THE FAITHANGLEFORUM

TRANSCRIPT

"Evangelicals and Trump: Understanding the Appeal"

Dr. Molly Worthen
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PETER WEHNER: I want to welcome everybody. This is the 31st Faith Angle Forum and we appreciate you all being a part of it.

Let me now introduce Dr. Molly Worthen. It's great to have her here. She is an assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She did her undergraduate work at Yale and her PhD at Yale in American religious history and her research focuses on North American religion and intellectual history but particularly on the ideas and culture of conservative Christians. She is a gifted writer and an award-winning teacher. She's author of *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*. There's some interesting intersections that she's had. Mike Cromartie knew her, respected her. She and I share an editor at *The New York Times*. He had spoken very highly of Molly Worthen and said she would be great here. And she is a former student of David Brooks when David was teaching at Yale.

DAVID BROOKS: She has a lot of resilience, bouncing back from it

PETER WEHNER: Yes.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Still recovering.

PETER WEHNER: She was in your first class, David. And she said it was very tough. But we'll talk about that later. No, she was very laudatory of that time.

We've asked her to speak on "Evangelicals and Trump: Understanding the Appeal." It strikes me that this is one of the most significant and interesting political and theological developments in many years. And we brought her in to try and deepen our understanding of this alliance, which two years ago would have seemed a very unlikely alliance to a lot of people, and to bring texture and nuance to that discussion, to dispense light rather than heat, we've got plenty of that in discourse these days, and to treat people not as cartoon figures but as real people.

And there are plenty of fascinating questions to explore here, whether this alliance signals a dramatic change in the evangelical movement or simply a prudential evolution, whether this is a deep and lasting alliance or one that is reluctant and tenuous, what explains this appeal and whether that alliance is going to change the fundamental character of fundamental Christianity and also some of the generational issues

that this raises.

Molly Worthen will do her presentation and then the floor will be open to all of you to explore any questions on your mind. And so, Molly Worthen, thank you for being with us, and take it away.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Thanks so much, Pete, for that lovely introduction. Thank you all. I'm so excited to be here. I've known about the Faith Angle Forum for a long time and it's just very exciting to get to be part of this discussion.

I have noticed that now that the current incumbent has been in office for 10 months or so, whenever the subject of why so many white evangelicals voted for him comes up, a lot of scholars who study the Christian right will sigh in a kind of superior manner and tell you that it's pretty obvious why evangelicals voted for him and there are at least half a dozen good reasons.

But the fact is that, to my knowledge, none of these so-called experts actually called it prior to November 8, 2016. I'm guilty as one of those know-it-alls who totally failed to put my knowledge to any practical use until it was too late. And ever since, I've been trying to figure out why I didn't see it then because it is fairly clear to me now.

I have settled on a theological explanation for our scholarly failure and that is original sin. And I'm not trying to be cute. I do mean original sin in something awfully like Augustine's sense of concupiscence, of the inward contortion of the self upon the self that prevents us from seeing clearly.
Professional historians generally pride ourselves on seeing the world through other people's points of view. I mean, that's our job.

But in this case, I think most of us were too trapped in our own vantage points, in assumptions that seemed obvious to us, in our own visceral reactions. And so, we failed to appreciate Donald Trump's appeal to many Americans, even though certainly in the case of white evangelicals, that appeal is absolutely consistent with some very long historical patterns.

I should make clear that when I use the word evangelical, I am generally speaking about white conservative Protestants. I'd love to hear from you about your own experience. But in my work as a journalist, I find that whenever I have occasion to interview an African-American or a Latino conservative Protestant, it is very rare that they want me to call them an evangelical. That's very much a white tag and that's how I'm using it now.

I think any successful politician wins votes because he or she tells supporters a story they want to believe, a story of what this country is, who Americans are that aligns with whatever stories they are already telling themselves. And I think that Trump masterfully played on and reinforced three stories that evangelicals like to believe.

The first is a story about the role of government in our lives. The second is a story about women and

authority. And the last is a story about experts and discerning truth. And I'm going to take those in order and say a little bit more about each one.

Now, fair warning, this is going to involve a pretty deep dive into the history of theology and I want to be clear that by dwelling on theology, I'm not dismissing other less intellectual ways of explaining evangelical affection for Trump like racial prejudice, and economic resentment. But I do think that for many people, theology becomes this powerful framework that helps what you could call the precognitive motivations coalesce and make sense to people. And it's worth understanding for that reason.

First, let me take up this matter of government because I think it's a substantial feature of white evangelical policy opinion that has confused observers since long before Trump came on the scene. In the Gospels, Jesus seems to have a lot of concern for the poor, right? He tells his disciples to give to the poor. He says invite the poor to your feasts.

And so, for many liberal Christians and secular folks, it seems like this ought to translate into Christians supporting progressive taxation and expanding public welfare. But of course many evangelicals, though by no means all, object to those policies, even though many of them would stand to personally benefit. So from that viewpoint, you could label this the what's the matter with Kansas problem or whatever you like.

Many white evangelicals opt for what I'll call a selective libertarianism, that is, a hostile view of an expansive social safety net but a world view that is not exactly a small government vision.

They love Trump's promises to intervene in a big way on certain issues like immigration. There are some historical reasons for this and they have to do with how evangelicals came to view biblical authority, really what it means to be a Christian in particular historical contexts.

And the first is the late 18th century, the time of the American Revolution when many evangelicals believed that the Bible called them to political rebellion. Now, when I talk to my undergraduates at Carolina about this, I love to talk about the example of the Baptist preacher Isaac Backus. This guy he came from a tradition that rejected the authority of the Church of England by becoming a Baptist. He had rejected the authority of the Congregationalist Church, the state church in much of New England. And now, he rejected the authority of the king.

He became one of the great preachers of the Revolution. Shortly after the Battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775, he gave a rousing sermon mocking the doctrine of passive obedience to the king and calling on Christians to rise up in violent resistance.

Now, Backus is interesting for us because he represents this crucial moment in American religious and political history when American evangelicalism became fused to late 18th century republican politics.

That's republican, small R, politics, when the language of individual conversion to Christ, un-coerced free

conversion merged in a powerful way with the idea of individual political freedoms and when what I see as the dominant religious tradition in America became really entwined with this deep suspicion of centralized authority, a powerful federal government.

Now, historically of course conservative evangelicals have sometimes been very happy to use the power of government to advance a particular moral vision. Take the campaign for Prohibition, for example. This American evangelical suspicion of centralized government in cases when it might threaten Christian liberty combined with a taste for mobilizing the tools of government to police morality and maintain their own cultural authority.

This kind of apparently paradoxical mix, this goes back to Isaac Backus' own Puritan forebears. This is really the Puritan genius. The Massachusetts Bay Puritans saw both these strategies, this rejection of a certain kind of centralized power and a very confident use of certain government tools as necessary to build and guard their city on a hill.

It is not actually inconsistent. It has an internal logic. What I'm calling this selective libertarianism has lent a certain flexibility to evangelical political ideology, a tendency to alternately welcome an authoritarian leader like Trump and also cheer his promises to strip away certain regulations, to roll back Obamacare and so forth.

It is absolutely true that within evangelicalism there have been other competing visions of state power, no doubt. But I really think that if you want to understand today's fights over tax policy, Obamacare, whatever, you have to go back to the Revolution.

You have to, or at least if not the Revolution, then the Puritans, to a time when evangelicals came to think that Christians could not be completely free to obey the authority of the Bible and their conscience without placing strong limits on the powers of the state.

This is not to say that conservative evangelicals have no heart for the poor and I think this is a point that liberals frequently misunderstand. Most evangelicals I know care deeply about their fellow human beings and how they might help them.

But they think that the church or private individuals should be the primary agents of this, not the government. And they think that progressives who seek to redistribute wealth or otherwise try to eliminate fundamental sources of injustice are naïve.

They're naively playing into the hands of would-be totalitarian social engineers and they simply don't grasp the reality of original sin or the arc toward the eschaton and the fact that these fundamental injustices will not disappear until Jesus comes again.

I'll add that I see something similar in reactions to mass shootings like we had yesterday in Texas, this tendency to cast these tragedies as acts of evil reflective of human depravity, original sin, which of course

raises the question of why the Brits and the Australians and the Canadians don't seem to be as tainted by original sin as the rest of us. But that's another debate, I suppose.

Now, evangelicals have certainly, in a kind of pointed way, not been inclined to support major efforts in Washington to fundamentally intervene to equalize opportunities, especially if redistributing wealth means giving tax dollars to people who do not look like them, like new immigrants and non-whites.

I would say this last problem, the problem of cultivating empathy in a diverse community, because that's really what it is, this is a pretty universal human thing. It is not unique to evangelicals. I would say the United States' incredible level of diversity, combined with the legacy in this country of race-based chattel slavery are the two big things that explain our divergent path from the rest of our peer countries when it comes to an expansive social safety net.

It is not an accident that the great heyday of American social spending, the period when it actually looked like we were on track to keep up with our peer countries, if not outpace them in the generosity of public benefits, coincides almost exactly with the period of our tightest constraints on immigration, from the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924, which set very strict quotas, basically prevented anyone who was not coming from Western Europe from entering this country, to the Hart-Celler Act in 1965, which lifted those quotas. And that happens to be the time of the New Deal, the Great Society and so forth. Not an accident.

But let me follow that thread of particularly evangelical logic, this idea that the individual Christian conscience and its work in the church, these are the most sacred things. These are the elements of society that the government has got to work to protect above all.

This brings us, I think, to a fraught policy question in our own time and that's the matter of religious liberty and how it's been surfacing in debates about gay rights. I've just sketched for you the long history of evangelical thinking about religious liberty. But to understand this, the current dynamic under Trump, we've got to add one more piece, the late 20th century chapter of this story.

Let's accelerate a little bit to the early 1970s. The Christian right was not yet the political juggernaut that it would become. Jerry Falwell in the early '70s was still a fundamentalist wondering if full-on political activism was truly consistent with the Gospels.

But then, Paul Weyrich, an Eastern Rite Catholic from Wisconsin who'd been trying to organize conservative Christians ever since the Goldwater campaign struck political gold when the IRS revoked the tax exemption of white-only Christian segregation academies, as they were known to their critics. These were the private Christian schools which were de facto all-white that evangelicals, including Jerry Falwell, had set up in response to attempts to desegregate their local public school systems.

Now, evangelicals swore up and down that this was about their right to educate their children in their faith. It had nothing to do with race. They felt victimized by court decisions and new regulations that policed their private schools and it was really Weyrich's call and that of his colleagues to defend religious

liberty, to defend the liberty of these white schools, not—initially anyway—the legalization of abortion that first summoned them to politics.

Those evangelicals who use the language of religious liberty today usually try to ignore this ugly chapter in their community's history. And some of them, like Russell Moore, who's been to this forum, who I know is known to a number of you, the president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, and of course one of the few prominent never-Trumpers still standing, some of them do have a pretty good record on race and civil rights.

But the fact is that these Christians are using an argument that their predecessors used to defend segregation and they are using it to defend unequal treatment of gay people. Evangelicals reject this analogy entirely and strictly from the standpoint of scriptural warrant, from the standpoint of what the Bible says, it's true that the two issues are not identical. But it seems to me that proof texts don't really matter beyond the bounds of churches, as mainstream political opinion is quickly coming to see religious condemnation of homosexuality as the moral equivalent of racism.

