

Selection from:

Jesus and John Wayne:

How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation

by

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SEVENTY-FOUR PERCENT of white evangelicals voted for the McCain/Palin ticket. But 24 percent of white evangelicals—up 4 percent from 2004—broke ranks and voted for Obama. The Obama campaign had targeted moderate white evangelicals, the sort who had been voting Republican for twenty years but who wanted to expand the list of “moral values” to include things like poverty, climate change, human rights, and the environment. Obama doubled his support among white evangelicals ages eighteen to twenty-nine compared to Kerry’s in 2004, and nearly doubled his support among those ages thirty to forty-four. Scholars and pundits alike started to declare the end of the culture wars, and to look ahead to “the end of white Christian America.” The old guard was shaken.¹

But militant evangelicalism was always at its strongest with a clear enemy to fight. Two weeks before the election, with an Obama victory appearing likely, one Colorado Springs pastor reminded fellow evangelicals of this: “This could be the best thing that ever happened to the evangelical cause. . . . We’re used to being against the tide.” He was right. The presidency of Barack Obama would strengthen evangelicals’ sense of embattlement and embolden the more militant voices within the movement.²

Race had been central to the formation of white evangelicals’ political and cultural identity, and so it’s not surprising that evangelical opposition to the first African American president would reflect a belief in his “otherness.” Explicit expressions of racism were rare, but among conservatives generally, the birther movement gained traction, questioning the legitimacy of Obama’s citizenship. Within evangelical circles, Franklin Graham added fuel to the fire by agreeing that the president had “some issues to deal with” regarding his birth certificate. Graham also questioned the legitimacy of Obama’s Christian faith. For Christian nationalists, casting doubt on Obama’s faith functioned in the same way as questioning the legitimacy of his citizenship. The president’s problem, according to Graham, was that “he was born a Muslim”—the “seed of Islam” had passed through his father to him, and “the Islamic world sees the president as one of theirs.” Graham saw “a pattern of hostility to traditional Christianity by the Obama administration” while Muslims seemed to be “getting a pass.”³

Other evangelicals, too, depicted the president as a Muslim sympathizer. Gary Bauer claimed the president was more interested “in defending the reputation of Islam” than in “saving the lives of Christians,” and he thought it prudent to advise Obama that defending

Islam was not “in his job description.” Conservative evangelicals took issue with the president’s reluctance to use the words “Islamist extremism,” and recoiled as he “glowingly gushed about the Quran multiple times” during his 2009 Cairo speech. By 2010, more white evangelicals believed Obama was a Muslim (29 percent) than believed he was a Christian (27 percent). A full 42 percent claimed not to know.⁴

The specter of a Muslim in the White House further entrenched the Islamophobia already widespread within the Christian Right. During Obama’s first year in office, Phyllis Schlafly hosted a “How to Take Back America Conference.” The conference included the usual sessions on “How to Counter the Homosexual Extremist Movement,” “How to Stop Socialism in Health Care,” and “How to Recognize Living Under Nazis & Communists,” but General Jerry Boykin was also invited to address the conference on the threat of Islam. The next year, Boykin contributed to a report on “Shariah: The Threat to America,” published by a neoconservative think tank. The report warned of Muslim schemes to impose shariah law and claimed that most Muslim social organizations were “fronts for violent jihadists.” The center’s director noted considerable interest on the part of “local law enforcement intelligence, homeland security, state police, National Guard units and the like,” even as terrorist experts critiqued the report as “inaccurate and counterproductive.”⁵

During Obama’s first term, conservative evangelicals worked to woo back wayward members of the younger generation. Two years after Obama was elected, Wayne Grudem, cofounder of the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, former president of the Evangelical Theological Society, and one of the leading proponents of gender complementarianism, decided to weigh in on politics directly. Until then, Grudem had focused primarily on theology and gender, writing several books promoting “biblical manhood and womanhood,” serving as general editor for the ESV Study Bible, and penning an evangelical approach to systematic theology. In 2010, he published what amounted to a systematic guide to politics; weighing in at over six hundred pages, the book offered an exhaustive guide to the “biblical” view on all things political. Grudem denounced abortion and LGBT rights and defended religious freedom and national sovereignty. Illegal immigration was a problem, but so were the “too many” legal immigrants who didn’t seem to be assimilating. He recommended immediately and effectively closing the borders, especially the border with Mexico. For Grudem, loving one’s neighbors meant going to war to protect them from “evil aggressors.” Military strength was a blessing, and it was wrong not to use it, especially in the case of the nation’s greatest threat, Islamic terrorism. Treating terrorism as a “law-enforcement problem” wouldn’t work; preemptive war was required. For those less inclined to purchase a weighty tome on Christian politics, the basic contours of the political worldview Grudem delineated were readily available in dozens of books on evangelical masculinity published in the 2000s. Faithful Christian manhood might start in the family, but it didn’t end there.⁶

