

The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism

by [Aaron M. Renn](#) February 2022

American evangelicalism is deeply divided. Some evangelicals have embraced the secular turn toward social justice activism, particularly around race and immigration, accusing others of failing to reckon with the church's racist past. Others charge evangelical elites with going "woke" and having failed their flocks. Some elites are denounced for abandoning historic Christian teachings on sexuality. Others face claims of hypocrisy for supporting the serial adulterer Donald Trump. Old alliances are dissolving. Former Southern Baptist agency head Russell Moore has left his denomination. Political pundit David French has become a fearsome critic of many religious conservatives who would once have been his allies. Baptist professor Owen Strachan left an establishment seminary to take a leadership position in a startup one. Some people are deconstructing their faith and leaving evangelicalism, or even Christianity, behind. Where once there was a culture war between Christianity and secular society, today there is a culture war within evangelicalism itself.

These divisions do not only represent theological differences. They also result from particular strategies of public engagement that developed over the last few decades, as the standing of Christianity has gradually eroded.

Within the story of American secularization, there have been three distinct stages:

- **Positive World (Pre-1994):** Society at large retains a mostly *positive* view of Christianity. To be known as a good, churchgoing man remains part of being an upstanding citizen. Publicly being a Christian is a status-enhancer. Christian moral norms are the basic moral norms of society and violating them can bring negative

consequences.

- **Neutral World (1994–2014):** Society takes a *neutral* stance toward Christianity. Christianity no longer has privileged status but is not disfavored. Being publicly known as a Christian has neither a positive nor a negative impact on one's social status. Christianity is a valid option within a pluralistic public square. Christian moral norms retain some residual effect.
- **Negative World (2014–Present):** Society has come to have a *negative* view of Christianity. Being known as a Christian is a social negative, particularly in the elite domains of society. Christian morality is expressly repudiated and seen as a threat to the public good and the new public moral order. Subscribing to Christian moral views or violating the secular moral order brings negative consequences.

The dating of these transitions is, of necessity, impressionistic. The transition from neutral to negative is dated 2014 to place it just before the Supreme Court's *Obergefell* decision, which institutionalized Christianity's new low status. The transition from positive to neutral is less precise, though the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War in 1989 was clearly a point of major change. I selected 1994 for two key reasons. It represents the high-water mark of early 1990s populism, with the Republican takeover of the U.S. House of Representatives (and, arguably, the peak of evangelical influence within U.S. conservatism). And it was the year Rudolph Giuliani became mayor of New York City, signaling the urban resurgence that would have a significant impact on evangelicalism.

For the most part, evangelicals responded to the positive and neutral worlds with identifiable ministry strategies. In the positive world, these strategies were the culture war and seeker sensitivity. In the neutral world, the strategy was cultural engagement.

The *culture war* strategy, also known as the "religious right," is the best-known movement of the positive-world era. The very name of its leading

organization, Moral Majority, speaks to a world in which it was at least plausible to claim that Christians still represented the majority of the country. The religious right arose during the so-called New Right movement in the 1970s, in part as a response to the sexual revolution and the moral deterioration of the country.

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Up to and through the 1970s, evangelicals and fundamentalists had voted predominantly for the Democratic party. Jimmy Carter, a former Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher, was the first evangelical president. He won the Southern Baptist vote, 56 to 43 percent. *Newsweek* magazine proclaimed 1976, the year of his election, the "Year of the Evangelical." As late as 1983, sociologist James Davison Hunter found that a plurality of evangelicals continued to identify as Democrats. But under the leadership of people like Jerry Falwell, this group realigned as Republican during the 1980s and became the religious right. Evangelicals remain one of the Republican party's most loyal voting blocs, with 80 percent supporting Donald Trump in 2016.

The religious right culture warriors took a highly combative stance toward the emerging secular culture. By and large, the people we associate with

the religious right today were those far away from the citadels of culture. Many were in backwater locations. They tended to use their own platforms, such as direct mail and paid-for UHF television shows. They were initially funded mostly by donations from the flock, a fact that imparted an attention-grabbing, marketing-driven style. Later, groups such as the Christian Coalition began to raise money from bigger donors, having become more explicitly aligned with the GOP.

Major culture war figures include Jerry Falwell of Moral Majority (Lynchburg, Virginia), Pat Robertson of the Christian Broadcasting - Network (Virginia Beach), James Dobson of Focus on the Family (Colorado Springs), Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition (Atlanta), and televangelists Jimmy Swaggart (Baton Rouge) and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker (Portsmouth, Virginia).

