

2024

## Review of The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism

Jeff VanDerWerff,  
Northwestern College, Iowa, [jvdw@nwciowa.edu](mailto:jvdw@nwciowa.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters)



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), [American Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

VanDerWerff,, Jeff (2024) "Review of The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, 334-337.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69755/2995-2212.1295>

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters/vol8/iss2/20](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol8/iss2/20)

Copyright © The Author(s) 2024



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](#).

**Evangelicals in American Society and Politics**

***The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism.* Tim Alberta. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2023, hardback, 512 pp., ISBN: 9780063226883**

**Jeff VanDerWerff, PhD  
Dean of Social the Social Sciences  
Professor of American Government and Public Life  
Northwestern College, Iowa, United States  
[jvdw@nwciowa.edu](mailto:jvdw@nwciowa.edu)**

From the beginning—when dedicating the book to a his recently deceased dad—and then throughout twenty-three subsequent chapters (nearly 500 pages), Tim Alberta writes from the perspective of one who is grieving. This drives him to exhaustively investigates “what the hell” is happening to American evangelicalism (p. 9; as his wife asks in exasperation at one particular low point). Understandably devastated by an unexpected personal tragedy, the author also is profoundly saddened and equally bewildered by his own Christian subculture and how this faith tradition has inexplicably abandoned so many of the values and virtues he learned growing up. Alberta’s journalistic lament over the unfolding crisis of American evangelicalism is well worth the read and will undoubtedly resonate with many, though not all, who buy this book. It did with this reviewer.

As Alberta visited and talked with a host of individuals across the country over a period of approximately four years, he asks the central question of the book: “what is the purpose of the church?” The one provided by the congregation of his youth, the one his father pastored in Brighton, Michigan, seemed straightforward—make disciples! Alberta confesses that “what he struggled for so long to accept...is that not everyone shares this vision for the church” (p. 432). What this “age of extremism” (one personified by Trumpism) has exposed, is an American church pressed far too easily, even willingly, into the world’s political mold. The 45<sup>th</sup> president, chief among a considerable host of others, is fomenting fear and many evangelicals are, in turn, succumbing to hate and anger as a consequence.

Through the course of listening to untold sermons and political speeches, not to mention countless conversations and several interviews (e.g., with Chris Winans, John Torres, Doug Olsen, Russell Moore, Robert Jeffress, David French, John Dickson, Bill Bolin, Chad Connelly, Ralph Reed, Cal Thomas, Greg Locke, Miroslav Volf, Stephen Strang, Brian Zhand, Ralph Reed, Curtis Chang, Daniel Darling, Rachael Denhollander, Julie Roys, Nick Olsen, among others), Alberta found followers of Jesus—lots of them—who are worshipping America, in essence. Virtuous, patriotic citizens are a desirable objective, of course, but the emergence of Christian nationalism has presented a false gospel and an increasingly tempting idol. As *New York Times* columnist David French observed: politics has become the “new religion” for many and, not surprisingly, it is a jealous god (2019).

*Review of The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory:  
American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism*

To make matters worse, many of those who claim Christ as their savior are spoiling for a fight; they wish to go after the evil in evidence all around them. This response is prompted, in part, by the fear fracturing the American church. Social conservatives are scared about the future of the U.S. and a culture that is going off the rails; these believers—known as “values voters” not so long ago—are now willing to wage a battle to take the nation back for God. Alberta wonders, however, if evangelicals have gotten things backwards and distorted their discipleship efforts. Pastors, preaching partisan politics, if not bitterness, tend to fixate on prevailing in this culture war. Few clergy are teaching those in their care about “how” to winsomely enter public life and, as importantly, “on an appropriate way to win” (p. 179). The desire to preserve a Christian society ends up deemphasizing, if not dismisses entirely, behavior exhibiting the fruit of the spirit (i.e., peace, patience, kindness, etc.). All too many have adopted an approach more akin to Machiavelli than Jesus, one that embraces an attitude where the ends justifies the means.

The Christ of the gospels, with his message of good news, is a “moral stranger” (p. 242) for some of these fervent followers. Consequently, many former believers have left their faith behind: *exvangelicals* often have been repulsed by what is being said and done in the name of Jesus; the so-called *nones* who no longer identify themselves as a member of any particular denomination or religious body of believers continue to grow in number. Even worse, some parishioners leave one church for another because, in Alberta’s estimation, they actually *do not want to be disciplined* in a way that challenges or conflicts with their partisan or ideological commitments (p. 150). It seems clear evangelicalism has a catechism problem. The religious subculture or tradition is struggling to form and shape citizens of another kingdom, ones who possess not only a resilient, but countercultural faith. Loving enemies, praying for persecutors, turning one’s cheek, or going the second mile is “simply incompatible with the culture-warrior mentality” (p. 215).

This reality is reminiscent of an observation—troubling advice really—offered several years ago by theologian N.T. Wright: “Jesus saw as a pagan corruption *the very desire to fight paganism itself*” (1999, p. 89; italicized in the original). The current condition and unhealthy state of a politically captured American church and its increasingly compromised Christian witness sadly illustrates, and possibly begins to help in making sense of, this counterintuitive and yet sage guidance. Wright’s critique operates in parallel with the following New Testament admonition from the apostle Paul to the early church (who lived amidst the trials and tribulations of first-century Palestine, where real, as opposed to perceived, persecution in fact occurred):

Write this to Ephesus...I see what you’ve done, your hard work, your refusal to quit. I know you can’t stomach evil, that you weed out apostolic pretenders. I know your persistence, your courage in my cause, that you never wear out. But you walked away from your first love—why? What’s going on with you, anyway? Do you have any idea how far you’ve fallen? Turn back! Recover your dear early love... (Revelation 2:1-5 *The Message*).

