

NONFICTION

How American Evangelicalism Became 'Mister Rogers With a Blowtorch'

In his new book, "The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory," the journalist Tim Alberta subjects his faith's embrace of right-wing extremism to critical scrutiny.



By Jennifer Szalai

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THE KINGDOM, THE POWER, AND THE GLORY: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism, by Tim Alberta

What would Jesus do? It's a question that the political journalist Tim Alberta takes seriously in his brave and absorbing new book, "The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory," pressing the evangelicals he meets to answer a version of it — even if a number of them clearly do not want to.

Alberta, a staff writer for The Atlantic, asks how so many devout Christians could be in thrall to a figure like Donald Trump, whom he calls a "lecherous, impenitent scoundrel." According to one of the scoops in the book, Trump himself used decidedly less vivid language to describe the evangelicals who supported Senator Ted Cruz in the 2016 Republican primaries, telling an Iowa Republican official: "You know, these so-called Christians hanging around with Ted are some real pieces of shit." Many of Cruz's evangelical supporters eventually backed Trump in 2016; in the 2020 election, Trump increased his share of the white evangelical vote even more, to a whopping 84 percent.

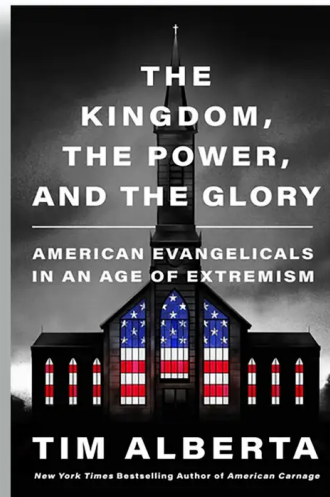
This phenomenon, Alberta says, cannot simply be a matter of evangelicals mobilizing against abortion access and trying to save lives; after all, they have kept remarkably quiet when it comes to showing compassion for refugees or curbing gun violence, which is now, as Alberta notes, the leading cause of death for children in the United States.

What he finds instead is that under the veneer of Christian modesty simmers an explosive rage, propelling Americans who piously declare their fealty to Jesus to act as though their highest calling is to own the libs. No wonder the popular image of evangelicalism, according to one disillusioned preacher, has devolved into “Mister Rogers with a blowtorch.”

Alberta's previous book, “American Carnage” (2019), detailed Trump's takeover of the Republican Party. His new book reads like a sequel, tracing the Trumpian takeover of American evangelicalism, but this time Alberta begins with his very personal connection to his subject. He is “a believer in Jesus Christ,” he writes, “the son of an evangelical minister, raised in a conservative church in a conservative community,” a suburb of Detroit.

In the summer of 2019, just after “American Carnage” was published, his father died suddenly of a heart attack. At Cornerstone, his father's church, some of the congregants approached the grieving Alberta not to console him but to complain about his journalism, demanding to know if he was on “the right side.” One church elder wrote a letter to Alberta complaining about the “deep state” and accusing him of treason.

The experience was so surreal that Alberta decided to find out what had happened to his religious community. During Trump's presidency, his father had moved farther to the right, but despite their differences their love for each other was undiminished. Alberta interviewed his father's handpicked successor, Chris Winans, who is “not a conservative Republican” and spoke candidly about how “God's people” have always had to contend with worldly temptations that could lead them astray: “I want to be in power, I want to have influence, I want to be prosperous, I want to have security.” Many of Winans's congregants left for a church down the road that preached the kind of “blood-and-soil Christian nationalism” they wanted to hear. “The church is supposed to challenge us,” Winans says. “But a lot of these folks don't want to be challenged.”



“The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory” charts a transformation in evangelicalism, from a midcentury moment when white American Christians were such a dominant force in the country that many could “afford to forget politics” to a time when many more feel, as one prominent pastor puts it, “under siege.” Alberta suggests that this panic has less to do with any existential threat to American Christianity than a rattled presumption of privilege. “Humility doesn’t come easy to the American evangelical,” he writes. “We are an immodest and excessively indulged people.”

A crisis of leadership has compounded the problem. Alberta offers a deeply reported account of the cascading scandals that have consumed Liberty University, an “insular, paranoid family business” coupling authoritarian rules with “flagrant misconduct.” (Jerry Falwell Jr., the former president of Liberty and the son of its founder, was already indulging his “tyrannical instincts” long before “he became ensnared in a love triangle with his wife and a Miami pool boy,” Alberta writes.) Another chapter describes the struggle to bring to account pastors who victimized congregants in a church that has become “institutionally desensitized” to sexual abuse.

Alberta takes heart that new congregations are springing up in unlikely places. Attending a service in an Atlanta distillery, he sees people who are there “to be disciplined, not demagogued.” But his reporting keeps leading him to opportunistic impresarios who realize that the painstaking work of building a congregation can be made infinitely easier with expedient shortcuts. Political mudslinging offers a “dopamine rush.” Exaggerating threats and calling the other side evil means that whatever you do, no matter how outrageous or cruel or contrary to Scripture, can be defended as righteous.

In 2021, at a rowdy protest against pandemic shutdowns hosted by FloodGate Church in Michigan, a few miles from Cornerstone, Alberta saw a lot of American flags in the sanctuary but not a single cross. “I couldn’t suppress a feeling of absolute disgust,” he writes about the spectacle that followed. To get a fuller picture, he returned repeatedly to FloodGate and talked to its pastor, but the church was committed to political warfare at all costs. “I never ceased to be aghast at what I heard,” he writes.

For the most part, though, Alberta hangs back, letting the people he interviews say what they want — or refuse to say what they don’t. The most belligerent culture warriors tend to shy away from talking about helping immigrants and the poor, since bashing the left tends to stimulate conservative passions more reliably than trying to teach Jesus’ example of good deeds and turning the other cheek. The dynamic turns out to be mutually reinforcing — or mutually destructive. One preacher, a “former Southern Baptist,” says that pastors are now “afraid of their own congregants.”

It’s a situation that recalls Alberta’s account in “American Carnage,” in which establishment Republicans naïvely thought they could use Trumpism to their advantage while maintaining control over their party and constituents. “Those fabled gatekeepers who once kept crackpots away from positions of authority no longer existed,” Alberta writes in “The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory.” Instead of issuing guidance, too many “so-called shepherds” resort to pandering — and their congregants end up even more wayward than before.

At an event organized by the Faith and Freedom Coalition, Alberta meets a man selling T-shirts emblazoned with “Let’s Go Brandon,” the conservative chant that stands in for a four-letter expletive directed at Joe Biden. The T-shirts include the hashtag #FJB as a handy reminder. The proprietor explains that his merchandise is responding to the fact that “we’ve taken God out of America.”

Alberta asks the man whether the #FJB is an appropriate way to bring God back. “People keep on asking for it,” he replies with a shrug. “You’ve got to give the people what they want.”

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