A second strategy of the positive-world movement was *seeker sensitivity*, likewise pioneered in the 1970s at suburban megachurches such as Bill Hybels's Willow Creek (Barrington, IL) and Rick Warren's Saddleback Church (Orange County). This strategy was in a sense a prototype of the neutral-world movement to come. But the very term "seeker sensitive" shows that it was predicated on an underlying friendliness to Christianity; it's a model that assumes that large numbers of people are actively seeking. Bill Hybels walked door to door in suburban Chicago, surveying the unchurched about why they didn't attend. By designing a church that appealed to them stylistically, he was able to get large numbers to come through the doors.

Seeker-sensitive churches downplayed or eliminated denominational affiliations, distinctives, and traditions. They adopted informal liturgies and contemporary music. Seeker sensitivity operated in a therapeutic register, sometimes explicitly—the Christian psychologist Henry Cloud has become a familiar speaker at Willow Creek. They were approachable and non-threatening. Today, there are many large suburban megachurches of this

general type in the United States, which to some extent represent the evangelical mainstream.

In the neutral world, by contrast, the characteristic evangelical strategy was *cultural engagement*. The neutral-world cultural engagers were in many ways the opposite of the culture warriors: Rather than fighting against the culture, they were explicitly positive toward it. They did not denounce secular culture, but confidently engaged that culture on its own terms in a pluralistic public square. They believed that Christianity could still be articulated in a compelling way and had something to offer in that environment. In this quest they wanted to be present in the secular elite media and forums, not just on Christian media or their own platforms.

The leading lights of the cultural engagement strategy were much more urban, frequently based in major global cities or college towns. The neutral world emerged concurrently with the resurgence of America's urban centers under the leadership of people like Giuliani. The flow of college-educated Christians into these urban centers created a different kind of evangelical social base, one shaped by urban cultural sensibilities rather than rural or suburban ones. These evangelicals tended to downplay flashpoint social issues such as abortion or homosexuality. Instead, they emphasized the gospel, often in a therapeutic register, and priorities like helping the poor and select forms of social activism. They were also much less political than the positive-world Christians—though this distinction broke down in 2016, when many in this group vociferously opposed Donald Trump. In essence, the cultural-engagement strategy is an evangelicalism that takes its cues from the secular elite consensus. Sometimes they have attracted secular elites or celebrities to their churches.

The political manifestation of the cultural-engagement approach is seen in politicians like George W. Bush, who touted "compassionate conservatism" and an evangelicalism less threatening to secular society.

The vitriol directed at Bush by the left should not obscure the differences in Bush's own approach. For example, less than a week after 9/11, he made the first-ever presidential visit to a mosque to reassure Muslims that he did not blame them or their religion for that attack. He opposed gay marriage but supported civil unions and pointedly said he would not engage in anti-gay rhetoric. It is important to stress, however, that pastors and other cultural-engagement leaders within the evangelical religious world were typically studiously apolitical. They consciously did not want to be like the religious right.

Most of the urban church world and many parachurch organizations embraced the cultural engagement strategy, and some suburban megachurches have shifted in that direction. Major figures and groups include Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church (New York City), Hillsong Church (New York City, Los Angeles, and other global cities), - *Christianity Today* magazine (suburban Chicago), Veritas Forum (Boston), Sen. Ben Sasse (Washington, D.C.), contemporary artist Makoto Fujimura (New York City), and author Andy Crouch (Philadelphia).

These different movements represented different responses to the three worlds. But they also reflected other theological, sociological, and cultural differences among the various camps. The culture warriors had a fundamentalist sensibility, and often came from that tradition. Jerry Falwell and Francis Schaeffer both had fundamentalist backgrounds, for example. The seeker sensitives and cultural engagers had a more evangelical sensibility.

Fundamentalism prioritized doctrinal purity and was frequently separatist and hostile to outsiders or those who would compromise on biblical fidelity. Evangelicalism developed, beginning in the 1940s, as an attempt to create a kinder, gentler fundamentalism that could reach the mainstream. Its priorities have been more missional than doctrinal. If we view it in terms of sensibilities, we will find that this split—between

doctrinal or confessional purity and missional focus or revivalism—has manifested itself persistently throughout American religious history.