All right. Now that I've raised the matter of sexuality, let me turn to the second topic Trump has capitalized on and that's white evangelical attitudes toward women and authority.

Now, we've all been reading the same articles about the socioeconomic decline of white men in America. I think we're all at least aware of books like Hanna Rosin's The End of Men, JD Vance's Hillbilly Elegy and we know the common line on Hillary Clinton, that for many American men, she came to represent all of the ways in which modernity had emasculated them.

What I would like to add to what I think has kind of become almost common wisdom is a longer and particularly evangelical history and a point about the Bible and how the authority of the Bible is relevant here.

First, as long as anybody has been keeping track of things like church attendance, we know that women have made up the majority of churchgoers in pretty much every modern religious community. And I shouldn't say churchgoers. I should say active religious members because this is not just a Christian pattern.

For almost that long, so for say at least the last couple hundred years, church leaders have worried very openly about what they've called the feminization of the church, the emasculation of muscular Christianity. Combine that with a general crisis of masculinity in the late 19th century—, maybe we've been in one long crisis of masculinity for a long time.

But in the late 19th century, you have a confluence of historical factors, right? You have the rise of an urbanized economy, the decline of the small, independent farmer, the rise of the middle manager and all of that stuff. And you have a context in which men, particularly conservative white Christian men, were getting nervous about women's authority on missionary boards and so forth even before they were really

all that worried about suffragettes.

Now, if you go into the church archives and you follow the arguments about things like whether female missionaries should be allowed to preach or whether women should be allowed to serve as deacons or ministers, you will run into the same Bible verses over and over, St. Paul's proscriptions of women speaking in church. And you will find again and again an assertion that believing in the inerrant truth of scripture—inerrant is the key word there—requires adherence to strict, unchanging gender roles.

At first this seems like kind of an obvious point I think. Of course conservative evangelicals are insisting that Paul's rules about women should apply for all time. Of course they think that the Bible is a timeless authority that has no mistakes in it. The truth is that inerrancy, as many activists in the Christian right and evangelicals more broadly speaking have come to understand it, has a more recent origin.

There's this long tradition since the origins of Christianity, Christians have been worried about protecting the Bible as a source of perfect truth. But the particular formulation that you encounter in today's evangelical circles has a more recent history that we've got to get a handle on. It has a clear intellectual lineage that goes back to the mid-17th century.

So what happened then? Well, very briefly, Protestant theologians were trying to fend off a set of intellectual attacks from two very different opponents. On the one hand, theologians of the Catholic Counter-Reformation were busy picking apart in their very obnoxious, very logical fashion Protestant claims to the authority of the Bible.

On the other hand, pioneers of the Scientific Revolution were coming up with new non-theological approaches to the study of God's Creation. A little bit later, the philosophers of the radical Enlightenment were getting to work debunking Christ's miracles. These embattled Protestants were caught in the middle and they responded by developing a highly logical, highly rationalistic, we might say pseudoscientific method of argument based on the techniques of both the scholastic theologians and the Enlightenment rationalists. They kind of borrowed their enemies' weapons and turned them back upon them.

They did their best to design this kind of scientific theology that spoke in terms recognizable to that milieu to try to defend the Bible's perfect authority not just on matters of salvation, but on every scientific and historical fact from the scope of the flood to the tiniest details of Ancient Israel's politics and certainly on the matter of Paul's teachings on gender roles.

By the time we get to the mid-19th century, we have theologians in this tradition talking about the Bible as a storehouse of facts, a storehouse of facts. That is such an interesting way to describe scripture. Now, I want to note something very important. This view of the Bible as an unchanging document, as a science textbook did not speak for all conservative Protestants. Historically, evangelicals have had many different ways of understanding the Bible's authority.

Anabaptists, for example, historically emphasized the collective task of the Christian community to discern

God's will and they have been more inclined to see the Bible as a guide for daily living rather than as a science textbook.

The Wesleyan tradition instructed believers to understand Christ himself rather than scripture as God's most important revelation and to read the Bible with the aid of human reason, church tradition and personal religious experience, the so-called Wesleyan quadrilateral that can lend a more flexible interpretive lens.

Wesleyans, and this is really important for this gender question, Wesleyan also have a more perfectionist narrative of God's work in the world that is a viewpoint that looks for humanity to become more and more Christ-like over time.

What follows from that is that God did not necessarily intend the rules and regulations of the first century to apply for all time because we should get better at being like Christ without such rules. And that certainly has been borne out in some of the early Wesleyan church treatment of women.

Pentecostals, in the earliest crazy days of Pentecostal revival in the turn of the 20th century, tongues and dancing and healing and all of that, had a powerful view of the Holy Spirit's action in the world, breaking down barriers, empowering women and people of color to preach and heal right alongside men. And none of these are liberal traditions.

But think about the broader cultural and intellectual context of America at the turn of the 20th century. Think of the clichés. Hemlines are rising. Women are demanding the vote.

Millions of non-Protestant, even non-Christian immigrants are pouring into these swelling, smelly, noisy cities which are growing at the expense of traditional life in the countryside. Meanwhile, some Protestants, the so-called modernists are readjusting their view of scripture in order to accommodate new science. It's a kind of bleak picture.

And the defense of an errorless Bible that could answer all of these modern threats, that could answer science on its own terms began to appeal to a wide array of conservative Protestants from across these various traditions. They adopted inerrancy as a kind of fundamentalist battle cry, a symbol for the Bible's authority over modern life. And here is another problem. I told you that there are these conservative Protestant resources for developing a theology of gender equality. You do not have to be a heterodox progressive to find this stuff, to recover Wesleyan ideas of gradual perfectionism.

But there is a problem and that is that, as far as I know, there aren't any good biblical proof texts or theological traditions for explaining away the decline of white male authority in America, the kind of negative side of elevating women.

Now, of course there are ways to draw on theology to talk about economic haves and have-nots, particularly the Social Gospel's ideas of institutionalized collective sin. But that view is at odds with the

selective libertarianism that I mentioned.

I'd love to talk more about why it is that the Social Gospel has ended up in this particularly marginal pathetic role in America where it's gone on to be much more mainstream in other countries, in Christian circles in Canada, for example.

I also think that the masculinity piece is really important here. The long evangelical history of anxiety about Christian masculinity, the assertion that Jesus was manly, he was not meek and mild seems here only to make evangelical men feel even more like failures, to have a sort of less flexible notion of what it means to be a man. They don't have a good way to account for the sense of diminishment that they feel theologically.

Here is where I think we can start to understand that great mystery, right, the women who voted for Trump, particularly evangelical women who voted for Trump because these two trends in our culture, the ascending place of women and the declining status of men, these are totally intertwined in the same families.

In a family where the man is no longer the breadwinner, where he feels he has lost his dignity, he has no hope of attaining the status that his father or grandfather had, where the women in his life have seen him feel demeaned, they have watched men drift away from Sunday worship. Perhaps we can start to understand why even for women this hierarchical theology of gender has real staying power, why there is a certain perverse appeal in Trump's pseudo-masculinity.

The third narrative I want to mention is the story of fake news. Much of Trump's appeal does not start with ideological reasoning. It starts with an alternative reality that he creates. I've told you that evangelicals have this long tradition of defending the Bible against the incursions of modern scholarship and casting doubt on so-called experts who challenge the church.

This primed them to believe Trump's alternative reality and dismiss unwelcome information as fake news. When people complain about the fact that Americans now seem to live in alternative media universes, a substantial number feel free to decide for themselves what is fact and what's not, it can be tempting or trendy somehow to blame postmodernism. And I have as many crotchety complaints as the next person about the vague bogeyman of postmodernity.

But there is actually a much longer history that I think goes back longer than the typical way of understanding the roots of postmodern trends certainly in our intellectual culture to explain why this way of thinking has special appeal to conservative evangelicals.

I'm not blaming evangelicals for this broad turn in our culture. But there's a history here that helps us understand why this fake news stuff has particular resonance in that subculture. This history goes back to the late 19th century to a Dutch theologian named Abraham Kuyper who laid the groundwork for a new way of thinking about the way Christians should talk to non-Christians.

If you're a theology nerd, we're in the realm of apologetics here. Now, up until this point, up until the late 19th century, I'd say most Christians, certainly most evangelicals, were very into natural theology; that is, using evidence from the natural world to argue for the existence of God.

Kuyper moved away from natural theology, from trying so hard to prove the truth of Christianity with empirical evidence out in the world that everybody has access to. He focused instead on presuppositions, on the foundational assumptions that distinguish a Christian worldview from a materialist one.

This way of thinking came into full bloom in the American context at Westminster Theological Seminary outside of Philadelphia in a school of thought known as presuppositionalism, presuppositionalism, which was taught by one professor in particular there from the '30s through the '60s, although it trickled out and had a few different kind of mouthpieces.

The term is a bit of a mouthful. But the basic idea is I think pretty straightforward and that is that one can only accurately evaluate evidence out in the world if proceeding from the right assumptions, assumptions that you can't demonstrate, that you have to simply take on faith, the most important being the assumption of the inerrant truth of the bible. That's the key one.

What happens here? Well, this gives you a handy way to dismiss arguments or information you don't like. You just say that your opponent's assumptions are wrong and, voila, it is fake news.

I spent a lot of time in my last book tracing the way in which this way of thinking had a particular powerful influence on some of the leading evangelical evangelists and public intellectual types, people like the culture warrior, Francis Schaeffer who was kind of a wondering cultural prophet among American evangelicals from the '60s into the '80s. And he played a big role in mobilizing the evangelical pro-life movement among other things.

I'll add a little asterisk on the abortion issue. I believe very much that opposition to legal abortion is key to understanding why evangelicals supported Trump. But I think that factor is a little bit more straightforward. I've chosen to not dwell on it here.

Francis Schaeffer and folks like him very brilliantly used this way of thinking, this presuppositionalist stuff, packaged in more accessible language, packaged in the language of the Christian worldview, defending the Christian worldview or world and life view against the secular humanist worldview. And this gave American evangelicals a way to talk back to secular scholarship and feel they had emerged victorious, and not just victorious, but more savvy than their opponents, really getting what was going on.

Yeah, these secular liberal types, they talk about a neutral public square. There's nothing neutral about it. It is totally poisoned by the suppositions of the secular humanist world view. I think when Trump began speaking in terms of fake news and phony stories coming from kind of an untrustworthy media, he capitalized unwittingly on two generations of evangelical intellectual practice. They are old hands at rejecting difficult facts as fake news.

I've just given you a lot of theology to chew on and this is not to imply that theology is always the main thing going on. My job description says intellectual historian. I'm required, I guess, to think that ideas matter a lot. But I think the way they matter is that humans crave frameworks to organize our chaos, to make sense of our sufferings, our fears and our desires. Material forces often play a pretty big role in generating those fears and desires, as do the structures of community, the patterns of human fellowship and emotions.

I just filed a piece with the editor that Pete and I share on the importance of worship and patterns of worship in reinforcing and maybe someday weakening the appeal of Trump's ideology on evangelicals. But when we turn our gut reactions into political strategies, I think we often rely on ideology.

And for evangelicals, I've laid out three major ideological frameworks: the selective Christian libertarianism and concept of religious liberty that goes back to the Puritans by way of the American Revolution, the deep roots of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and its implications for gender and the century-old story of presuppositionalism and its path to fake news.

