

The Trump Presidency Was a Catastrophe for American Christianity

David French on the crisis within the evangelical movement

by Sean Illing

(Feb 3, 2021)

<https://www.vox.com/22188646/trump-evangelical-christianity-david-french>

“I’d be happy to die in this fight. ... This is a fight for everything.”

That’s what **Eric Metaxas**, a prominent Christian radio host, told President Donald Trump during a radio interview a few weeks after the 2020 election. If the hysteria in those words surprises you, you probably haven’t paid close attention to how evangelicals have responded to Trump over the past four years. Indeed, evangelicals have been one of Trump’s most loyal constituencies.

Even after it was obvious that Trump lost the presidential race, many Christian leaders redoubled their support for Trump and joined a legal effort to overturn the election and disenfranchise millions of Americans. And just two weeks ago, Franklin Graham, a public face of evangelical Christianity, compared GOP officials who voted for Trump’s impeachment to Judas Iscariot, the biblical character who sold out Christ for 30 pieces of silver.

So that’s where American evangelical Christianity is right now.

David French is a senior editor at the Dispatch, a columnist at *Time*, and most recently the author of *Divided We Fall: America’s Secession Threat and How to Restore our Nation*. French is also a constitutional lawyer and a conservative Christian who has tracked the evolution of evangelical politics as closely as anyone over the past several years.

I reached out to French to talk about how Trump became a pseudo-champion for millions of American Christians, why conspiracy theories are so attractive to religious fundamentalists, and why he believes Trump’s evangelical base represents a serious threat to the rule of law in the US.

Sean Illing: You call this moment a particularly “dangerous time for Christianity.” What makes it so dangerous?

David French: There are a few things. I think when you see such a large segment of American Christianity, of white evangelicalism in particular, tie itself so closely to one political party and to one man, Donald Trump, you’re not exactly tying the faith to virtue. That’s obvious enough.

There’s some fascinating research done by Ryan Burge, who is a statistician and a scholar of religion at Eastern Illinois University. He has shown how different American religious strands, whether it’s Black Christians, Mormons, atheists, Catholics... all maintain some distance in their ideology from the the party they most affiliate with. But this isn’t true for white evangelicals. It is an exact overlap. The identification between white evangelicals and the GOP is almost perfect.

That’s a problem because it means your faith is now tied to an entire array of both

personalities and political positions that do not naturally flow from biblical ethics. Any time you're going to tie faith to ideas and people who do not either personify biblical ethics or positioned to flow from biblical ethics, you're creating a real problem. They've essentially politicized their faith.

Sean Illing: But why Trump? Is he just a random but convenient vehicle for Christians? Or is there something particular about him – his celebrity, for example – that makes him a perfect fit for the modern Christian ethos?

David French: Man, that's a big question. Part of it is simple. White evangelicals are Republicans, and Republicans are white evangelicals, which has been the case for a long time now, and Trump was just the Republican nominee, and so he had to work incredibly hard to lose their support....

He worked hard to do that by engaging in all kinds of behaviors that are obviously unChristian, that are contrary to Christian ethics, that are deeply harmful to other people. But that's where it gets complicated. I tell people all the time that live in other parts of the country, in non-MAGA parts of the country, that they have to remember where white evangelicals tend to get their information about the world.

When it comes to politics, most evangelicals are not getting their information from the pulpit. I think it's a misconception that a lot of people who are outside of the evangelical world have, that at church they're getting a ton of politics. No, but what's happening is a lot of Republican Christians are getting catechized in politics through conservative media, through Fox News, through talk radio. As I've told a lot of people, if you had the information inflow that a lot of my neighbors have [French lives in Tennessee], you'd be MAGA also. A lot of it is just a product of information that makes it not that hard to support Trump, if that's your information flow.

The other thing is that a lot of these people genuinely believe, because of where they get their information, that the country is in some kind of emergency that justifies the extremism of Trump. They believe they need someone who's willing to be very aggressive in taking on the left, their so-called enemies. Trump was also very shrewd about granting access to evangelical supporters and to outright grifters and opportunists. That's a big part of what happened as well.

Sean Illing: I had a conversation last year with Kristin Kobes Du Mez, a historian at Calvin University, and she argues that evangelical Christianity has been steadily subsumed by popular culture and has turned, increasingly, into a more masculine, more militant, and more nationalistic political religion. Does that reading seem correct to you?

David French: I'd say that there is a perverted version of masculinity that is common in Southern evangelical circles that rendered the church vulnerable to the Trumpian influence. I've seen that with my own eyes. There's a deep-seated insecurity that exists about masculinity in the church for lots of interesting reasons, some of them related to the way the secular culture has cast a lot of aspersions on traditional masculinity as being “problematic.”

In many strands of evangelical Christianity, there's a real struggle to articulate and live out a biblical masculinity that is not too influenced by a secular culture that either wrongly denigrates toughness or wrongly elevates toughness. I think that that's led to an awful lot of confusion.

One of the things that has been so bizarre to me has been this equation of Donald Trump with virtuous masculinity. We don't need to go into all of the details, but this is a man who evaded military service, who has serially cheated on wives, who is terribly out of shape, is so cowardly in

a lot of his personal interactions, that he delegates to others the task of firing people. There's so much that if you were going to map out who is the archetype of the masculine leader prior to Trump, he would be the opposite of that.