There were other differences among the movements, as well. The culture warriors were mostly middle and lower-middle class. Their leaders may have had college degrees, but their followers frequently did not. The seeker sensitives and cultural engagers were more solidly middle class and typically better educated. The culture warriors attracted large numbers of Pentecostal charismatics, such as Pat Robertson, although there was some tension between them and the non-charismatic portions of that movement. The seeker sensitives and cultural engagers were much less Pentecostal. Those who did affirm the continuation of the - charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit were subtle about it. The culture warriors were also heavily shaped by the Cold War: They were not just culture warriors but Cold Warriors. The very name of Falwell's Liberty University attests to this association with America's fight against godless communism. This militancy was often linked to a fervor about the end times, which many culture warriors saw as imminent. The cultural engagers, by contrast, were better adapted to a post-Cold War era and reflected an end-of-history rather than end-times perspective. They were no longer burdened by Cold War considerations.

These different approaches—culture war, seeker sensitive, and cultural engagement—should thus not be seen as purely a result of differing strategic choices. They are products not just of different times but of different groups of people. However, their prominence, growth, and character are directly linked to the specific eras in which they developed.

The deterioration of the standing of Christianity in the 1970s led to the development of the culture war and seeker sensitivity strategies in the later stages of the positive world. The transition to the neutral world led to the emergence of the cultural engagement strategy.

The main strategy advocated for in the negative world is Rod Dreher's

Benedict Option. Dreher is not an evangelical; he is Eastern Orthodox, and openly admits his limited understanding of the evangelical world. He may thus have underestimated Protestant suspicion of monastic imagery: The “Benedictine” framing undoubtedly contributed to his project’s poor reception in the evangelical world.

Nevertheless, the general evangelical rejection of the Benedict Option is disproportionate to these sensitivities. We see this primarily in the fact that evangelicals have not developed an evangelical-friendly version of or alternative to it. Despite ample evidence that America has now entered the negative world, no evangelical strategic approaches to it have emerged. American evangelicals are still largely living in the lost positive and neutral worlds. Their rejection of Dreher’s Benedict Option was not about too much Catholic terminology or disagreements over strategic elements. It was rooted in a denial of reality. Evangelicals were, and to a great extent still are, unwilling to accept that they now live in the negative world.

Although evangelicals have not yet developed a negative-world ministry strategy, the transition to the negative world has had major consequences for evangelicalism. The shift has put different types and degrees of pressure on different evangelical groups. As with politics, these pressures intersect with different social groups and strategic positionings, producing conflict and realignment within the evangelical world.

Of these groups, the cultural engagers are clearly the most at risk from the transition to the negative world. Although the shift from the positive to the neutral world represented a downward shift in Christianity’s standing within society, the cultural engagement strategy characteristic of the neutral world enjoyed higher status than did the culture war strategy. Unlike Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell, Tim Keller is highly respected by secular society. He has written for publications like the *New Yorker* and the *Atlantic*. He has received friendly interviews and profiles from

journalists such as Nicholas Kristof at the *New York Times*. Cultural--engagement leaders have been treated by elite secular society in a way the culture warriors never were. They have a cultural status to lose, which the lower-status culture-war Christians of the positive world never had to begin with.

An example of the threat posed to them by the negative world is the partial cancellation of Tim Keller at Princeton Seminary in 2017. Keller was slated to receive the seminary's Abraham Kuyper Award and give an associated lecture. It's hard to think of anyone more thoughtful and winsome than Keller, but students protested his award because he subscribes to a gender theology that restricts ordained ministry to men and affirms men as the head of the home. The award was retracted, though Keller was allowed to give a talk. If Tim Keller is too much for a moderate mainline seminary, it's hard to see how any other evangelicals could get a hearing. The prospect of simply losing the ability to engage with culture is an existential threat to the approach of the cultural engagers.

Cultural engagers are also much more likely to live in upscale urban environments, work in high-paying and prestigious professions, and enjoy the social milieu of the upper-middle class (historic architecture, pour-over coffees, farm-to-table restaurants, artisanal goods, luxury gyms, and the like). The environments in which they live and work are majority secular progressive, where the negative-world culture of secular progressivism is most intense. These are the main places in which people tend to be canceled. Evangelicals from a seeker-sensitivity or suburban megachurch environment may feel similar pressures if they are living and working in more upscale, corporate suburbs.