These are all strategies that conservative evangelicals have used to make sense of massive change in America and their declining cultural authority and to try to rally likeminded Christians to arrest that decline. And in some ways, these strategies have worked. They've worked at the state level in various ways. Of course they helped elect Donald Trump.

But if we step back and consider the big picture, I think we see that the Christian right has not managed to halt world civilizational change. They've not managed to halt the drift toward a more pluralistic, more ultimately secular America.

That trend, at least in what I'll call the long short-term, so not forever, but for quite a while, I think it's going to make conservative evangelicals dig in more, feel all the more certain of their commitments and they have fused this history of theological thinking with a deep sense of economic anger and, in many cases, nativism that Trump has masterfully exploited.

I'm really eager to hear your reactions to this, how this does or does not line up with what you've seen in your own reporting and your own work. Thank you.

PETER WEHNER: Great. Thank you very much, Molly.

(Applause.)

Q & A Part I

PETER WEHNER: Let me give the order that we'll start and if we get into the break, we'll pick it up and others, you can have your questions. We'll start with David Brooks, then Kirsten Powers, Robert Draper, Napp Nazworth, Will Saletan, Tom Hallman, Jon Ward and Karen Tumulty. David, why don't you begin?

DAVID BROOKS: Thank you, Molly. That was excellent actually. You gave us a lot of historical depth to the current moment. I did a much better job as a teacher than I anticipated. But I just wanted to ask you two questions and the first you sort of touched upon.

I remember there was Henry Steele Commager had a sentence in one book I read that during the 19th century, religion prospered while theology slowly went bankrupt. And it was the idea that American Christians are not that theological.

The first question was as you wear your intellectual historian cap and then see actual evangelicals in action, how much do you think the theology really does play a role or is this just a story of theology slowing drifting from the minds of a lot of actual voters and they're voting on totally opposite things and Christianity is just where they go Sunday morning and God is my best boyfriend? So that's my first question.

The second question, I wanted you to address the question of Trump the man and the personal morality of the guy. And Pete has written about this, that there's been this stunning turnaround if you ask evangelicals does character matter to leadership. It used to be tremendously important and now it seems to be completely unimportant.

And he just strikes—I thought one of the key saliences of the Sermon on the Mount is that inner grace is determinative—and that that the inner quality of the soul is more important than the outer production of the soul and that therefore you should always go inner, not outer.

And why do so many evangelicals support a guy who seems to me embodies the pagan virtues and not the Christian virtues, conflict over agape, what Augustine called the splendid vice? So those are the two questions, how much does theology really matter and why did they pick a guy who seems to cut against so many Christians, so many of Jesus' teachings?

MOLLY WORTHEN: Yes, both fundamental questions. Theology always matters. It matters how you're looking for it. So even that caricature of Jesus is my boyfriend, there's a theology there. There's centuries of theology there.

That comes out of this pietistic tradition of not just internal change and emotional connection, personal emotional connection with the divine but also a kind of sensual dimension to one's relationship to the divine, that of course has a long pre-Protestant history in Catholic monastic writing. So there's always a history there.

I think a lot of the concrete ways in which some of the theological traditions I've described inform our current moment show up in particular language that evangelicals use. And they may have no idea. They can't even spell presuppositionalism. They have no sense of this sort of obscure Dutch thinker that I mentioned or the other roots of this.

But they certainly use the term Christian worldview all the time. And that term can seem sort of innocuous. So isn't it just shorthand for a political platform associated with the Christian right? I'm telling you. I'm telling you if you pay attention to the theology, you see there's a lot more going on there that has to do with epistemology, has to do with sources of knowledge that we trust and don't trust and how we think about certainty in regards to knowledge about our world.

I've found too that in my work as a journalist I remember writing a profile of a prominent Calvinist evangelical megachurch preacher. I hung around after one of his services just to sort of talk to people and quiz them a little bit on their views about human depravity and predestination and so forth.

They couldn't rattle off to me the key points of the Synod of Dort. But they were certainly in their own language recapitulating serious theological ideas that have a history.

Now, this question of Trump's personal morality and evangelicals' willingness to overlook an awful lot of sin and an awful lot of unrepentance I think has some context in the ways evangelicals are used to thinking about leadership in churches, particularly in the tradition, the Christian tradition, or the heretical tradition, depending on your view, of the prosperity gospel.

Those of you who were here in May heard my friend Kate Bowler talk about the prosperity gospel. But in that tradition particularly, there is a pattern of fairly authoritarian leaders who get away with an awful lot of personal indiscretion and hubris. But that seems to be overcome or outweighed by their material success.

The question of the prosperity gospel and the way in which its values, while they come out of the Bible in a sort of tenuous sense, right, this broad message that you see in the Hebrew scriptures particularly of God in some real way blessing His people, rewarding His people materially when they are righteous, there is that sort of biblical lineage.

It makes a lot of evangelicals uncomfortable in its current form because of precisely the reasons you say, that it seems to create this tension between more conventional Sermon on the Mount Christian values and this material worldliness.

But it feeds, I think, the kind of fusion of evangelical theology and free market ideology that has become so powerful in the 20th century. And that means that Trump's appeal as a businessman which has this much broader resonance beyond just evangelicals, means it has this I think particular resonance for evangelical Christians in maybe a surprising way who have been reading books for a century about Jesus as a successful businessman.

That genre is a very old genre. They have this long history of kind of blending the values of those two worlds. And it's given them I think a facility with a certain amount of cognitive dissonance maybe. It's not perfectly reconciled. But there is a history there.

PETER WEHNER: Thanks. David, did you want to come back at all on that? Why don't we go to Kirsten?

KIRSTEN POWERS: Thanks for that. That was one of the best talks I've ever heard here and I come pretty much every year. I just had a basic question, when you were talking about sort of the line between the arguments that evangelicals made to justify segregation up to now LGBTQ issues. And I'm just wondering what is the argument, right? So what was the argument that they made and that they're now extrapolating from on gay issues?

MOLLY WORTHEN: Right. It is clear, I think, that evangelical pastors and laypeople had, in their view, a more straightforward job of producing proof texts that demonstrate racial differences and justified slavery in the context of the antebellum period and the Civil War.

It becomes messier if you're trying to marshal the Bible to justify separate water fountains, right? Because by that point, no one was really openly justifying enslavement of non-white people.

But the biblical argument that you do encounter in the '50s and '60s that's kind of one stepped removed in a logical sense from defending the policies of segregation, but is deeply connected, is the argument that the Bible opposes miscegenation as it was called, race-mixing and that the problem with desegregation is that it undoes God's intention for the races to remain separate.

They may be equal and they deserve in this theoretical sense, equal opportunity to use the resources of society. But God did not intend a kind of mixing. And how persuasive do you find the biblical arguments? Well, of course not very from I think the perspective of even quite firm fundamentalist believers in inerrancy today.

But that is how the arguments about the differences in God's kind of relationship with the races that had a certain context in the debates over slavery make their way into debates over segregation.

But in the context of desegregation academies, especially because we're now talking about the 1970s, we're talking about a time when it was even conservative white evangelicals were accepting the kind of political reality in terms of the kinds of rhetoric they could use, the kinds of arguments they could make publicly. They were not defending those schools on this basis. They were defending them on the basis of religious liberty.

PETER WEHNER: I'll go to Rob. Let me ask one question and then we'll go to him. Let me state to you what I think an evangelical who would disagree with your critique, how they would present the argument and then you tell me what you think is the weakness of that argument.

I think what they would say, and what I've heard from evangelical friends of mine, is that you're imposing a kind of a structure and theological framework that maybe is unfair to them and maybe doesn't quite apply.

And what I've heard from a lot of them is a more straightforward and I think, in a way, simpler argument which is, look, we weren't thrilled with Donald Trump. We weren't necessarily thrilled with him in the primaries. We had a binary choice with Hillary Clinton and Trump. And we had to make a judgment.

There was the policy side and then there was the personal side and we were willing to reluctantly hold our nose on the personal side because on issues like abortion and the courts and conservative policies that they think are crucial to the wellbeing of the country, they genuinely thought Trump would be better, not perfect.

And so, that this was a difficult choice that they had to make and it was a prudential calculation. And so, they went ahead and voted for him. But they didn't do it with a huge amount of enthusiasm. What would you say if somebody made that critique to you, what is missing about that?

MOLLY WORTHEN: I'm sure that accounts for the view of many evangelicals, particularly those for whom the abortion question is really the primary question. I've had conversations with some Christians who absolutely voted on that issue and no other issue alone. And I think there is an integrity to that position.

But I think if that actually accounted for a wide swathe of evangelical leaders who've supported Trump and laypeople, that in the time since the election, I would have expected to see more criticism of the president, a little bit more confidence in bringing the Gospel to bear in critiquing his personal conduct and some of his recklessness. And in the absence of that, I think that there's not simply a hold your noise and choose the lesser of two evils. There's actually --

PETER WEHNER: Enthusiasm.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Or if not enthusiasm, at least a set of kind of ideological paradigms that allow one to really view Trump as God's tool and that's another kind of line of rhetoric that you see in evangelical writing about Trump, that he's a sinner like us all. But at this moment in history, God is using this man.

PETER WEHNER: Okay. Robert Draper?

ROBERT DRAPER: So that's an excellent setup for a question I was going to ask.
But I've heard evangelicals readily concede that Donald Trump is an imperfect vessel and they nonetheless continually see that vessel as a vessel half full to a degree that's remarkable, as if they do see a kind of theological beauty in his imperfection. And so, my question is really a basic one, which is what, in your view, would turn evangelicals away from Trump? Or is there belief in him as unyielding as their belief in Jesus Christ?

MOLLY WORTHEN: Well, there is this pattern in recent history of evangelicals being excited to have helped propel a candidate into office, often believing they played a greater role in that election than they really did, whether we're talking about Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush, and then, rather quickly,

becoming disillusioned or at least some years on becoming disillusioned with the policy outcomes of that administration because, in practice neither of those presidents absolutely put the evangelical religious right interests at the forefront.

It's early days. I'm inclined to say that Donald Trump, he's delivered on his promises more thoroughly already to the Christian right than these predecessors have. I mean, certainly he's made good on his promises regarding the courts, in his directives on the treatment of transgender people in the military and these sorts of things. And in his sort of willingness to spout off against political correctness.

And the markers of that acceleration of secular humanism that so disturbs conservative Christians, at least of some kinds. Now, much of that is rhetoric, right? Some of that is concrete policy, like the nomination of Gorsuch, of course. That's a very serious, concrete thing.

But the rhetoric is also powerful. The rhetoric makes it okay to speak in certain ways at lower levels of society if the commander-in-chief is doing so in his Twitter feed. So I think already evangelicals have reason, those who voted for the rationales I've laid out, to be pretty pleased with how things are going.

For that reason, I think it's hard for me to imagine a scenario that would lead evangelicals to blame some political calamity entirely on Trump and not find a way to rationalize it. I think he's going to remain in fairly good evangelical favor if he continues on this favor.

ROBERT DRAPER: But can you imagine any scenario in which disillusionment would creep in, whether it's a change in his rhetoric or a change in policy? Is there anything you can see or is it a theological cake that's already baked?

MOLLY WORTHEN: Well, I suppose if he leads us into a nuclear war with North Korea, I think that evangelicals, like all Americans, would place a lot of blame on a reckless style and on an inexperience that seems to set Trump apart from other politicians.