Sean Illing: To go back to something you were saying earlier about faith and partisanship, I'd argue that Christians in this country sacrificed the credibility — and the substance — of their faith the moment they leaned into politics and embraced the GOP as their vehicle for power, and this is something that preceded Trump by decades. Do you think that's unfair or inaccurate?

David French: The embrace of political power carried with it a number of dangers that ultimately the church couldn't escape. I've heard a number of people who've reflected on the beginning of the religious right and this decision to not just engage in politics, but to engage in politics through the GOP almost exclusively. You can engage in politics, and you can be intellectually independent, but to engage in politics through the GOP specifically in pursuit of political power was a big mistake.

Sean Illing: Why?

David French: Because **the right may have acquired political power, but the left was much more effective at achieving cultural power, and if you believe, as I do, that politics is downstream from culture, the quest for pure political power was always going to be limited. The religious right lost the culture and with it their ability to impact the world the way they envisioned.**

The Trump years encapsulate this perfectly. The right went all-in on Trump. White evangelicals went all-in on Trump. They won the presidency. They won the House. They won the Senate. They had the judiciary. Is anyone going to say that the United States of America is now more fundamentally Christian in 2021 than it was in 2017? I don't think so. Most people would say the cultural left has been empowered during these years. So the religious right got what they wanted in a lot of ways, politically speaking, but I don't think they achieved their long-term goals by any stretch of the imagination.

Sean Illing: Why do you think so many American Christians are being taken in by conspiracy theories?

David French: Well, so many of these conspiracy theories utilize religious and prophetic language. For example, if you watch a QAnon video, and I've seen a bunch, you get messaging like “Where we go one, we go all” and “Put on the full armor of God,” and it's this mix of scripture and prophetic-style imagery that appeals on a deep level to a certain kind of religious person. The conspiratorial messaging is like a gateway drug that sucks people in.

And this is all happening in such fertile soil in a time of fear and uncertainty and death. We're literally in the middle of a plague. So I think people, in times of fear, put their hope and trust in Trump, because that's who they had, and Trump shrewdly exploited it. And, again, the religious right has already been conditioned by decades of conservative media telling them that the godless left wants to destroy their way of life. They've been told for 20 years that the left hates them and wants them dead. They've been told the Democratic Party wants to kill the church. And of all these big lies have been supported by countless smaller, enabling lies.

So it's not hard to see why conspiracy theories take root in these communities. It's not hard to see why they'd believe the Democrats stole an election or that they're perverted pedophiles trafficking children. The soil has been prepared for a long, long time.

Sean Illing: I keep wondering where this goes from here, and it's not encouraging, David. If the stakes are now that high, if the religious right is fully convinced that their very way of life is on the verge of extinction, then how does this ever stop escalating? Are they not a serious threat to the rule of law in this country?

David French: I have written a lot about how the hardcore Trump evangelical base threatens our constitutional rule of law. People on my side have told me for a long time that I'm exaggerating the threat, that I should stop pearl-clutching. But now we've seen a direct violent attack on the US Capitol, on the very seat of American democracy, and it was designed to prevent a peaceful transition of power that was taking place at the exact same time as the attack.

And we're seeing all across the country bogus attempts to manufacture legal doctrines to overturn a presidential election. People are walking into court with manufactured evidence, with made-up legal doctrines to try to reverse an election. You're walking into legislatures trying to manufacture a way that they can overturn an election. Then when all that was in the process of failing, they tried to manufacture a revolution to overturn an election. I think that that's a pretty comprehensive top-to-bottom threat to the rule of law.

Sean Illing: I now live in the Deep South, as you do, and I really don't think people outside of these areas understand how pervasive this kind of paranoid, alarmist thinking truly is. These are not fringe beliefs. Millions of people are convinced an election was stolen, and if you really believe that, you're already mentally prepared to justify extreme countermeasures.

David French: Unless you're in the middle of Trump country and interacting with grassroots activist Republicans, I don't believe you can possibly understand how deep the conspiracy thinking has wormed its way into the GOP. I don't think you understand the ferocity of Trumpism. One of the reasons more legislators have not stood up more dramatically to Trump, and let's just be honest about this, is that they fear for their lives and the lives of their families. Some stories on this have leaked, but I really do think it's worse than most people suspect.

Sean Illing: How do we pull back from the brink, David? Do you honestly see a path forward?

David French: I don't know. Look, to say that there's no hope is completely wrong. I think there is hope. The fact that I don't see a particular path in the short to medium term doesn't mean there isn't hope. I do think the attack on the Capitol was a wake-up call for some people.

My personal hope is that as we move forward without Trump tweeting and inflaming tensions, as the burdens of the pandemic lift and politics start to feel less immediately existential, that people can have a chance to breathe. That's my hope. If we can get past this flash of insurrectionary spirit, then maybe we can all breathe and slow down. If people can get out and spend more time in restaurants, with their families, maybe they can have a chance to breathe.

Our only hope is that the overall atmosphere of the country starts to feel less like an existential crisis and more like normal life, whatever that is, because I don't think things would have escalated to this point without the stress and anxiety of the pandemic weighing down on all of us. There's been so much death and fear and restlessness, and it's amplified our societal dysfunctions.

I have to believe that as the pandemic recedes, and some of the pressures it placed on us fade with it, that things will get better. That's my best shot at optimism.