
REVIEWS

From Color Line to Colorblind: White Evangelical Rhetoric on Race

The Bible Told Them So: How Southern Evangelicals Fought to Preserve White Supremacy. By J. Russell Hawkins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021; 224 pp. \$29.95 hardcover.

The Myth of Colorblind Christians: Evangelicals and White Supremacy in the Civil Rights Era. By Jesse Curtis. New York: New York University Press, 2021; 320 pp. \$32.00 paperback.

In August of 2019, the *New York Times Magazine* published “The 1619 Project,” a full-issue effort to approach American history through the interpretive lens of slavery and anti-Black racism. Though previous histories had employed a variety of other lenses—politics, religion, economics, military campaigns, and so on—this project would center *race* as the definitive variable in the past four centuries of life on these shores. Widely lauded and much discussed, the issue drew criticism from historians Victoria Bynum, James McPherson, James Oakes, Sean Wilentz, and Gordon Wood, who affirmed the intent of the project while regretting certain factual inaccuracies. They argued that reporter Nikole Hannah-Jones, in her determination to emphasize and indict American racism, had crafted a coherent big picture at the expense of important particularities.¹ An expanded and bound edition appeared in 2021, quickly claiming bestseller status and continuing to stir debate nationwide, informed by the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement and a correspondent panic over critical race theory in the public schools. The past, present, and nuances of American racism were hashed out everywhere.

At the same time, somewhere within this broad, national reckoning, Christian historians were examining American churches through a comparable racial lens. Jemar Tisby’s *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* appeared in April of 2019, with Anthea Butler’s *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* and Randall Balmer’s *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* going to press in 2021. These are history books that culminate in the present, mapping the route from then to now in order to situate current events, especially as they pertain to white evangelical faith, Republican politics, and the coalescence of the two in Donald Trump’s tumultuous presidency. They are also small books with big arguments, painting in broad strokes and so perhaps vulnerable to the same sort of concern that has followed Hannah-Jones. Academic readers who consider these popular histories may want to pair them with some more traditionally academic fare—narrower in focus, more attentive to detail, and rigorously documented via archival research. They will find these in the two books considered here. Each focuses on white evangelicalism in the second half of the

¹ “We Respond to the Historians Who Criticized The 1619 Project,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html>.

twentieth century, attending specifically to the ways that white evangelicals talked about race—or declined to do so. Both chart a progression from the stern enforcement of the color line in the 1950s and 60s to the strategic adoption of colorblind rhetoric in later years.

In June of 1963, President John F. Kennedy invited 250 pastors, priests, and rabbis to a White House summit, hoping to solicit their support for civil rights legislation. Recognizing the challenges such a bill was sure to face, Kennedy had decided to invoke the nationwide web of moral leadership spun through the American clergy. Gathered together and briefed on the details, these men could then return to their communities as religious-political ambassadors, leveraging their local influence and persuading their flocks to support the administration's stand on behalf of racial equality and justice. Though religious leaders had always differed on the finer points of their theologies, Kennedy seemed to assume that they would unite behind the moral urgency of the race problem. That assumption was soon challenged by the raised hand of Florida Baptist minister Albert Garner, who shared that his congregants, like many others across the "Southland," carried the "strong moral conviction" that "racial integration . . . is against the will of their Creator."² Thus Kennedy's attempt to ground the civil rights struggle in the morality of the Scriptures would necessarily collide with one of the more common hermeneutics by which those Scriptures were read in the South.

This anecdote opens J. Russell Hawkins's *The Bible Told Them So: How Southern Evangelicals Fought to Preserve White Supremacy*, a clear and thorough book that documents white Christians' embrace of a segregationist Word in South Carolina between the years 1955 and 1970. Hawkins has a pair of arguments to make. The first is that, though more attention has been paid to the religious character of the civil rights movement and its reverend leaders, the backlash was essentially religious as well. (The two factions read the same Bible and prayed to the same God, and each invoked his aid against the other.) Martin Luther King, Jr. famously framed his cause as a holy challenge to worldly injustice. But his foes held the Jim Crow order consistent with the divine hierarchy established in their sacred traditions—inhabited by diverse groups and defined by inequalities, to be sure, but understood to have been created, categorized, and stratified by God according to his purpose. This worldview came with a distinguished pedigree, shaped and sponsored by Southern preachers and theologians for two centuries at least. And it was founded even more firmly upon a base of hegemonic cultural acceptance, embraced and defended by the people in the pews. Their support proved most influential and most durable, occasionally serving as a firewall against the egalitarian notions of their ministers.