If that had the kind of horrific consequences that seem quite plausible, then I can see a scenario in which a tragedy like that would overwhelm these other ways in which evangelicals have been quite pleased.

ROBERT DRAPER: But that's nuclear war. Short of nuclear war?

MOLLY WORTHEN: Short of nuclear war? I think that media is so polarized and bifurcated in this country that the accounts of troubles and failures that are reaching many conservative evangelical readers don't place blame on Trump. They rationalize these struggles that we're having as a country in other ways. And they make very persuasive arguments to their readers.

I find that to be a very insurmountable barrier for persuading Trump supporters. I've yet to talk to any Trump supporter—evangelical or not—who's really in a profound way kind of walked back their feelings. And if you all have had a different experience, I'd love to know about how those conversations have

unfolded.

PETER WEHNER: Napp, I think you were next.

NAPP NAZWORTH: All right. My question's similar. And I think, to Robert's question, actually I think it's a theological argument you need to make and it needs to come from preachers. And there's actually some empirical evidence for that, which I can give you a reference to later if you're interested.

The book that you wrote that I interviewed you about, was that *Apostles of Reason*?

MOLLY WORTHEN: Mm-hmm. (Affirmative.)

NAPP NAZWORTH: Okay. In there, you sort of expanded our view of evangelicalism, talking about all the diversity of evangelicalism. And here, you're sort of painting with a broad brush. So let's get into more of sort of the diversity there that's going on.

You have the evangelicals that Peter was talking about who voted for Trump, took a shower afterwards because they felt really dirty and awful about it. Then, you have the true believers. Then, you have sort of the liberal evangelicals who never would have voted for the Republican anyway.

And then, you have the conservative evangelicals who did not support Trump, like me and Michael. And then, on the evangelical advisory board, it's basically made up of Southern Baptists and prosperity preachers. One group of those thinks the other group is heretics. You know?

Also let's talk about Paula White. You brought up this subject of women. You have a female preacher on the board, right? So what is that telling us?

And then, my other question was about the presuppositionalism. The way I've heard it described is different than the way that you've described it. It's that a worldview needs some internal consistency. And so, a presuppositional apologist would get people to think about their own worldview and its internal consistency and, through that way, kind of talk about the Christian worldview.

From my experience, what I've seen of presuppositional apologists is that they tend to be more open to uncertainty and gray areas and so forth than other types of apologists. I don't know. That's just my perspective.

MOLLY WORTHEN: How do we make sense of the diversity of evangelicalism in relationship to the massive lumping I've done and then this question of whether there is a certain intellectual integrity and curiosity that comes with presuppositionalism. I think these are really important questions.

I set out to write that book, Apostles of Reason, because I was disturbed by the kind of broad brush painting that I so often encountered of conservative evangelicals in the media and I thought also in

historical work because it's the case that this particular theological tradition, the kind of reformed post-fundamentalist tradition that has become very allied with the presuppositionalist way of thinking has gotten outsized attention among some of the best historical work on evangelicalism.

I specifically went into the archives to try to push back against that. I took core samples across what I thought was a pretty wide range, from the Mennonites to Pentecostals. What I ended up telling, kind of to my surprise, not the story I set out to tell, was the story of why it actually is the case that that tradition has come to have disproportionate power. It's come to be even though numerically speaking, this particular strand of evangelicalism is not, if you're counting heads, it's not the one that accounts in terms of the kind of church genealogy for the most number of American conservative Protestants. It's come to have this outsized influence.

I think the reasons for that are what I summarized for you, that there is a real power in this set of ideas that had kind of found their moment in the mid-20th century, in an era of the clash of worldviews, the age of ideologies, where it was really empowering to tell conservative Christians that you too have a worldview that is internally consistent. It sees things that these other worldviews don't.

And you have a way to talk back to the assumptions of secular humanism or Communism of Fascism and so forth. Now, I do see these other traditions as important and, especially in conversations with younger evangelicals under the age of 40, say, who are often frustrated, if not necessarily with the doctrinal content of their parents' churches, then certainly with the kind of aggressive, Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell style of intervening in the public square. They are looking in many ways for alternatives.

Sometimes rediscovering thinkers that are not really in their own tradition, like the Mennonite theological John Howard Yoder has a real currency among a small but not insignificant kind of subset of evangelical challengers to the intellectual regime that I've described. I really struggle with this general question though of how to think about the generational relationships. I don't know what your experience is.

But I find that I tend to kind of seek out those stories and my notebooks are full of these anecdotes of really thoughtful evangelical college students who are more progressive on many issues, particularly sexual identity, certainly on kind of cultural pluralism.

Often they're very troubled by Trump. But I'm very reluctant to jump from those anecdotes to a vision in which there is a radical generational shift in a fairly short amount of time because I do think because the trends that I laid out for you a few minutes ago are so deeply rooted in history that they're going to cast a long shadow over the future of the country, even as demographically the portion of people who we would label as conservative white evangelicals is bound to keep shrinking. I think they will continue to have disproportionate influence.

I also had a fascinating conversation with a young woman who's now a student at Dallas Theological Seminary a few days ago. She went to Liberty University as an undergraduate, went as a conservative, convicted conservative, joined the debate team, spent every weekend debating on other campuses with

college kids from around the country, ended up becoming much more progressive in her politics. Hates Trump. Felt like an unwilling participant in the Trump campaign because of Jerry Falwell, Jr.

But she's made the choice to go to Dallas Theological Seminary to get a set of orthodox credentials is how she put it to me, so that she can critique evangelicalism from the inside. She said critics who are perceived as being on the outside, even with somebody like Jim Wallis and the Sojourners crowd, simply don't have that same status or influence.

And she said you have to understand that there are these loud voices like Robert Jeffress, Franklin Graham who are constantly speaking politics from the pulpit. But there are loads of people pastoring small churches who are terrified of talking about politics, terrified, number one, because they have the real sense that their own congregation is more conservative than they are and they're worried about their jobs and this is a kind of structural problem in evangelicalism that means that I think pastors have to be very careful about how far ahead of their congregation they get or how much they challenge them.

And second, because putting partisan issues aside, there is a general sense of sort of exhaustion about politics and people just don't want to hear about it, even if they might hate Trump as much as the pastor does. And so, she was calling for this real problem of a failure by the leadership to marshal some of these other theological resources and how they're actually teaching about the application of scripture to politics.

Now, this question of presuppositionalism, I'm glad to hear that you encounter people who are kind of convinced presuppositionalists for whom that leads to an openness and new evidence. Generally, I don't think that that's the central thrust of that worldview. There is of course a basic insight in presuppositionalism that is obviously true. We do all have assumptions. And we are all kind of taking certain things for granted in how we evaluate the world around us.

But I would draw a distinction between the worldview of presuppositionalism, which absolutely identifies some of these assumptions as non-negotiable, and the worldview of pragmatism, which holds all assumptions in a provisional way, at least theoretically, and is built on a kind of constant expectation that the scientific process and evaluation of empirical evidence out in the world forces you to constantly revise and reevaluate your own assumptions.

Now, of course humans are humans and they don't always do that. But I would say that the world view of pragmatic is, in practice, what kind of the arbiters of intellectual and scientific and economic culture in our civilization say they're doing. I mean, that's sort of what has seemed to work the best as we try to figure out a way to live together in a relatively peaceful manner, given that all of us are coming with these presuppositions that are not the same.

If we focus the conversation solely on the evidence that we can all access, regardless of our metaphysics, we can at least have a conversation that involves some shared common ground that is impossible if you reject your adversaries' claims because they don't believe in the same scripture that you believe in.

I think there is that important distinction. You're identifying though a real power in that school of apologetics because it does hit on something that's manifestly true about how humans think.

PETER WEHNER: Will Saletan?

WILL SALETAN: Okay. Thanks to Napp for the question and thank you for the answer because that sort of leads in to what I wanted to ask about, which is about presuppositionalism.

The famous slur against evangelicals is that they're—what was it—poor, uneducated and easy to command. Presuppositionalism sounds worse than that. It has two levels. One is—as I understand it from you—one is an imperviousness to hypothesis testing.

Instead of—pretty much what you were just explaining—pragmatism subjects you to go out and test your assumptions. Presuppositionalism says no, the assumptions are true and that drives everything else and no evidence is going to overcome your presumption.

But there's a second level to it, if I heard you correctly, which is that you get on top of that a story about the assumptions, the evidence presented by your opponent. You now have this sort of postmodern thing where you can discredit their point of view, their evidence because it's based on their assumptions, which are not neutral, suspicious, false. So it doubly insulates you from learning.

It sounds to me like no worldview built on presuppositionalism can learn, can overcome its mistakes. If you start with various other mistakes about women or anything else, how do you unlearn those? Maybe through moral experience but maybe through just empirical experience.

And so, is that a fatal flaw that will have to be purged, overcome, unlearned before evangelicals who have grown up under that or who have adopted it can progress?

MOLLY WORTHEN: Well, I think that presuppositionalists—I'll try to put this in sort of more neutral historian's terms.—presuppositionalists who find themselves at odds with the reality presented by secular authorities have, in my experience, a couple of different ways of relating to that.

One is, as you describe, a fair amount of imperviousness or what is perhaps more common and that is a kind of paradoxical mix of presuppositionalism, so affirming my own assumptions, and selectively incorporating new evidence as it fits this framework. I talked to a guy who works for Answers in Genesis, the most prominent creationist ministry, named Nathaniel Jeanson who has a PhD from Harvard Medical School. So this guy is no dummy.

And this speaks to—and he was very open with me about this—an incredible skill in compartmentalization and selecting an area for his PhD research that had to do with blood cancers that did not mean he had to talk at all about questions of human origins or anything that would bring him into conflict with his advisors.

At any rate, he was very open with me that he calls himself a presuppositionalist evidentialist who has these presuppositions and is interested in evidence as it affirms them. But I'm glad you brought up moral experience because I think that that's really important here.

And the habits that take us through our lives and the way those are changing, especially for younger evangelicals who I think are experiencing greater levels of diversity, both cultural and intellectual in some of their higher educational settings, particularly actually at Christian schools which are making a priority of recruiting students from abroad, which often are bringing to their campuses children from missionary families who have a very interesting set of backgrounds and who are simply absorbing from the wider culture a different attitude toward people who are not heterosexual.

I think the process of having kind of daily contact and friendships develop with people who are unlike themselves in a way that I think is maybe different from their parents, especially because it is combined with this sort of political exhaustion, has a way of wearing away at some of the intellectual patterns that they maybe learned in church or from their parents.

And I also think there are cases where people who grew up with this worldview change their minds about it out of intellectual argument just like there are some stories of conversion to Christianity or abandonment of faith that have to do entirely with being convinced by an argument about reality. But I wonder if those are the exception.

I wonder if most humans change our minds about things in a more subtle process that is about the interaction between the intellect and our emotions and our relationships. And that's I think where I see the most change happening.

And people like Shane Claiborne the guy who runs the kind of communal, very service-oriented, kind of Anabaptist-inflected Christian community in Philadelphia and is very progressive theologically, I mean, I think he has a real authority on these matters that comes out of his claims of lived experience and lived service. And he's perceived as liberal and there are of course certain conservative evangelicals who won't listen to him on theology no matter what.