The Ephesians are praised for many things—working hard, being patient, resisting sin, critically examining the claims of false prophets, and suffering patiently—but they apparently got their

priorities confused. Jesus reminds them, and American evangelicals, of a more excellent way: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.’ This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-40 *The Message*). Ironically, this is what the believers at Ephesus had at one time been commended.

From witnessing the antics of a Michael Flynn “ReAwakening America Tour,” a Charlie Kirk Turning Point USA event—“Freedom Night in America”—or a David Barton “American Restoration” historical lecture, on the one hand, to the incredulity of taking in a so-called sermon at Floodgate church or Global Vision Bible church, on the other hand, the unalloyed commitment and passion of those attending these events and/or services betrays their true purpose, according to Alberta. As his reporting captures, these followers of Jesus fail to recognize the irony in being conformed to the patterns of the world. He insightfully writes,

Christian devoutness was measured not by their striving and self-perfecting on the inside, but by their scrapping and self-aggrandizing on the outside. In this context, all the shady alliances and moral compromises made sense. *The quest for political clout was not a deviation from their faith in Jesus; it was a demonstration of it* (p. 276, emphasis mine).

Some Christians, more than previously realized (especially prior to January 6), cannot let go of a national identity or the tendency to equate this fight for America with one on behalf of their faith. They see such efforts as a means by which to proclaim God’s kingdom, power and glory!

Not all followers of Jesus (let alone most) believe or act this way, of course. Alberta quotes a dissenting voice, one representative of an alternative vision for the American church. In the view of this individual: “...the first step is reimagining the Christian worldview. And that means replacing our dominant metaphor—culture war—with something different” (p. 427). It would seem American evangelicals need to be reminded about the parable of the weeds and the wheat (see Matthew 13:24-30, *The Message*). In response to a question regarding whether or not the farmhands should dig out the thistles in their fields, Jesus answers with an emphatic no, they definitely should not. The danger of doing so is that in zealously rooting out the offending “weeds” (to say nothing of correctly identifying them in the first place), some of the prized “wheat” will invariably be accidentally uprooted as well.

So too is the risk and peril of the current culture wars. To what extent have (white) evangelicals in America surrendered to contemporary pagan corruptions by fighting for *what* they want or *who* they hope wins? What value is there in these pyrrhic victories, even if they are right, when Christians cease to be seen as good? Evangelicals may well prevail from time to time in these public skirmishes, realizing a measure of political success, but at what cost? Waging a self-righteous battle with political opponents, alleged enemies, has resulted in an untold number of casualties, both intended and otherwise, on each side of the divide.

*Review of The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory:  
American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism*

As Alberta works through his grief, he ends the book in a rather sanguine fashion, coming full circle by worshipping yet again at Cornerstone (the body of believers his dad once served) and finding tender green shoots of optimism in what he witnesses. He readily admits, however, that “...most Christians in America have no interest in being provoked this way from the pulpit; they have become captive to a cultural [civil] religion” (p. 444). Yet, some in the pews are receptive, and even if it was unlikely his own father would ever preach such a challenging message, he did select a successor who clearly is called for such a time as this.

Another encouraging development is that of the folks at *Redeeming Babel* (p. 342ff) and their efforts to begin to create a better way of doing Christian politics through “The After Party” curriculum, with its emphasis on the “how” of politics (instead of a primary preoccupation with “what” or “who”)! Addressing the need for religious instruction regarding public life, they have designed an ingenious conversation starter that asks those who take it a series of questions, which places them on a hope and humility scale (Chang, 2024). Those high in hope but low in humility land in the ‘combatant’ quadrant. While likely the fewest in number, these individuals tend to be the loudest among us. Conversely, those low in hope, but still displaying a healthy dose of humility are considered the ‘exhausted,’ which is where most of the American public finds itself these days. A third corner of this 2x2 typology, where both hope and humility have each receded unfortunately, are cynics, and is where no one should want to be (sheepishly this is where yours truly got placed). It is the fourth quadrant that is the preferred goal.

Ideally, the American church should be producing (forgiven and faithful) disciples—citizens not only of the United States, but also the kingdom of God—who are high in hope and humility. To begin with, hope because they should know where their ultimate loyalty and allegiance lies, which is decidedly not with the elephant or the donkey, but rather the lion and lamb. At the same time, humility in recognizing everyone, American evangelicals included, suffer from the fate of the fall and are plagued by a self-interest that is the hallmark of the human condition. As Alberta joyfully discovers, there are those who “...aspire to a post-partisan Christianity; even more so they look forward to the promised feast awaiting Jesus’s followers in eternity, a place where divisions will vanish, replaced by a celebration of unity in Christ” (p. 346). Now there is a purpose worth pursuing.

### References

- Chang, C. (2024). *A More Interesting Quiz*. The After Party. <https://redeemingbabel.org/a-more-interesting-quiz/>
- French, D. (2019). *Politics Is a Jealous God*. The Dispatch. <https://thedispatch.com/newsletter/frenchpress/politics-is-a-jealous-god/>
- Peterson, E. (2002). *The Message: Bible in Contemporary Language*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress (access online: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/msg/>).
- Wright, N.T. (1999). *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press.