Those who live in the upper-middle-class or elite world are exposed to far greater negative-world pressure than are other Christians. They risk more in falling afoul of the current secular progressive line. That risk is often

underappreciated by middle-class or blue-collar Christians living in environments, like small towns, that are still in some ways positive toward Christianity.

Under pressure, this group has turned away from engagement with and toward synchronization with secular elite culture, particularly around matters such as race and immigration. Their rhetoric in these areas is increasingly strident and ever more aligned with secular political positions. Meanwhile, they have further softened their stance and rhetoric on flashpoint social issues. They talk often about being holistically pro-life and less about the child in the womb. While holding to traditional teachings on sexuality, they tend to speak less about Christianity's moral prohibitions and more about how the church should be a welcoming place for "sexual minorities," emphasizing the church's past failures in this regard. This stream has been particularly attractive to upper-middle-class, urban, and highly educated evangelicals. It includes most of the preexisting cultural engagers, plus some younger racial justice activists such as Greg Thompson and Duke Kwon.

Increasingly, the rhetoric and activities of this group are about bringing secular cultural movements to the church rather than bringing the gospel to the culture—though some, such as Tim Keller, continue to stay the course with a traditional approach that both challenges and affirms elements of the culture. Some of this change represents overdue reform: For example, some evangelical institutions have indeed failed to prevent or properly respond to accusations of sexual abuse, such as those against Ravi Zacharias. Even here, however, reformist zeal is often highly selective and directed primarily against political opponents. Few if any of the loudest voices crying out about sexual abuse in Protestant churches said anything when abuse allegations were made against ministries associated with the church of then-senatorial candidate Raphael Warnock, for instance.

A secondary stream involves those drawn from smaller movements such as the emerging church, neo-anabaptists, and others who explicitly became progressive evangelicals or part of the Christian left (or “ex-evangelicals” who have left evangelicalism or even Christianity behind). This group has gone beyond the cultural engagers in becoming, for example, largely LGBT-affirming.

For their part, the culture warriors or religious right who persisted through the neutral world have evolved toward Trumpist populism in the negative world. They are Trumpist not just because they supported Trump politically, but also in that they have embraced his key positions on issues such as immigration and trade restrictions, and sometimes post-liberal politics as well. They are populist in that they tend to attack elites, including evangelical elites, in the name of the masses. They have also jettisoned some historic touchstones of the religious right, such as a concern for personal morality and character in political leaders, in favor of a more realpolitik approach. Traditional social issues such as abortion do remain very important to them. As shown in the 2016 exit polls, this group accounts for the majority of evangelicals, and it includes most fundamentalists and Pentecostals. Culture warriors continue to be lower in economic status and education levels, and to reside away from the nation’s cultural centers. This group includes people such as Franklin Graham, Robert Jeffress, Doug Wilson, and Eric Metaxas (a rare New York City–based member of this movement).

These shifts have produced conflict and realignment for several reasons. The first concerns Donald Trump and his embrace by the culture warriors. Their support of a man of such low and boorish character horrified some people of a generally conservative disposition who might otherwise have remained part of the religious right. These are the people to whom personal character and class still mattered. Some historically center-right middle-class suburbanites, for example, were very turned off by Trump. Others were appalled by the presence of the theologically aberrant, even

heretical figures among Trump's religious inner circle, such as the prosperity preacher Paula White. Similarly, but tending in the opposite direction, some of this group of center-right mainstream evangelicals became alarmed by what appears to be an in-progress abandonment of traditional beliefs on sexuality and the embrace of hard-left secular positions on race by many cultural-engagement leaders and evangelical institutions. Trump and wokeness are the two key polarizers re-sorting evangelicals.

The leadership class of evangelicalism is more highly educated and more upper-middle-class than the masses. So, though 80 percent of evangelicals voted for Donald Trump, a much smaller share of the evangelical leadership supported him, and many were the religious equivalents of the "Never Trump" movement. This disjunction revealed to the evangelical base that their leadership class did not share many of their values or preferences, resulting in an elite-base split similar to that roiling the Republican party.

This split has been acrimonious at times. The culture warriors have been fiercely hostile toward the establishment. Hostility to elites is part of the populist affect, and their combativeness against what they perceive as theological drift flows from their heritage. For their part, the cultural engagers in upper-middle-class milieus have likewise adopted a separatist approach. They are keen to show the world that they are not at all aligned with the Trumpist culture warriors, whom they have harshly denounced in some cases. In effect, they have declared their own culture war, but theirs is against other evangelicals rather than the world.