But there's a way in which the ability to combine an argument made out of experience and a kind of theological argument is maybe more powerful. But you're right generally I think about this sort of sticking power of this worldview and that's why I think it's become so influential.

PETER WEHNER: Go ahead, Will. Did you have a follow-up on that?

WILL SALETAN: Yeah. I mean, and I don't know if this is something that can be answered now.

But I'm just curious to know more about--part of this sort of mode of discrediting the other's evidence based on their point of view is that it sounds like there's a kind of illusion of enlightenment as part of it, that not only am I impervious to this information based on this worldview, but I believe that I know better

than you, Mr. or Mrs. Secular Humanist, I understand you better than you do. And that further blinds me to the fact that I am actually being impervious or ignorant.

But I don't know how pervasive that is. It's a difficult thing to pull off obviously. But it's clearly fundamental to Trump for him to give his supporters the feeling that they know better than the news.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Yeah. I think that's absolutely right. And I think there's a way in which there's a certain level of conspiracy thinking going on that is always appealing because humans love the idea that they're in on the conspiracy.

And this is the way in which evangelicals have spoken for a long time about the way in which the authority of organized religion has retreated from the public square, the way in which court decisions have limited prayer in public schools Ten Commandments monuments are no longer as easy to put up as they once were.

And the way of pushing back against that is to say that none of this is about neutrality. None of this is about creating a fair space that's not biased against anyone. This is about actually, although they're not telling you, the positive imposition of a set of assumptions that are hostile to Christianity.

And so, you're absolutely right. There's this sense of kind of lifting the veil and seeing what's really going on.

PETER WEHNER: Let me ask one quick follow-up and then we'll go to Tom. Is your sense that this kind of belief in presuppositionalism, confirmation bias, resistance to empirical evidence, that that's particularly manifest among evangelical Christians or would you say with secular humanists or materialists, that that's the same thing?

In my own experience, this is just a condition really of human nature, of human life. I mean, I know it within myself and I know it in people on the left and the right. There's just a tremendous—I would say more acute, for reasons I'm not entirely clear to me—that this kind of indifference to empirical evidence.

I just don't know many people who have shifted their views on many issues really in any area of life. But you seem to be saying that your sense is for theological reasons that it is particularly amplified and acute within evangelical Christianity because of theology. Is that fair or would you say that it's true of everybody, but since your focus today is on evangelical Christians, it's there as well?

MOLLY WORTHEN: Well, I guess my answer is yes and yes. And of course this is how humans are. I think there's good social science data on this. We've all read stories about these bananas anti-vaxers on the left who are completely impervious to scientific evidence, the whole linking vaccines to autism and all of that.

However, and I regret that I don't have the studies on my fingertips, it seems to me that in the aftermath

of the election, there were also a few studies that indicated that a rejection of unwelcomed news information and the kind of acquiescence to the sense that the world is divided between phony news and sources you can rely on is more closely associated with the political right in our current moment.

I haven't seen a study that breaks it down by religious persuasion. But my view is that one way to explain the reasons why conservatives are more likely than liberals to go in for this way of thinking is to look at this theological backstory.

PETER WEHNER: Okay. Good. Tom is next.

TOM HALLMAN: I kind of wanted to follow up on something Robert mentioned, and you too, Peter. So Trump's pick over Hillary or because of theology or a better choice, he's given a pass because of some of the personality things. As the stakes continue to rise, what will be defeat? What will be seen as defeat? Who will be blamed and what are the implications?

MOLLY WORTHEN: What will white evangelicals see as defeat?

TOM HALLMAN: Yeah. Well, let's say if he's impeached or something, not a nuclear war and not some of the personality issues that Robert mentioned, but a true loss, who will be blamed and what are the implications?

Will Trump be blamed for his actions or will it be the media brought him down? And I guess what is defeat and what are the implications of a loss, a true loss?

MOLLY WORTHEN: Well, I think that there's already evidence that when there's a negative news story produced by the Trump administration, there is a strong tendency among his supporters to certainly blame the media and to point what they see as a hypocritical double standard.

There's all sort of corruption in the Clinton campaign and in Democratic politics more broadly and why is Trump being singled out in this way. Or he's simply honest and he speaks off the cuff and so he's blamed for that honesty because he's bucking political correctness.

Now, in the long-term, even eight years of Trump I don't think is going to roll back the ways in which America is, generally speaking, following the same cultural trends as the rest of the Western world. I think for historical reasons, we're about, I don't know, maybe a century or two behind in terms of waning church attendance and the secularization and the pluralization of our public square.

But the reasons that make the American founding exceptional, the structural reasons why organized religion has remained more robust in this country are not exceptional enough to exempt us from the broader trends of Western civilization, period. And I think that most white evangelicals, in some perhaps inchoate sense, accept that.

And they then fall into I guess two broad camps. There's the sort of Russell Moore camp who begin to speak instead of a moral majority, a prophetic minority, maybe even take it to the length that someone like Rod Dreher does and say really let's not abandon politics, but let's focus on nurturing a local Christian community in which we can really live out the Gospel in a concrete way. Let's continue to fight for religious liberty because that's important. But let's no longer really try to sort of take back the country.

But there's a large swathe of Americans who, while they feel very embattled, while they see the forces of world historical significance kind of arrayed against them, they're not inclined yet to sort of pull back from that effort to reassert their authority in the culture and in the halls of power.
But I think to the extent that there is kind of an inevitable defeat here or inevitably there will be some sort of follow-on to the Trump administration that is not a victory ultimately for that worldview, it already falls into this sort of narrative that they have had for a long time, the sort of sense of being outsiders and pushed to the margins of the culture that was originally a Christian culture and was theirs.

But in some sense, this defeat is built into their understanding of how things are going. I don't think that many evangelical supporters for Trump have a completely sort of utopian vision for how this is going to end. I think they see pretty clearly the incredibly sea change on sexual morality, for example.

PETER WEHNER: We'll do Jon Ward and that'll be the last question for this segment.

JON WARD: I would just say to Will, as somebody who came up inside evangelicalism and saw presuppositionalism kind of percolating up, I think for a lot of evangelicals there's a sense of it gives them a sense of coherence that helps them deal with a sense of being under siege. So I think that sense of being under siege that you just talked about is pretty key to the evangelical point of view.

Two quick, basic questions. Who are the most—on presuppositionalism—who are the most prominent presuppositionalists kind of today? And I was curious if you could go back and give us just an example of what kind of thing Francis Schaeffer was dismissing through presuppositionalism back when he was practicing or alive.

And then, my main question was on the generational divide because I wondered what you thought to what degree is digging in a generational dynamic. And to me, you have sexuality as a big issue there and then race.

Do you see race as something where younger evangelicals could show a way forward, make progress that could help the evangelical church and on sexuality, where do you see the issue of textual interpretation going with that younger generation?

MOLLY WORTHEN: Okay. There's a lot there. I'm trying to think about the kind of status of presuppositionalism today as sort of an ongoing academic concern and that's a really interesting question.

And Napp, maybe you have a good answer to this because my sense is that in the kind of generation that

was actively teaching from the '30s through the '60s, there's a few individuals I can think of who really had an outsized hand in shaping the generation of thinkers and activists who would become influential in the Christian right.

Cornelius Van Til is of course the big name at Westminster Theological Seminary. Gordon Clark, who was a philosopher who taught at Wheaton who had a slightly different take on it also was very influential and taught some of the guys who founded Christianity Today magazine and so forth.

But in the generations that have followed that, there's a way in which the basic assumptions of this way of thinking have percolated fairly broadly and in a somewhat diffuse way really untethered from some of the pretty sophisticated apologetic work that was going on in almost that founding generation.

So that you start to run across the vocabulary of presuppositionalism like in the Society for Pentecostal Studies sort of weird places in the '80s and '90s, in talking about the Pentecostal world and life view.

Now what do they mean by that? Well they may not know the origins of it and they've sort of put their own charismatic twist on it. But the essence is still there.

But I'm not sure. I mean, do you know whether there are individual trained evangelical philosophers who would call themselves particularly advocates for that school of apologetics, as opposed to those evangelical academics who just sort of are using the tools of presuppositionalism more broadly?

NAPP NAZWORTH: I believe there are, and don't quote me on this because this is outside my area of expertise. But yeah, I believe that there are a whole bunch of apologists out there who would describe themselves as doing presuppositional apologetics.

Every year there's an apologetics conference in August or September, I think, at the Southern Evangelical Seminary. This is where a lot of these people gather. I've only been once. But yeah, that's where you will find sort of all the big names in Christian apologetics.

MOLLY WORTHEN: It's in Louisville?

NAPP NAZWORTH: No, in Charlotte.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Oh, okay. Yeah. I mean, these kind of reformed, it seems to have most traction in kind of reformed evangelical circles.

NAPP NAZWORTH: It's not all reformed.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Right. No, I mean, that it's gotten much more diffuse.

JON WARD: Andy might have a thought on this because he's pretty well-versed in this. But how big of a

role did like Nancy Pearcey's book, Chuck Colson's book, those books around the turn of the century, how big of a role did those play in disseminating this thinking into evangelical writ large? Or was it other books? I don't know.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Yeah. I mean, Nancy Pearcey was sort of a disciple of Schaeffer and has continued to teach. I mean, her books, certainly they seem to show up on reading lists at seminaries. And I run into references to them in conversations on evangelical campuses.

I think you're right, that there are particular books. And that's helpful to intellectual historians who are sort of trying to trace out particular genealogies. But then, it can be very hard. You might be able to trace a line of ideas to the syllabi that are being taught at a particular institution.

But then when it comes time to sort of look at, well, how is this actually filtering into the culture in ways that might impact the ballot box the question that when journalists call me up, it's like the one question they're actually interested in is voting.

And that becomes a much murkier matter, right? And that's where I think it's really interesting to simply pay attention to the frequency with which this language shows up because the language is charged in this particular way.

You asked about the particular issues of sexuality and race and whether there's a kind of liberalization going on among millennial evangelicals. I think there is. But I think the reasons why I'm not enthusiastically optimistic about this yielding support for massive policy change, at least in the short term, is the same reason why I'm very disillusioned with the American left.

And that is that progressive evangelicals who are persuaded that their parents were wrong in some fundamental way on sexuality and race can turn pretty easily to the set of answers provided by the mainstream left, which is essentially a set of answers connected to identity politics and policies that achieve important, but politically relatively easy cultural victories for basic levels of respect.

Down the Confederate flags. Great. Well, what about addressing the deep underlying imbalances of wealth between white communities and communities of color? Well, it turns out that that's a lot harder to do and that's much more meaningful.

So there's a way in which the American left presents this very easy set of answers for these sexuality and race issues that gets its base excited, that seems to alleviate this sense of social responsibility that progressive evangelicals and progressive secular people have for these longstanding inequities.
But for historical reasons, we have a very hard time in this country talking about the deep material groundwork for these problems. In the course of the American Revolution, we lopped off a major portion of our spectrum of ways in which Americans can collectively solve political problems. We lopped off our Tory tradition, our big government, centralized authority tradition.

And that's true for people on the left almost as much as it is true for these conservative evangelicals I'm talking about.

So the range of ways in which you can talk about political problem-solving is much more limited in this country than it is in Canada or the rest of the Western world because of course it's that Tory tradition, that tradition of turning to big government to solve problems that makes it possible to have a social democratic left in the 19th and 20th centuries that's yielded the welfare states in other countries.