Hawkins's second argument is that, despite the political victories tallied by the civil rights movement and the formal collapse of Jim Crow, segregationist Christianity did not surrender in the South. On the contrary—though public spaces integrated gradually by legal fiat, and though overtly racist claims and arguments became increasingly taboo, the core tenets of white supremacy remained central to white evangelical belief and thought in Dixie. They persisted in altered form, evolving by the 1970s into a pair of rhetorical adaptations. The first of these, *colorblindness*, entailed

² J. Russell Hawkins, *The Bible Told Them So: How Southern Evangelicals Fought to Preserve White Supremacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2.

avoiding any reference to race, proceeding as though it no longer existed and so could not matter, but doing so always in deference to traditional hierarchies. This approach had the dual benefit of subtlety and efficiency, able to achieve white supremacist policy goals without inviting unwelcome attention. The second adaptation, a *focus on the family*, occurred as white parents moved their children into quickly proliferating private schools, ostensibly to raise them right and to instill religious values, but doing so in an educational context still amenable to segregation. Southern white evangelicals stopped talking about race and became overtly protective of their families even as they pooled their resources into an ascendent conservative politics with Southern leadership, taking their stand against an oversized, overweening, integration-mandating federal government.

Together, the gradual, public suppression of segregationist theology and the quiet rise of colorblind racism yielded a more mannerly strain of massive resistance in South Carolina. White clergy and their congregants deemphasized racial considerations in their faith statements and creeds, replacing them instead with appeals to changed hearts and personal reconciliation. Transferred from the official realm of policy to the microcosm of individual relationships, the race problem became atomized—a matter on which each white citizen should dutifully reflect but otherwise irrelevant to the church and the state. Hawkins is attentive to the various ways that this notably devious and remarkably stubborn intransigence has influenced subsequent evangelical practice and politics, providing the rhetorical groundwork for a twenty-first century America in which everything and nothing has changed. Contemporary debates over policing, housing, welfare, affirmative action, economic inequality, environmental justice, education, and other topics retain core elements of this thinking. In some cases, the legacy is overt. In 1958, for example, former University of South Carolina president and future governor Donald S. Russell first proposed a school voucher system to preempt local enforcement of *Brown v. Board*. Under his plan, “the state and school district involved would provide the student with his tuition to attend a school, private or otherwise, of his choice in reasonable radius of his home,” taking for granted but declining to state that this school would undoubtedly be for whites only.³ From this infancy the voucher idea took hold, promoted first by Milton Friedman and later by Betsy DeVos until it was legitimized nationwide.⁴ If our contemporary conversations about race, fairness, and policy are to be productive, they should begin in the recognition of this past.

By 1968, when President Lyndon Johnson invited Southern Baptist leaders to the White House for a conversation on race, the wave of major civil rights legislation had already rolled. Recognizing that changing laws had proven incapable of changing hearts, Johnson encouraged Southern clergy to take the matter directly to their congregants, making racism salient to the individuals in the pews. The Baptists were happy to do so. They had been working on that project for some time already, pushing racial justice off the public agenda and into an impenetrable privacy. Hawkins finds these trends largely consistent with the critique launched in the books noted above. In his telling, they are the product of conscious, deliberate, reactionary work, carefully calculated, biblically grounded, and persistently adaptable to shifts in federal law and public opinion.

³ Hawkins, *The Bible Told Them So*, 136.

⁴ See Robert Asen, *School Choice and the Betrayal of Democracy: How Market-Based Education Reform Fails Our Communities* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021).

