What I Wish More People Knew About American Evangelicalism

For all the bad that's come out of this movement, there are still countless stories of personal transformation leading people to live better lives.

By John Fea

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My father was a hard man. I spent most of my childhood fearing him. He was a product of the American working class who, as he liked to put it, attended the "school of hard knocks." He served his country in the Marines, apprenticed as a carpenter, and was a staunch disciplinarian of his three boys. He stood at 6 foot 4 and was quite intimidating. He could also erupt at any moment into a rage that often resulted in corporal punishment. My brothers and I were usually guilty of the crime; still, the penalty did not always match the offense.

Although he was raised Roman Catholic, he lived as a functional agnostic. Then he got saved. In 1982, he became a born-again Christian. He started attending Bible studies, praying before meals, cutting back on the foul language, and preaching the Gospel to his family. My father's spiritual growth was aided by Christian radio, especially James Dobson's daily *Focus on the Family* program. Over time, this scary guy became a better father and husband. My mother likes to tell the story of me, noticing the change in my father, asking her privately, "What the heck is going on with Dad?"

This transformation has been on my mind lately as I've noticed a growing—and in some ways deserved—trend of books and articles criticizing American evangelicalism. Publishing houses have released books with titles and subtitles such as *Evangelical Anxiety*, *Inside the Evangelical Movement That Failed a Generation*, *White Evangelical Racism*, and *Following Jesus Out of American Evangelicalism*. I've been part of this trend. Back in 2018, in these pages, I took my fellow evangelicals to task for their support of Donald Trump. I spend a lot of time writing at a blog that is critical of Christian nationalism, evangelical Trumpism, and the other warped politics that are so prevalent in my religious tribe.

But the story of American evangelicalism isn't all negative, neither in my dad's era nor in ours. For all the bad that's come out of this movement, there are still countless stories of personal transformation leading people to become better parents, better spouses, and better members of their communities. Seeing the good in evangelicalism is essential to understanding its appeal to millions of Americans.

James dobson was a clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of Southern California School of Medicine and a staff doctor at the Children's Hospital of Los Angeles; he had a pedigree that impressed uneducated working-class evangelicals like my dad. Dobson taught my father that he should exercise paternal discipline because children had strong wills that needed breaking, but that such discipline should never be delivered in a spirit of anger.

As valuable as Dobson's message of compassion was for my dad, his emphasis on male authority in the home has come under significant criticism in recent years. The Calvin University history professor Kristin Kobes Du Mez, in her book *Jesus and John Wayne*, paints Dobson as one of the evangelical patriarchs who “corrupted a faith and fractured a nation.” The Baylor University historian Beth Allison Barr has tied Dobson to unbiblical views that have “subjugated women.” They have identified a serious dark spot in the history of American evangelicalism.

I have offered praise for the work of Du Mez and Barr and have recommended it to my own daughters. In fact, my oldest daughter was a history major at Calvin University. Du Mez was her adviser.

When it came to our two daughters, now well-adjusted adults, my wife and I did not take James Dobson’s approach to child-rearing. There were no purity balls or regular spankings to protect their salvation. Nor did we listen to much of his marriage advice, especially as it related to male headship and female submission. We have found other Christian approaches to marriage and family more helpful and, perhaps, less harmful.

Yet for all their value, books such as Du Mez’s and Barr’s, as works of evangelical history, are woefully flat and do not explain historically the story of my father and, I imagine, millions of other men and women who learned from Dobson how to love their families as Jesus loves his church.