Hoping to stem the Leftward drift of younger evangelicals, Grudem made a point of criticizing those tempted to vote candidate over party, a transgression too many evangelicals had committed in 2008. In 2012, he and his conservative allies did see a small decrease in evangelical defections (Obama's share of the white evangelical vote dropped to 21 percent), but they failed to vote Obama out of office. Resentment festered. As President Obama was being sworn in for his second term, Mark Driscoll tweeted that he was praying for a president who would be placing "his hands on a Bible he does not believe to take an oath to a God he likely does not know."⁷

In Obama's second term, evangelical opposition manifested around the issue of religious freedom, and for evangelicals, "religious freedom" didn't apply equally to all faith traditions; their defense of religious freedom was linked to their defense of "Christian America" and to their conservative gender regime. Already in Obama's first term in office, the Affordable Care Act's contraceptive mandate signaled that hostile government overreach could coerce Christians into participating in practices they abhorred. In 2012, the ACLU brought a suit against the conservative Christian owner of the Masterpiece Cakeshop for refusing to bake a cake for a same-sex wedding. In the summer of 2015, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage, ensuring that more Christian business owners would be forced to violate their consciences in this way. Weeks later, a county clerk in Kentucky named Kim Davis became a cause célèbre among religious conservatives when she refused to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. The next year, the administration sued North Carolina over the state's controversial "bathroom bill" restricting individuals to use facilities matching their sex assigned at birth. Evangelicals were taken aback at the pace of their apparent marginalization, but they weren't about to give up the fight.⁸

True to form, conservative evangelical leaders worked to galvanize followers by stoking a sense of embattlement and issuing calls for greater militancy. They drew on a familiar script. After the Pentagon lifted the ban on women in combat in 2013, John Piper called Obama's support for the move "a shame on the president's manhood." At a 2014 National Day of Prayer event, Dobson labeled Obama "the abortion president." Dobson's fury at the threat of transgender restrooms reflected longstanding assumptions about unrestrained male sexuality, female vulnerability, and predatory behavior. Blaming "Tyrant Obama" for his dictatorial attempts to alter how women and men relate to one another and how children perceive their own gender identity, Dobson could hardly contain himself: Who would have thought the day would come "when boys could meander into the private sanctuary of girls' toilets," when "sex-absorbed junior high boys" could ogle girls' bodies in the shower? "Have we gone absolutely mad?" In language reminiscent of that voiced by ERA opponents three decades earlier, Dobson issued a desperate call to action to American men to defend their wives from men who dressed like women in order to peer over bathroom stalls, and their little girls from men "who walk in unannounced, unzip their

pants and urinate in front of them.” If any of this had happened a century ago, “someone might have been shot. Where is today’s manhood? God help us!” General Boykin concurred: “The first man who goes in the restroom with my daughter will not have to worry about surgery.” The Family Research Council executive vice president claimed to be surprised when the LGBT community responded by calling him out for inciting violence.⁹

It wasn’t as though evangelical men hadn’t already been heeding Dobson’s call. From authors and pastors to men in the pews, evangelical men had been promoting and performing a militant Christian masculinity with increasing fervor. During the Obama years, new voices joined a now-familiar refrain.