And that has yielded a more moderate relationship between Christianity and the different visions for government so that you have in Canada, you have evangelicals who are Social Gospel-ers for whom that doesn't mean they're necessarily socialists. And they can talk about issues of race with that set of tools that, to my mind, are actually much more meaningful.

So that's a broader problem with American political culture that's not to blame exclusively on evangelicals, but I think it is relevant when we look at the ways in which evangelicals who are starting to be persuaded on some of these issues then maybe have a set of answers that are all too easy in the end.

PETER WEHNER: Great. Thank you very much. When we come back, we'll go Karen Tumulty, Michelle Cottle, Daniel Lippman, Carl Cannon, Mike Gerson and Elizabeth and others, if we have time. Thank you.

Q & A Part II

PETER WEHNER: Okay. Thank you very much, everybody, for coming back. And Molly, that was a really stimulating and interesting discussion and why don't we keep it going? We have until noon. So we have time.

We will begin with questions. I wanted to start with Andy Crouch, and then we'll go to Karen and the rest of the folks. And the last person I had was Elizabeth. So if there are others after her, again, please raise your hand and let me know.

But otherwise, we will continue the conversation. And Andy, why don't you kick off this portion of the conversation?

ANDY CROUCH: Okay. I just want to say Pete made me jump in line. I did not jump in line. But Pete asked me to raise something that we were talking about at the break. Thank you, first of all. So much of value in what you presented. And I think the attention to the deep kind of theological history is really helpful and just adds many wonderful layers to this.

I do have a worry, which is that we're explaining inevitably something kind of post hoc that very easily could have been otherwise. And I think the most vivid way to say it is that the precinct that includes Liberty University, so Jerry Falwell, Jr.'s own precinct, in the primary, Donald Trump came in fourth or fifth, I mean a distant, very distant choice of presumably a quite white evangelical cohort of voters.

And it wasn't until the nomination process kind of coalesced around him, with the interesting exception of a few figures like Falwell who did get out of in front and endorse him. It wasn't until much later that white evangelicals kind of ended up supporting him.

And on the other side, I think you just have to wonder did they feel like they had any alternative. The last time, it seems to me, the Democratic Party gave white evangelicals a genuine alternative at the presidential level was with Bill Clinton in 1992. And in that election, a big chunk of them shifted to Clinton.

It's been 80 percent for the Republican nominee for many, many elections since Clinton. But Clinton was a really different phenomenon. And if the Democrats had been offering someone like that, or even someone who came close to something like that, we would almost certainly have had a different outcome.

I just wonder if Marco Rubio had been nominated and had won, we would be having a completely different conversation, I think with a different set of equally plausible theological historical priors.

So, and then, of course, you ask, well, why do people still support him now. And I just think cognitive dissonance theory goes a long way toward explaining once people have made a choice, how they consolidate around that choice and find ways to do their own post hoc justification.

So how do you feel about all of the contingencies in this that so easily could have been otherwise, that were honestly the reason that every one of us in the room who were well-informed about this missed it I think because there was so much to miss and there were so many other things going on that are just as powerful potentially, but just as things sorted out, did not end up being the decisive factors.

MOLLY WORTHEN: I love that question. I think there is a real tendency, especially when we have the obligation to link history to some sort of current political situation, to adopt a teleological account. And it's very seductive and it offers a certain comfort. It organizes our chaos. But it's never that way. I mean, at least secular historians don't see a teleology there.

I think what we can say are a couple of things. Number one, all of the characterizations I have laid out for you of the intellectual structures that influence conservative white evangelicalism are true with or without Trump. These are deep trends that I think have been useful in other contexts to explain various features of evangelical politics and they apply here.

But secondly, there are not by any means sufficient, as you point out, to explain the Trump phenomenon. And the real power comes in the coincidence of those long, long rooted theological and intellectual patterns with features of the 21st century West more broadly, right? This is not simply about America.

This is a story about a wave of nativist populism sweeping nearly every Western society for a set of reasons that are, of course, specific to each of those societies but are very much related and have to do with backlash against globalism and economic resentment and a feeling by white working and lower class men

primarily across these different societies that they've been left behind, not just by economic trends and the scales of success but also in the priorities of their own leaders.

And I think that Trump was the one who responded most powerfully to that set of circumstances. And it's a narrative too that I think has been very meaningful for evangelicals. Of course not them alone, but it has reinforced some of the theological patterns that I've described.

I think you make a very important point when you point to the way in which for many evangelicals, voting for Trump was a vote against Hillary Clinton. I think the degree to which this election was the referendum on the incredible just disdain and visceral hatred for the other candidate is really astonishing. And of course, that's a pattern that's broader than American evangelicals.

However, I think it's interesting to ask, well, why is it actually that Hillary Clinton was a completely unacceptable candidate for so many evangelicals. You could say, well, it's the abortion issue. And yes, that's true for a significant swathe of voters. That would not have been true for the same set of voters in the early 1970s, when the great fundamentalist, WA Criswell, was on the record in 1973 saying abortion is a difficult matter.

It's a matter between a woman and her doctor, a mother and her doctor, and there are cases in which the mother's health and her mental well-being should take priority over the status of the fetus.

And that changes in a relatively short span of years. Conservative Protestants go from indifference or just not a lot of investment in the abortion question, really seeing it as a Catholic question, at least in terms of national political organization—there are some exceptions at the state level—to very much seeing it as one of the marquee political fights of their time and not just a matter of forestalling murder but also a kind of symbol for the great breakdown in gender roles and the encroachment of the secular humanist state into the home.

Hillary Clinton as sort of a Social Gospel Methodist, I mean, there's a sort of counter-history in which you could see that side of her being appealing to evangelicals. But I think there are reasons that have to do with the story I've laid out why that couldn't be so.

And then, there's, of course, the simple fact of her gender, her relationship to American politics going back many decades, the way she's come to stand for a certain narrative about the ascent of the climbing, professionally ambitious woman who thinks that stay-at-home moms just sit around and bake cookies.

That plays into this particular sensitivity that evangelicals have to the story about the decline of the traditional family and the decline of male authority in that family. So the very fact that this was a vote against Hillary Clinton I think supports some of the narratives that I've laid out.

PETER WEHNER: Good. Okay. Just one observation that I've noticed in the conversation. I had a lot of these. Well, what's interesting to me was less the binary choice between Clinton and Trump than it was

the Republican primary where you had 16 or 17 candidates that you would have thought by the old metrics would have been chosen ahead of Trump. But the thing that I heard from a lot of friends of mine in the course of it was the word to describe Trump in the perspective of his supporters in the primaries was he was a fighter that they had a sense that the culture was being lost and that the Republican Party had not fought back with sufficient vigor and strength and they had the perception that he was a strong figure and that he knew only one direction and that was forward and to go on the attack.

I think they felt in him a sense of their grievances being both heard and they felt like we're going to be in a sense prosecuted because, to me, that's the more interesting and puzzling aspect which is the GOP primary. Karen, you are up.

KAREN TUMULTY: Sure, and let me join everybody in saying thank you. Oh, let me join everybody in saying thank you.

Where does immigration fit into all of this? Because just a decade ago when Pete and Mike were running the world, evangelical leaders would talk about the immigration issue and specifically the liberalization of immigration laws as having a basis in theology, welcoming the stranger. I mean, how did that swing? And also, how did evangelicals get sort of so wrapped around the axle about sharia law?

MOLLY WORTHEN: It is interesting to look back to just, I don't know what, 2014 maybe, the Evangelical Immigration Table and the effort by these fairly conservative evangelical leaders to collaborate with conservative politicians to support pathways to legal citizenship and so forth. And that seems to have turned so quickly.

Immigration is one issue on which I think I am more optimistic about short-term change and more significant impact by younger evangelicals, who I do think are less captive to the sense of nativism that has reared its head in such an ugly way in this election.

I mean, I think this gets again to Andy's point about contingency. I think in any community there are these sort of latent things going on under the surface, oftentimes contradictory impulses, stories about what this community is, what our pathway forward is, what the rules should be that are sort of competing.

And at any given time given the political situation, one narrative emerges as more persuasive than another. But there are alternative logics. And the Mormon Church is a great example of a deeply conservative body that, on immigration for reasons that have something to do with that church's international mission and its strong legacy of missions that is not just a professional endeavor for a select few, but it is embedded in every family. That community has had a different attitude toward immigration than many conservative evangelicals have had.

But you're absolutely right. There's also a strong tradition in recent years of marshaling scripture to advocate for a more charitable view toward refugees and immigrants. I mean, I guess my answer is fairly simple, that there's that narrative and then there's the narrative of we are the holy remnant. We are the

keepers of the true American flame that goes back 150 years or more than that and that has always remained a very powerful source of sense of self for white evangelicals.

And at times, when they feel that their cultural authority is under particularly acute threat, and that's tied into economic standing as well too, that self-understanding can easily loom very large. But one reason why I'm hopeful that there's going to be some attenuation of that is because it seems to me that, in a significant way, the business interests in the Republican Party are not crazy about Trump's posture on immigration and certainly want to be able to have the workforce they need. And of course they rely a lot on illegal immigrants for that too.

But in this sense, there is a confluence of interests in these two parts of the Republican Party, both of which are important for sort of Trump's base. And while I don't know that that will change under Trump exactly, because he's gotten so much mileage from exploiting that one particular nativist narrative, in the long-term beyond him, I think there is more room for shift on that than other issues.

I mean, the concern about sharia law, I mean, I think that sharia law has just become the symbol for the way in which the authority of Western Christian civilization is under siege. It's a shorthand. And its power comes partly from the way in which we live in these isolated media universes.

And for one of these universes, there are all of these fabricated stories about the power of sharia law in local American communities that are read by their readers as fact, as reporting a real encroachment by these forces of fascist Islam into the citadels of true-blooded America. And I think the way that coincides with Trump's larger nativist account of America has lent it a particular power right now.

PETER WEHNER: Thanks. We'll go to Michelle. And let me just go over the batting order so folks know. We'll go Daniel --

REIHAN SALAM: Pete, on that point, just on the immigration point?

PETER WEHNER: Yes. Go ahead.

REIHAN SALAM: So just a couple of things to keep in mind about this. Public opinion in immigration has been pretty stable. It depends on how you actually look at it.

There are these two guys, Jens Hainmueller and Daniel Hopkins, who have looked at it basically using a kind of more experimental method where they're trying to kind of like vary different conditions and what have you. And what they find you is that pretty much across racial groups, ethnic groups, class groups, et cetera, Americans tend to favor the same kind of immigrants, people who are in high wage, high prestige occupations, people who are English-speaking, et cetera.

But the thing is that there's a big question of crafted language. So there are many people who say they will favor a reduction in immigration levels.

But when you ask them about discrete policy choices, do you want to reduce family admissions, do you want to reduce employment-based admissions, et cetera, they will say no, just as when people say I want a smaller government, but I want every single discrete program.

A lot of the politics of immigration is about exploiting those cleavages and using crafted language to kind of muddy the issue. What I would argue is that the big changes that in the 1990s, as recently as the mid-'90s, you had Barbara Jordan, you had basically both right, left coalitions on both sides of this issue.