Jesse Curtis opens his *The Myth of Colorblind Christianity: Evangelicals and White Supremacy in the Civil Rights Era* with an anecdote as well. Now the year is 2015, the place is St. Louis County, Missouri, and twelve months have passed since black teenager Michael Brown was killed by white officer Darren Wilson. As Black Lives Matter activists gather to mark the anniversary of Brown's death, Saddleback Church pastor and best-selling author Rick Warren takes to Twitter to offer comment. “#AllLivesMatterToGod,” his post reads, “Racism isn't caused by SKIN but by SIN.”⁵ Here, with one hashtag and one clever slogan, Warren has encapsulated the white evangelical position on race since the 1960s, perfectly representing the sort of colorblindness that Hawkins documents. Racism is not systemic in this view, and skin color is irrelevant to public policy as it pertains to police officers and prosecutors. Dismissing the naiveté of activists who think otherwise, Warren relegates the problem to the interiority of the heart, under the jurisdiction of ministers rather than marchers.⁶ His position is very typical. Having mostly declined the opportunity to stand for civil rights in decades past, America's leading white evangelical figures would mostly decline this time as well.

And yet, though Curtis and Hawkins agree on many of the key points at issue, Curtis situates colorblind rhetoric within a much more complex whirl of forces. Perhaps because his sources are more widely distributed—taken from around the nation and internationally, rather than just in the American South—he finds white evangelicals struggling to orient themselves in a changing world, pushed by arguments and pulled by motivations that mix the admirable with the ugly. His examples often inspire a measure of sympathy on their way to the inevitable disappointment.

As of the 1950s, colorblind theology was the province of African American figures, who argued that Christianity should be fully integrated and open to everyone, regardless of race. A decade or two later, as we know, colorblindness had been appropriated and recast by white evangelicals, who discouraged civil rights activism on grounds that Christianity should be focused on soul-saving and indifferent to racial consciousness. But that transition was punctuated by efforts at evangelical self-improvement, at least at the institutional level. In the late 60s, even as segregation academies were proliferating in the South, a number of evangelical colleges and universities launched recruitment drives to diversify their campuses. Wheaton, Taylor, Moody Bible Institute, and other historically white evangelical schools made appeals to Black students, raising their Black populations from somewhere around zero percent to somewhere closer to two. This proved a rocky process, as Black students generally found themselves isolated and tokenized, subject to the prejudices of their classmates, the suspicions of the trustees, and the painfully awkward outreach of well-meaning administrators. Newly conscious of their palpable blackness, these students by their very presence cut a sharp contrast to the otherwise uniform whiteness of their campuses, forcing their new communities to process for the first time what it meant to be white. The experience was discomfiting to everyone, the experiment mostly failed, and the already miniscule Black populations receded in the early 1970s. But the effort was made.

⁵ Jesse Curtis, *The Myth of Colorblind Christianity: Evangelicals and White Supremacy in the Civil Rights Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 1.

⁶ For more on this legacy, see Meridith I. Syter, “The *Opportunistic Sermon*: Theology, Praxis, and Jerry Falwell,” in *Rhetoric of the Protestant Sermon in America: Pulpit Discourse at the Turn of the Millennium*, ed. Eric C. Miller and Jonathan J. Edwards (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020), 19–38.

The 70s then played host to the Church Growth Movement (CGM), a concerted effort to plant and develop new evangelical churches around the United States. The CGM became immediately relevant to matters of racial justice because of its fresh and regressive take on integration. Founded by Donald McGavaran—a lifelong missionary, born in India, who had worked and traveled extensively in Africa—the CGM was neither Southern nor explicitly sympathetic to Jim Crow. Instead, inspired by McGavaran’s study of religious behavior among various ethnic groups in his travels, CGM asserted that churches grow fastest and strongest when their congregations are homogenous in some significant way. Individuals are most comfortable when surrounded by people with whom they can identify, the argument went, so churches oriented around sameness will be most successful. Though critics in the United States might dismiss this idea as a veiled defense of segregation, McGavaran claimed that he was simply adapting to a reality of human nature the world over. Predictably, critics *did* align CGM with racism and segregation, while segregationists praised its novel insights and broad perspective. So the already complicated project of desegregating Sunday morning was recomplicated by a seemingly new sociological argument with a suspiciously old resonance. Ultimately, CGM provided white evangelicals with a theoretical justification to do what many of them had wanted to do all along—sort American Christians into the appropriate set of categories, arranged by doctrine, by class, and very importantly, by race, effectively preserving evangelicalism as a white, middle class, suburban sort of faith. Here again, the issues and arguments over integration feel somewhat more nuanced, even as the basic dynamics of racism continue to operate underneath.