Eric Metaxas emerged as a leading voice on Christian masculinity in the Obama era. Metaxas wasn’t new to the world of evangelical publishing, or to evangelical culture more generally. Raised in the Greek Orthodox Church, Metaxas got his start writing children’s books. In 1997 he began working as a writer and editor for Charles Colson’s BreakPoint radio show, and he then worked as a writer for VeggieTales, a children’s video series where anthropomorphic vegetables taught lessons in biblical values and Christian morality. (Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber became household names in 1990s evangelicalism.) Belying his VeggieTales pedigree, Metaxas brought a new sophistication to the literature on evangelical masculinity. As a witty, Yale-educated Manhattanite, Metaxas cut a different profile than many spokesmen of the Christian Right. If Metaxas’s writing wasn’t exactly highbrow, his was higher-brow than most books churned out by Christian presses. More suave in his presentation than the average evangelical firebrand, Metaxas was a rising star in the conservative Christian world of the 2000s. After Colson’s death in 2012 he took over BreakPoint, a program broadcast on 1400 outlets to an audience of eight million. That year he also gave the keynote address at the National Prayer Breakfast, where he relished the opportunity to scold President Obama to his face, castigating those who displayed “phony religiosity” by throwing Bible verses around and claiming to be Christian while denying the exclusivity of the faith and the humanity of the unborn. In 2015 he launched his own nationally syndicated daily radio program, *The Eric Metaxas Show*.¹⁰

Metaxas specialized in writing about Christian heroes. His 2007 book, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery*, helped secure his position in the evangelical world. In Metaxas’s narrative, evangelical Christians were the good guys; sharing “God’s perspective on the subject,” they rejected “the abominable racial views” held by non-Christians and “cultural Christians.” In 2011 he published *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. Metaxas’s version of Dietrich Bonhoeffer bore an uncanny resemblance to conservative American evangelicals, in that he battled not only Nazis but the liberal Christians purportedly behind the rise of Nazism. Once again, evangelicals emerged as heroes. Evangelicals loved the book. Meanwhile, historians panned it; the director of the U.S. Holocaust Museum’s Programs on Ethics, Religion, and the Holocaust described it as “a

terrible oversimplification and at times misinterpretation of Bonhoeffer's thought, the theological and ecclesial world of his times, and the history of Nazi Germany."¹¹

[photo caption: Eric Metaxas delivering the keynote at the 60th annual National Prayer Breakfast at the Washington Hilton on February 2, 2012. REUTERS / LARRY DOWNING.]

In his 2013 book, *7 Men: And the Secret of Their Greatness*, Metaxas revealed the larger purpose behind his biographies. He wanted to clear up the confusion around "the idea of manhood" by addressing two "vitally important questions": What is a man? And what makes a man great? The answer started with none other than John Wayne. Wayne was the "icon of manhood and manliness." He had "toughness and swagger," but he used his strength to protect the weak. Generations of men were inspired by his model of masculinity, until something happened. That something was the 1960s.¹²

The transformation probably had something to do with Vietnam or Watergate, Metaxas mused. Until Vietnam, wars were seen as worth fighting and patriotic Americans dutifully defended the country and its freedoms. Vietnam changed all that. "Ditto with Watergate," which presented us with a president acting not at all presidential. Since that time, people had focused on the negative when it came to famous people, and it was hard to have heroes in a climate like that. Making matters worse, Americans had extended this critique back through history. No longer heralded as a selfless and heroic Founding Father, George Washington was denounced as a wealthy landowner and hypocritical slave owner. Instead of celebrating Christopher Columbus as the "intrepid visionary" he was, Americans now pilloried the explorer as a murderer of indigenous peoples. Metaxas conceded that "idol worship" wasn't a good thing, but being "overly critical" of good men could also be incredibly destructive.¹³

For Metaxas, the decline of heroic masculinity undermined Christian nationalism and eroded patriarchal authority. Just compare the 1950s television show *Father Knows Best* with the way the mainstream media had come to depict fathers, "either as dunces or as overbearing fools." But the country was paying the bitter price for their rejection of authority. Young men especially needed heroes and role models to see "what it means to be a real man, a good man, a heroic and brave man." Metaxas wasn't saying anything evangelicals hadn't been saying for fifty years. But with Barack Obama in the White House, and with evidence abounding that evangelicals were losing the culture wars, the message resonated widely.¹⁴

If Metaxas offered a comparatively highbrow discourse on heroic masculinity, the Robertsons offered a decidedly lowbrow version. *Duck Dynasty*, the reality television show featuring the Robertson family, debuted in 2008, and by 2013 it had become one of the most popular shows on television, with its fourth season premier drawing almost twelve million

viewers, more than the highest viewed episodes of critical favorites *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* combined. It was a show that celebrated faith, family, and duck hunting. In the Robertson clan, there was no gender confusion. Men were men: big, burly, bearded men. And women were women: perfectly accessorized wives and daughters who welcomed their husbands home after a long day's work with a home-cooked meal. Phil Robertson, the family patriarch, had been a college football quarterback; his brother, "crazy" Uncle Si, was a Vietnam vet. There were rifles and crossbows, multiple varieties of jerky, and not a whiff of elitism.¹⁵