Basically starting in the mid-'90s, the issue started to polarize in a somewhat different way. In the mid-'90s, you had very high levels of support for reducing levels. But what happened is you had a coalition of libertarians and liberals with libertarians saying we are not going to give people access to safety net benefits, which was partial.

We will restrict people's access to SNAP and Medicaid and what have you. But of course that wasn't for people's children. But many of those provisions were never actually enforced in practice. There was this idea of sponsorship and what have you.

Then, if you're looking like 10 years prior, it was actually interesting. One of the big sources of resistance on the Democratic side to the Bush era comprehensive package was actually coming from the Congressional Black Caucus.

If you want to see one of the big changes in immigration politics, it's partly that the CBC flipped when Obama became president and there are of course many complicated reasons that that was the case. But I think that basically the business lobby has always been very prominent, very effective. They've largely been effective in, for example, not having workplace enforcement. And even under Trump, there's no move towards workplace enforcement, the kind of enforcement that would actually have real teeth.

I guess I would offer a somewhat different narrative than that it's a simple matter of nativism versus people who are welcoming and loving. I think that there's another part of this which has led to the intense polarization and that a lot of it happens partly because black men tend to have different views on this issue than black women.

They vote at much lower rates and their voices have kind of fallen, like rank-and-file African-American men are not as prominent as they had been even as recently as 20 years ago. There's also this desire to chase after a rising Hispanic electorate which hasn't fully materialized.

I would say that there are many different pieces at work, leaving aside nativism per se.

PETER WEHNER: Good. Thank you. Thanks for that interjection, Reihan. Michelle, your question, please?

MICHELLE COTTLE: Before I get to my question, I just want you to know that here on Twitter, I've been

putting out little pieces of what you've been going over and I've been explained to not so gently by evangelicals that an intellectual elitist professor cannot possibly offer insight on it. So I just want everybody to know this has not been worth your time, according to Twitter.

I want to go back to what David was talking about in terms of Trump's personal morality and overlooking character issues. To what degree does this, on some level, boil down to imperfect vessel-type rationalizations?

I mean, it seems like you can't have a discussion without, one, the phrase imperfect vessel coming up at some point or King David then being brought into the discussion. And so, yes, it shows God's great glory that He can use someone even as loathsome on personal morality terms as this president.

MOLLY WORTHEN: I think this is a bipartisan pattern, the willingness of voters and political partisans to overlook the personal indiscretions of a candidate whom they support for policy reasons.

You know, I think there's the fascinating period in the 1990s when you have both Bill Clinton and Clarence Thomas caught in kind of not totally dissimilar webs of accusations and the ways in which both sides rationalized that behavior and defend their candidate or their representative, I think is telling.

I don't think it's a uniquely evangelical thing to do this, although as we were talking about before the break, there is this evangelical set of sort of biblical tropes as you say for making sense of that and seeing God's hand in that imperfect vessel.

But I think the reason we keep coming back to this is that the case of Trump seems very exceptional. I mean, this is not just a guy who turns out to have sexually harassed an intern years ago or once said something ill-advised.

It's an unbelievable record of brazen, horrific levels of vulgarity and total disregard for any moral authority other than his own. I mean, it's this nihilistic posture toward the norms of civilization. So there's not an equivalence between Trump's behavior and some of these other examples that are cited.

But that in this perverse way I think is actually part of the power of Trump because part of what he represents—and this comes back to, Pete, what you were saying about Trump as a fighter—is this big middle finger to the reign of political correctness.

And part of that is this increasing emphasis on respect for women and non-white people and his willingness to just totally disregard that, not just in his rhetoric toward the public sphere but in his personal life. I mean, I don't see any evangelicals apologizing for it in quite such a literal sense. But I think part of what's going on is they're a bit on his side because they see secular liberalism as having enchained hot-blooded men in this unnatural bondage. So there's an odd way in which his behavior has not punished him and maybe in fact is part of his charisma.

PETER WEHNER: Just to follow up very quickly on that, do you think that this moment with President Trump will change evangelical views on the character question in a durable way?

And secondly, because your premise was in part that to understand evangelical support for Trump was part of looking back. It made sense because of these deep sort of traditions or currents of thought.

How do you think that he will change evangelicalism most importantly, if at all, once we're through this period or do you think it's going to essentially revert to what it has been?

MOLLY WORTHEN: I think the change that we might see in how evangelicals evaluate character might not be so crucially tied to the particular dynamics of evangelicals' relationship to Trump.

But it is perhaps going to emerge from younger evangelicals' experience in this cultural revolution we're going through right now in which the centuries long practice of hazing in all kinds of contexts, in workplaces, in schools, in basically any power dynamic in which the more powerful player has the right and even the duty to be incredibly cruel to the person below them, their subordinate, that premise of so many spheres in our culture is seeming to erode before our eyes.

And that's, I think, what's actually going on beneath the huge outrage against sexual harassment. I mean, of course it's also about gender dynamics.

But in the case of someone like Leon Wieseltier putting aside Harvey Weinstein, who's, I think, an extreme example, someone like Leon Wieseltier, who's been given sort of the Weinstein treatment for a set of offenses that have to do with sex but are really about hazing, I think, suggests to me a pretty significant change.

I see this in the way students are reacting to kind of searing encounters with old school professors. And I had a conversation with a colleague who was working with an older professor in sort of small student meetings and that older professor just laid into the students, just raked them over the coals in this way that a few years ago, that's just sort of what wad one and you sort of expected it from the grizzled old man. That's part of his gravitas. He's going to do this to you and this is part of your rite of passage.

The students kind of revolted against this and said this is not how we expect to be treated. And you can chalk that up to kind of consumer mentalities in higher education or something, other factors. But I think young people are just not accepting this kind of behavior from older individuals in power.

And that is the broader cultural change, I think, that is going to post-Trump perhaps make Trump-like conduct unacceptable to a younger generation.

PETER WEHNER: Good. Okay. Thank you. We're going to go Daniel, then Carl Cannon, then Mike Gerson, then Elizabeth. So why don't we go to Daniel?

DANIEL LIPPMAN: Thank you. I was wondering how do you think Democrats can take advantage of the qualms that some evangelicals have about Trump going forward and for 2018 and 2020?

You know, should they remind people of his morality choices in the past or what is their prospects generally with getting back, or not even getting back, but just getting more of the evangelical vote share?

MOLLY WORTHEN: I don't have a great answer for that.

DANIEL LIPPMAN: And do they need it?

MOLLY WORTHEN: Do they need it? That's another good question. I mean, if African-Americans and whites who voted for Obama twice had turned out or not flipped, we would be having a totally different conversation. So you're right. Maybe they just need to wait out the demographic changes that I think are somewhat inevitable, if still very long-term.

I think the political polarization has happened not as much on the left as the right. But certainly there's been polarization on the left that has hurt the prospects of Democratic appeal, particularly on the abortion issue. There was once a time where you could be a vocal pro-life Democrat.

That's no longer the case and it's really unfortunate, even though I think at the actual level of conversation between people who spend their lives on this question, there's a great deal of humility and sensitivity to how complicated and difficult and painful a question it is for people on both sides.

You know, I suppose my sort of nerdy historian's answer would be that I would love to see the Democrats think seriously about the core sources of liberalism in America and recover a more coherent, less American exceptionalist brand of liberalism that is not afraid to run away from the conflict between the liberal commitment to tolerance for a multiplicity of worldviews and the real boundaries that have to exist around that tolerance if we're to live in a liberal society.

You know, there's this kind of incoherence at the core of liberalism that is abetted by this kind of mushy-minded tendency to focus on social and identity issues and run away from socioeconomic issue that is part of its problem broadly, not just in appealing to young Christians.

But there's also this broader narrative across the West of the Social Gospel and the role the Social Gospel has played in the rise of welfare states across the West. Its potent role in our own country in the Civil Rights movement and so forth, but as a much more kind of prophetic voice outside centers of power.

But what I try to do in my own classes, and I don't view this as service for the Democratic Party, I just view it as a service for humanity, is to decenter the students' frame of reference from America and all the things they take for granted about how our politics play out and say, no, actually the deep cleavages of the split between fundamentalists and modernists didn't have to happen.

It happened differently in other countries. No, in fact not all Social Gospel-ers needed to be tarred as godless socialists. It happened very differently just north of our border in Canada.

I don't know, maybe recovering a kind of broader vision of what it is to be liberal could create more space for young evangelicals.

PETER WEHNER: Carl Cannon and Mike Gerson and Elizabeth and then Molly.

CARL CANNON: Actually I have two questions that are unrelated. So bear with me.

Molly, can I ask you about this? I'd like your thoughts on one thing that you said, following on Kirsten's question. I used to [see] religious liberty as a justification to defend the segregation academies that sprung up all over the South in the late '60s and '70s. I covered that at that time. And I always considered that argument a fig leaf, almost delivered with a wink and a nod.

It was the only legal rationale they could come up with in response to Brown v. Board of Education and federal judges around the country were ordering schools to be integrated. I didn't think anybody was really supposed to believe it was a religious liberty issue.

It didn't come primarily from evangelicals. It came from country club Southerners, most of whom considered themselves Democrats at the time, and who were politicians, not theologians.

But that was my perspective and maybe I missed something. But I'd like your reaction to that, your thoughts on that.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Well, I think it's amazing the way humans have an endless capacity to be totally convinced by their own propaganda. And I think this is clear in its most extreme form in Donald Trump. I really believe that at any given moment, when he delivers an anti-factoid that has no relationship to reality, that is his reality in that moment. And it's a highly crystalized, extreme example of a general pattern in human nature.

I mean, in my limited archive work on this particular mater of the language that people founding these schools were using, I'm sure you're right about sort of the movers and shakers in these communities not necessarily being embedded in kind of grassroots evangelical politics.

But, someone like Jerry Falwell was talking in these terms. I mean, at least very early, before he sort of realized that he had to change his line on that if he was going to be ready for primetime.

CARL CANNON: Well, Billy Graham sure wasn't.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Billy Graham's relationship to the evangelical laity on matters of race is very interesting. He never wanted to get too far ahead of the people he wanted to reach. He never saw himself

I think as a social activist. His priority was always on winning the most souls for Christ and getting the most people to his crusades. And I think he wanted to do the right thing and he was certainly quite a ways ahead of the firm segregationists in his own tradition.

But he was not particularly courageous on these issues, I mean, when it comes to how his relationship with Martin Luther King changed over the course of the 1960s and his increasing point of distancing himself from King as King became more aggressive on certain questions, particularly on socioeconomic matters.

It's pretty clear, I think, that Graham was always acutely sensitive to how things would play with the people he was primarily concerned with. So I'm not sure I would look to him as a model of sort of social prophecy.

CARL CANNON: All right. My second question, a different thing all together. And this is a follow-up to both Robert Draper's original question and what Michelle just asked about. But there seems to me—and I'd like both of you to address this if you don't mind—a dialectic at play here regarding Trump's flaws that's intriguing in its simplicity.

I was thinking what Robert was talking about. An evangelical thinks Donald Trump is a sinner. We're all sinners. Who are we to judge? It's almost as if through his imperfections themselves validate a key tenant of what it means to be a Christian.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Well, I've been thinking about the differences though between the narrative of George W. Bush's biography and Donald Trump's. George W. Bush had a much more conventional redeemed sinner narrative. He was an alcoholic. He'd had this dissolute youth. But he repented. That's the key difference.