These trends reached a culmination of sorts in the 1990s with the arrival of the Promise Keepers, an evangelical men’s movement created by University of Colorado football coach Bill McCartney and gathered periodically in stadiums around the nation. Self-consciously multiracial and fully integrated, the Promise Keepers pledged to inspire men to be better husbands, fathers, friends, and citizens, crossing the color line to unite evangelical men in the sincere practice of both Christian faith and social roles. And yet, though markedly different in tone from the colorblind rhetoric of evangelicals past, Curtis argues that McCartney’s movement ultimately offered more of the same. As they focused on nurturing private hearts and strengthening personal relationships, the Promise Keepers evaded any concerted action against injustice, instead touting racial reconciliation within a broader politics of reaction to race-conscious policies. (As PK Vice President Paul Edwards explained, “This is a revival movement, not a reform movement.”⁷) But even this proved too much in the end, and the movement declined after 1997.

These and other examples substantiate a more textured take on white evangelicalism and racial integration. Curtis is closely attentive to the internal challenges and contradictions buffeting evangelicalism during the latter half of the twentieth century, acknowledging the good faith attempts as well as the reversions. Like Hawkins, Curtis brings the receipts, and his careful engagement with the details belies any suggestion of a political agenda. *The Myth of Colorblind Christians* is an especially deep and exacting work—an impressive debut from a young scholar already quite mature in his thinking and capable in his argument.

⁷ Curtis, *The Myth of Colorblind Christians*, 196.

The contrast drawn here between popular and academic histories is not intended to slight the one in favor of the other, but simply to note differences in audience, approach, and intent.⁸ America *does* have a legacy of racism and atrocity, and that element of American life *is* clearly significant enough to offer a useful lens through which to examine our history, politics, religion, and culture. Historians are uniquely equipped to perform this work and especially credible to explain its implications to the general public. Done well, it may even activate and mobilize citizens to correct past and present wrongs in their families, neighborhoods, communities, and institutions. Along the way, though, historical literacy demands that the grand narratives constructed in these volumes be informed and perhaps tempered by the more granular work coming out of university presses all the time. These books remind us that human life is inescapably messy—subject to well-intentioned failure, blundering, and confusion as well as malicious intent and calculation. Less coherent than most authors would prefer, our world is also necessarily more interesting.⁹

On the matter of race and racism, J. Russell Hawkins and Jesse Curtis demonstrate that white evangelicals have a lot to answer for, both in the past and the present. Theologically, politically, and rhetorically, they have proven too exclusive in their churches, colleges, and communities. Emerging from a racist past, their commitment to tradition has often exceeded their willingness to love their neighbors as themselves—at least when those neighbors were not white. For all that, however, Hawkins and Curtis also show that such a characterization is incomplete. For many of these white evangelicals, at least for a time, racial segregation amounted to Christian orthodoxy, and they felt themselves bound by God’s commands. Later, when Supreme Court rulings and civil rights laws pressed them to change, they hedged, softening their speech and circling their wagons and thereby ushering in new political arrangements to stop history by shrewder means. For certain other white evangelicals, integration was a challenge to be embraced in good faith, despite some reservations, and without conceding the systemic nature of the race problem nationally. Their attempts, mistakes, accomplishments, and failures deserve recognition as something other than an unvarying, strategic cruelty. A careful account of their rhetorical adaptations and evolution may help us better understand their moment and ours.

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⁸ I do have some reservations about Balmer’s book, however. On his website, Curtis has published a lengthy and persuasive critique of *Bad Faith* that documents factual inaccuracies and assumptions in the service of a larger argument. See Jesse Curtis, “The Bad History in Randall Balmer’s ‘Bad Faith,’” *Colorblind Christians*, October 24, 2022. <https://colorblindchristians.com/2022/10/14/the-bad-history-in-randall-balmers-bad-faith>.

⁹ On that note, readers may appreciate Daniel R. Bare’s *Black Fundamentalists*, which precedes the period under consideration in this review but challenges a similar set of assumptions about American Christianity and race. See Daniel R. Bare, *Black Fundamentalists: Conservative Christianity and Racial Identity in the Segregation Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

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