Duck Dynasty was a show made for Red State Americans. And for American Christians. Phil Robertson, the family patriarch, was a self-described Bible-thumping convert, and his son Al was a pastor. Onscreen and off, the entire Robertson clan committed themselves to "faith, family, fellowship, forgiveness, and freedom." The show itself wasn't in-your-face Christian, due in part to A&E's judicious editing. "We don't want to make it like 'The 700 Club for Rednecks,'" Al explained. Onscreen, the Robertsons shared their faith with a lighter touch, but as celebrities they weren't afraid to address controversial issues more directly. In a speech to a pregnancy center that drew attention in 2013, Phil denounced abortion and the hippies responsible for a movement that "lured 60 million babies out of their mothers' wombs." Later that same year, in an interview with GQ, he suggested that homosexuality would lead to "bestiality, sleeping around with this woman and that woman and that woman and those men," and included a few choice words on his own preference for vaginas over anuses. Without an editor to scrub his dialogue, Phil's unadulterated words caused an uproar in some circles. But among many of his conservative Christian fans he emerged as a new kind of culture warrior—one who wasn't concerned about "respectability," "respectability," who wasn't trying to engage "the establishment," who wasn't afraid to say it like it was.¹⁶

The Christian publishing industry took note. In 2013, the Robertson clan authored *The Duck Commander Devotional*. The next year Jase Robertson published *Good Call: Reflections on Faith, Family, and Fowl*, and Thomas Nelson published the *Duck Commander Faith & Family Bible*, a New King James Version available in hardcover. In 2015 Thomas Nelson published *Jep* and Jessica's book on faith and family, and seventeen-year-old Sadie's book on the same. The Robertsons' books were available at LifeWay books and at retailers like Walmart. Already in the 1990s, Thomas Nelson had recognized that they shared a "family values" base with Walmart, and they entered into a partnership; within ten years the big-box retailer had become the nation's largest supplier of Christian merchandise, selling over a billion dollars annually. Christianbook.com also carried an array of Duck Commander titles, plus DVD collections, hoodies, cookbooks, greeting cards, lunch napkins, and dessert plates.¹⁷

Some evangelicals worried about the “cultural Christianity” these Louisiana good ol’ boys portrayed, but the Robertsons weren’t just “cultural Christians.” They were devout, practicing evangelicals who, in good evangelical fashion, saw their celebrity as a means of spreading their faith. But the very distinction requires scrutiny. By the early 2000s, was it even possible to separate “cultural Christianity” from a purer, more authentic form of American evangelicalism? What did it mean to be an evangelical? Did it mean upholding a set of doctrinal truths, or did it mean embracing a culture-wars application of those truths—a God-and-country religiosity that championed white rural and working-class values, one that spilled over into a denigration of outsiders and elites, and that was organized around a deep attachment to militarism and patriarchal masculinity?¹⁸

While Metaxas pontificated on the virtues of heroic masculinity from his Manhattan perch, and the Robertsons reached large swaths of Red State America with their own brand of the same, dozens of other evangelical men (and they were overwhelmingly men) continued to churn out large quantities of indisputably middlebrow literature on Christian masculinity. The warrior as a model of Christian manhood remained ubiquitous, and a militaristic view of Christian masculinity went largely unchallenged in conservative evangelical circles. Within this genre, real-life military warriors continued to bring an aura of authenticity that mere pastors couldn’t match.

In 2015 John McDougall, an army chaplain, West Point graduate, and veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, published *Jesus Was an Airborne Ranger: Find Your Purpose Following the Warrior Christ*. Stu Weber, a fellow Ranger who first met McDougall at West Point, contributed the book’s foreword. Setting aside the pretty-boy Sunday-school Jesus no real man could relate to, McDougall made clear that his savior was no Mister Rogers. He was a warrior who knew how to channel aggression when he needed to. “In Ranger vernacular, Jesus was a badass,” a “forceful man” who called other men to “vigorously advance his kingdom”—as “spiritual badasses”—in their homes, communities, and world. There was nothing prim and proper about this Jesus. He was “a wild-at-heart Ranger on a mission,” a rural laborer who knew how to work hard and play hard. To sum up, “You can’t spell Ranger without the word anger.”¹⁹