My father did not need James Dobson to teach him how to be a patriarch. He was a patriarch years before he picked up a copy of Dobson’s *Dare to Discipline* or tuned in to *Focus on the Family* on WFME radio broadcasting out of New York City. Dobson had a different influence on him. My father took to heart Dobson’s lessons that as the male head of the household, he had the responsibility to lead the family with love and compassion. Such an approach to family life was countercultural to the working-class, patriarchal, immigrant culture in which he was raised. His life, and our family, took a 180-degree turn for the better. During my teenage years, when my little sister came along, my parents made sure that she was raised in an evangelical household. It was a completely different upbringing from the one I had experienced: defined by Christian love, tenderheartedness, and a father committed to the spiritual health of his family. For all this, a part of me will always be grateful for James Dobson’s life and ministry.

I'm waiting to see my father's story, and the story of others like him, in books about American evangelicalism in the 1970s and '80s. I'm not holding my breath.

Du Mez's and Barr's work is part of a narrative—perpetuated by scholars, memoirists, and journalists—that evangelicalism is bad for America. Christian nationalism, white supremacy, and sexual abuse have given the "good news" of the Gospel a bad name. Some of this criticism is necessary, a form of what the Catholic legal scholar Cathleen Kaveny calls "moral chemotherapy." She describes it as a "reaction to a potentially life-threatening distortion in ordinary, day-to-day moral discussion" that "threatens to undermine the very possibility of moral and political reasoning within the community."

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But some of it is unfair or disproportionate. Journalists don't sufficiently distinguish Christian nationalists from conservative evangelicals who simply and reasonably want to bring their faith to bear on public life. Brands and platforms are built upon calling out evangelicals for their sins. Overemphasizing the negative is also unhelpful to anyone outside the world of evangelicalism who wishes to understand why so many Americans are part of this movement.

Americans deserve a fuller accounting of evangelicalism's role in our country's life. By focusing solely on the moments when evangelicals behave badly, we miss the way most evangelicals practice their faith. Every day, you can find evangelicals serving their neighbors, addressing injustice, promoting the common good, and doing the things necessary to keep American democracy strong and compassionate. In the same way that the anti-evangelical narrative about gender, patriarchy, and racism fails to explain my father's story, it also fails to account for these moments.

Twice a week I curate a blog post called "Evangelical Roundup," which includes about 30 to 40 links that chronicle what is happening in the world of American evangelicalism: the good, the bad, and the ugly. In doing this work for several years now, I have found that for every Christian nationalist, nativist, and MAGA promoter, there is a believer in Jesus Christ living out the Sermon on the Mount's call to humility, meekness, and mercy. These are evangelicals doing evangelical things. They are following the way of the cross and extending the grace and mercy they have experienced to others. This is a beautiful thing to behold.

Take, for example, Eastern Nazarene University in Quincy, Massachusetts. Early this year the evangelical college entered an agreement with the state government to open a temporary emergency shelter for refugees in the school's fine-arts center. Eastern Nazarene understands this initiative in the context of its mission to equip students to "serve our world as agents of Christ's love and truth." The Eastern Nazarene story went virtually unnoticed outside of a few local news reports.

In my past several roundups I have called attention to evangelicals opening their congregations to the poor and needy, finding solidarity with the victims—all the victims—of the Israel-Hamas War, praying for peace, opening medical clinics in megachurches, working for immigration reform, and defending human life wherever it is threatened. They are following scripture's commands to care for the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40), bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), welcome the stranger (Matthew 25:35); and pursue peace (Hebrews 12:14). Again, evangelicals doing evangelical things.

I don't know whom these evangelicals will vote for in the 2024 election. Many of them will hold their nose and vote for Donald Trump. Perhaps some don't trust mask mandates or COVID-19 vaccines. Others might even attend churches that occasionally hold patriotic Sunday services. But they are also doing the Lord's work. In an age of extremism, when many evangelicals have indeed lost their way, others take seriously the personal transformation they have experienced and their call as disciples of Christ.

Like the story of evangelicalism in my father's generation, the story of evangelicalism in the third decade of the 21st century is complex. Let's tell the whole story.

John Fea is a distinguished professor of American history at Messiah University and the executive editor of Current.

https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/02/evangelicals-christianity-james-dobson/677362/