eisenhower’s presidency in the 1950s, whereas episode two’s timeline is much tighter, spanning just a few decades.

One of the most important elements of writing for a podcast is writing to your sound bites. Throughout the process of writing the script, I am combing through my library of clips and sound bites from my sources and deciding how to best setup each clip. I recorded a basic vocal track to accompany the sound bites as a draft and sent to Professor Rick Stockdell for edits and revisions. After revisions and edits were approved, I recorded the high-fidelity voiceover as well as adding music beds throughout the episode.

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