That same year, Weber teamed up with fellow real-life warrior Jerry Boykin to write *The Warrior Soul*. The Bible was filled with the vocabulary of war, with “attacks, wounds, blood, sacrifice, swords, battles, victories,” and for Christians there would be no peace until Christ the victor ushered in peace. Until then it was up to them to join the fight. “Should you *stand*—take action—against the murder of children by abortion? Of course you should!” Figure out how. The same applied to the Christian bakery fined for refusing to bake a cake for a same-sex “marriage ’ceremony.” It was time to show up. War required sacrifice. What might that look like for the armchair reader? Perhaps a significant donation to the Family Research Council. (Boykin served as executive vice president.) “Write some well-directed

checks, warrior.” Or it might look like joining the fight against terror by informing oneself on the dangers of Islam: “Can you intelligently address Sharia law and the threat posed to our faith and culture?”²⁰

Weber and Boykin had opinions on actual war, too. The Bible taught that it was a mistake to settle for quick and cheap peace. Just look at ancient Israel: when Israel was reluctant “to sacrifice sufficiently” they failed to conquer the land. In case readers failed to see the application to the present day, they made themselves plain: America’s reluctance to recognize the Islamic threat placed the nation in peril. Of course there were “moderate” Muslims who didn’t share this violent worldview, but these were “bad Muslims”—much like mainline Christians who had abandoned historical Christian fundamentals were “bad Christians.” Ignoring the threat of violent Islam could be lethal.²¹

Weber and Boykin also took a swipe at civilian control of the military. Determining the morality of war was best left to warriors themselves: “Despite their considerable pontification on the subject, philosophers aren’t necessarily the best judges of what makes a war just.” Warriors had “a unique perspective of the nature of warfare,” and they were the ones who should decide “what makes war just.” Moreover, God himself had “a special place in his great heart for warriors and their soldiering”—after all, his son Jesus was “a truly exceptional warrior.” Both Christian theology and “this constitutional republic” reserved “a high and honored place for the warrior.”²²

Reminiscent of the waning years of the Reagan administration, conservative evangelicals had struggled to mobilize as the George W. Bush presidency came to an end. But the Religious Right had always thrived on a sense of embattlement, and in that respect, the Obama White House was heaven-sent. Between demographic changes portending an end to “white Christian America,” the apparent erosion of loyalty among young evangelicals, and steady assaults on their conception of religious liberty, white evangelicals perceived clear and present dangers to their very existence. Or at least to their social and political power. Obama’s election had issued a warning call to evangelical leaders. Leaving nothing to chance, they made the most of the moment, working arduously to stoke further fear and resentment. By the end of Obama’s eight years in office, even as the president’s overall approval ratings had been among the highest in recent presidential history, white evangelicals remained his most stalwart critics. Seventy-four percent viewed him unfavorably, compared to 44 percent of Americans generally. Perhaps more importantly, conservative evangelicals had reinvigorated their posture of embattlement. Drastic times would call for drastic measures. When 2016 came around, they were primed for the fight. They just needed the right warrior to lead the charge.²³

NOTES: Chapter 14

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¹² Metaxas, *Seven Men*, xiii.

¹³ Metaxas, *Seven Men*, xv–xvi.

¹⁴ Metaxas, *Seven Men*, xvii–xviii.

¹⁵ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “‘Duck Dynasty’ success thrives on Christian stereotypes,” Religion News Service, August 21, 2013.

¹⁶ Pulliam Bailey, "'Duck Dynasty'"; Drew Magary, "What the Duck," *GQ*, December 17, 2013.

¹⁷ Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, 90–91.

¹⁸ Thomas Kidd, "Duck Dynasty's Cultural Christianity," *Patheos*, August 27, 2013, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2013/08/duck-dynastys-cultural-christianity/>.

¹⁹ John McDougall, *Jesus Was an Airborne Ranger: Find Your Purpose Following the Warrior Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2015), 11, 101, 114, 119.

²⁰ Jerry Boykin and Stu Weber, *The Warrior Soul: 5 Powerful Principles to Make You a Stronger Man of God* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2015), 18, 31–32.

²¹ Boykin and Weber, *The Warrior Soul*, 45, 86.

²² Boykin and Weber, *The Warrior Soul*, 107–8, 183, 198.

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