These divisions are ripping churches and other evangelical institutions apart. One reason is that these institutions are not perfectly divided among the various groups. Some fundamentalist churches may be purely culture-war. Some progressive-leaning urban churches may be almost entirely aligned with cultural engagers. But others are a mix. In particular,

the mainstream of suburban megachurches deriving from the seeker sensitivity movement tend to have a mix of different people, including many who could be pulled in either direction, depending on whether they are more allergic to Trump or to secular left racial politics. Even within the various tribes there are dissenters. David French might once have aligned with the culture war camp, but his negative reaction to Trump and preexisting personal and professional relationships in the neoconservative world turned him into a fierce opponent of the Trumpists. Similarly, some evangelicals in elite urban centers are not happy with hard-left secular race politics in their churches. Catering to them are new churches that explicitly advertise themselves as “non-woke.”

Evangelicalism is in flux, and its future as a coherent movement is in doubt. In part, this crisis has resulted from the failure of evangelicalism to develop strategies designed for the negative world in which Christians are a moral minority and secular society is actively hostile to the faith. The previous strategies are not adequate to today’s realities and are being deformed under the pressures of the negative world.

It is impossible to predict the future. But the past suggests that the culture warriors can survive, if in a diminished form. Those with a fundamentalist sensibility survived with their faith and churches intact when the mainline Protestant denominations adopted liberal theologies. But this would mean a return to a geographically and demographically limited backwoods Christianity, devoid of public or cultural influence.

The future of the cultural engagers and megachurch people who have turned toward cultural synchronization looks grimmer. The much--discussed failures of the evangelical elite cannot be understood without reference to the way the ground rapidly and fundamentally shifted under them during the transition to the negative world. Their desire to remain members in good standing of secular elite society, their social-gospel focus, and their embrace of current secular academic theories are

reminiscent of what happened to the mainline denominations (though this time the secular theories are from the social rather than natural sciences). Those denominations, once well-attended and socially prestigious, have lost a large share of their members over the last fifty years. The people in the pews skew elderly. The theology in many of these congregations is but a thin veneer for secular progressivism. The results could easily be the same for cultural engagement evangelicals: retention of cultural cachet, for a time, but ultimately the slow loss of adherents and theological orthodoxy.

But rather than extend existing strategies forward into the future, evangelicals could, and should, grapple seriously with what it means for them to live in the negative world. What strategies should be employed for this era? Unlike previous eras, the negative world necessitates a variety of approaches to match the diversity of situations in which American Christians find themselves. Finding a path forward will probably require trial and error and a new set of leaders with different skills and sensibilities. American Reformer, a nonprofit I co-founded, hopes to be an intellectual home for this new movement. We also see leaders starting new churches designed to respond explicitly to the negative world, such as Michael Foster and his new East River Church in Batavia, Ohio. But these efforts are still nascent.

Negative-world strategies will have to grapple with the “rise of the nones,” people with no professed religion who may be unfamiliar with Christianity and find it quite odd or even offensive. One-third or more of Americans in the younger age cohorts fall into this category, portending a radically different cultural landscape in America. This means evangelicals must include a Benedict Option–style focus on building churches and Christian communities that rely less on support from secular institutions and are resilient to outside pressure. They should stop outsourcing their political thinking to movement conservatism and their sociocultural analysis to secular academics. They should remain prudentially engaged in politics

based on their own traditions of Protestant political and social thought. They must be willing to accept a loss of social status, but they need not succumb to the very pessimistic mood that pervades Rod Dreher's work. They must accept that realignment will be a reality, with a reconfiguring of alliances and cooperation based on today's needs and different forms of shared values.

Adaptability is part of evangelical history. Each of the three models I highlighted is evidence of how evangelicalism has adapted to changing times. But there are more examples besides these. Evangelicalism has successfully adapted to new media, with various groups creating huge online and social media followings. It has adapted to the rise and fall of evangelistic strategies such as revivals and street preaching. Christians may indeed be a declining and unpopular moral minority, but that is no reason to assume that evangelicalism's day is done. Having adapted so many times before, evangelicals can do it yet again to thrive in the negative world.

Aaron M. Renn writes at aaronrenn.substack.com, from which he has drawn material for this essay.