You have the more expected arc that is, that confirms what you're saying, in the sense that we are all sinners. But Bush took that key last step.

What's so interesting about Trump is he's the least repentant individual we've ever had in American politics. And again, I think that he's managed to turn that to his favor. And it may not find support in proof texts. But it certainly coincides with an evangelical critique of the oppressions of secular culture that I think has allowed him to get away with it.

KAREN TUMULTY: Could I just add one thing? I don't know if this is mythology or not. But Karl Rove always argued that one of the reasons that evangelicals didn't show up in 2000 was the late breaking DWI stories about George W. Bush.

So here's a guy that did have the repentant salvation story and yet one little bit of information at the very end, if this is true, was enough to really effect people.

CARL CANNON: Yeah. He'd never come clean though.

ROBERT DRAPER: At this point, I think it might be pertinent to read into the record a paragraph from Trump's convention speech. This is something that he ad-libbed.

"At this moment," he said, "I would like to thank the evangelical community because I will tell you what the support they have given me, and I'm not sure I totally deserve it, has been so amazing."

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Doesn't this raise the question of whether Christianity has anything to do with this? These people are not Christians. I mean, it's just inconceivable that the notion of the single issue they're involved in is one they only decided was important like 30 years ago. Abortion?

This is not about evangelical Christianity support of Trump. It's about evangelical Christians abandoning Christianity in favor of a cult person who's basically creating a cult based upon white identity politics and nativism and racism.

And instead of seeking within the evangelical tradition over the centuries reasons for this to happen, we should look more clearly at what's actually happened, which is that they don't care about Christianity. They don't care about any of his values.

They're a political entity seeking power, riddled by fear. In other words, they are the antithesis of anything one could call Christian. Certainly as a Catholic, I just watch this with absolute disbelief. This has no theological dimension to it.

It is purely a political, foul and ugly move that's antithetical to any Christian purposes whatsoever. It's just the collapse of Christianity, not its actual increasing or procuring strength.

MICHELLE COTTLE: Molly, can I jump in two seconds? But it's a smaller think question than Andrew's. I'm not questioning the Christianity. But I do have a culture question for you, which is directly related to what Carl was talking about. I went to one of these segregationist academies as a kid in Dothan.

My entire childhood has turned up on the front pages of The New York Times and Washington Post in the last two years and I've discovered all of these fascinating things, that if there's an opioid crisis or a racist school system, I was there.

It was not a Bible academy. It was basically more along, Carl, it was rich, white Republicans in the area. But it was so hard to disentangle where I grew up culture from religion from racism. I mean, it's just kind of everything was one big mish-mash.

It may just be that I didn't notice that there was a religious aspect to it or it may just be that those kinds of schools could pop up alongside the ones that were more biblically based. And it just kind of all got blended together because we're talking about southern Alabama in the 1970s. Of course you went to

church. Of course you were religious. Of course this was all about Jesus or whatever.

I mean, it's just hard to prize apart the kind of driving forces with these things. And it may just be that's why Carl had one aspect of it and not specifically talking about religion. But it's got to be grounded in that to some degree.

MOLLY WORTHEN: I think that's right. I think human experience is a mish-mash. I have days when I really struggle with this whole idea of being an intellectual historian because I have days where I think, well, ideas don't actually matter that much.

Maybe the entire story of America is just it's all about slavery. I mean, there's a lot to be said for that. Maybe we can entirely account for so much of this through a sort of Marxian lens focused on the forces of production and our relationship to the material structures in our world.

And I have days of real sort of self-doubt. But I guess I resolve those by assuring myself anyway that to say that religion matters or that ideas matter is not to posit some sort of very uncomplicated, clear pathway from seminary classrooms to a pro-Trump rally. I mean, that's just manifestly silly. But rather, to try to be sensitive to the mish-mash, I mean, as you say.

And the way in which even a committed dark doctrinaire Marxist, perhaps especially a doctrinaire Marxist, thinks that ideas matter because it's that superstructure that frames our false consciousness, if I'm to speak in sort of Marxist terms.

Well, even if that's your position, then if you want to understand any of this, you have to analyze that. Even if you primarily see ideas as the framework through which we interpret and make a map of deeper structural forces.

Now, I happen to think that there's a very meaningful kind of pattern of mutual influence going on between the world of ideas and our relationship to our material situations, that they inform one another. And the frameworks we have that suggest a logic and a path forward, that justify a course of action that make it easier for us to pull one lever in the ballot box than the other, they inform our relationship to the sort of grounding in reality.

I'm really interested though in this suggestion that what we're talking about is simply idolatry. It's certainly a line of critique. I mean, Andy, you wrote a really powerful editorial in *Christianity Today* in the lead-up to this election in really calling out evangelicals for making an idol out of political strategy.

I've seen it since then surface in numerous ways. I mean, Russell Moore calling white supremacy this heresy, this idolatry. And that of course is a very old tradition in Christian prophetic literature. But I wonder is that line of critique making any impact. Is it resonating?

JON WARD: I would just, Andrew, I guess say to you that I do think your phrase of riddled by fear, I think

that is a key phrase. I do think that for many evangelicals, fear was much more dominant than faith obviously.

But I think in response to your comment, I would say come over to dinner at my family's house. Most of my family were Trump voters and they're of devout faith. So I don't think that it's an equivalence there to say that there's no faith there. I think it's just a matter of fear dominating over faith.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Insofar as they acted politically, they were violating their own faith. So there's nothing recognizably Christian at all in anything Trump represents. He's pagan, if anything. He's an inversion of Christianity.

For them to then support monolithically someone who is deeply, profoundly anti-Christian at every single level is not then them reflecting their faith. It's them abandoning their faith.

EUGENE SCOTT: I agree with that. I think there are multiple groups in this country that can understand fear. I think what they do with what so many white evangelicals did in justifying their fear and not putting it in context with their faith that actually talks about what you should do with fear is what's deeply problematic.

When you hear people say, white evangelicals say we like Trump because he gives a middle finger to political correctness—and you mentioned this earlier—and what they mean is giving a middle finger to how he speaks about women and immigrants, you're saying you like him because he gives a middle finger to the Gospel.

The Gospel speaks very clearly about how we should speak about marginalized communities and that's not what Trump is doing.

And so, one of the things that I think about as someone who is a person of faith in mainstream media is, is there any awareness or concern from white evangelicals about what this is doing in terms of their witness and being winsome.

I look at some people who go on air and profess to be Gospel-believing Christians defending and saying things. And I go I can't take anyone to your church. None of my unbelieving friends would look at anything you're saying and say I want to follow the Jesus that you profess.

What I don't understand is when people are making justifications about we like him because of this, because of how he talks to immigrants and black people in the cities and women and refugees and Muslims, like at what point do these many white evangelicals say how much of me feeling comfortable with him is causing greater discomfort for people who are not in my tribe. That's what I guess I don't understand.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: The Gospels are pretty clear on all this and he's attacking Christianity every day and

so are they.

It does become a question of whether they actually have any faith at all, whether it's simply an ideological construct rather than a lived faith at all, whether it's simply an identity they now have rather than anything conceivably related to the Gospels.

DANIEL LIPPMAN: To play the devil's advocate, the only thing I would say is that, in response to Eugene, which was a very powerful statement, that giving the finger to political correctness that people like about him, not all of those people who agree with that support everything he says slamming immigration or slamming immigrant groups or minorities.

A lot of people probably agree with him based on he is against the establishment and is willing to speak his mind on everything. And so, I would not say that all Trump voters support his rhetoric against people against what you had found troubling. And so, we shouldn't paint too broad a brush about that.

EUGENE SCOTT: I don't think anyone thoughtful thinks that evangelicals support everything Trump says. But if you don't support Trump calling NFL players sons of bitches and you don't say anything about it, that's problematic. So if you don't support what he says about immigrants and refugees, but you're silent about it, that's problematic. I don't think anyone supports Trump 100 percent of the time, including Donald Trump. However, when you choose to be silent about that the Bible calls you to speak on, what are people outside of the faith supposed to think.

PETER WEHNER: I want to go to Mike. It's a very good discussion. I'm somebody who's on public record on my own criticisms of Trump. I think that's probably well-known. I do want to just add one other perspective on this to try and represent what I think the other point of view is, at least to throw it out there. And again, my own views here are clear.

I was up until almost 3:00 in the morning a couple of weeks ago with somebody at a Bible study my wife and I host because he was very grieved by my own views of what I've said about evangelicals and Trump. It's a person of deep faith and a close friend of mine. And it was an intense conversation. It didn't get personal. But it was intense.

I heard where he was coming from. I make a different calculation obviously, or maybe not obviously. But I've made a different calculation on it. But from his perspective, because I do want to reflect that, he is of a view, and I think John touched on it, there is a tremendous amount of fear which I think is transmuted into a lot of anger.

But the language of the Apocalypse is prevalent within evangelical Christianity. And so, from their perspective, it is that and you have to disaggregate the evangelical support.

There are some people publicly who, and I think it's fair to say that they never question him. But there are others who, in a population of more than 25 percent of the American public who will say, look, I have

difficulty. I don't like it when he says this or when he tweets that.

But on the issues that I feel deeply about, which is the pro-life issue and the courts and the general culture, that I've got to make a prudential judgment, an uncomfortable judgment. And so, I'm going to go with him to support him rather than to oppose him. And so, there's the weighing of the scales here that's going on.

My own view, again, is I think that they are miscalculating on the weight that they put on the scales. But they begin from a presupposition where they think that the country is dying and they think that if it had gone liberal, then it would accelerate that decline and that there would be a tremendous human cost to that.

And again, I've got my own differences, which I've publicly expressed on it. But that is a point of view that I've heard. We can come back to it. Mike, you've been patient being in the queue. So let me go to you.

MICHAEL GERSON: I wanted to raise that point that Pete talked about a little bit. You haven't given much attention to eschatology. It strikes me as important that a lot of 19th century evangelicals were post-millennialists. When they founded magazines or colleges or welcomed scientific knowledge or supported abolition, they thought they were building the kingdom of God in a very tangible sense.

And then, 50 years later, you had an almost complete inversion of evangelicals to be pre-millennialists, which supported a more apocalyptic view of cultural change. I'm just wondering what weight you give those changes and maybe even why they took place so rapidly. Is there some explanation for that?

MOLLY WORTHEN: Eschatology comes up a lot, I think, in these conversations because when you learn about this particular view of the end times that has been predominant among white evangelicals since the last couple of decades of the 19th century, this dispensationalist pre-millennialism and its vision of history going down the tubes and getting more and more dire until Jesus' return inaugurates—well, prior to his return and shortly thereafter, we start to see the real deliverance of the prophecies in the book of Revelation and in some versions of this, the saints get to sort of skip a large part of it because they're raptured.

And the way in which this narrative of the end times has very concrete connections to particular matters of geopolitics like affairs in the Middle East, it can become, I think, a very powerful way of explaining evangelical views on a kind of reluctance to try to address some of the fundamental problems and injustice that we've talked about.

I think I put less weight on eschatology in our current situation than maybe some others do. I think there was a long period in evangelical history when eschatology deserved quite a lot of weight as recently as the 1970s when Hal Lindsey's book The Late Great Planet Earth was this massive best-seller.

I think there was more conversation in evangelical churches across the generations about the quite

concrete connections between some of these prophecies and what they're reading in the newspapers. Of course the Left Behind novels today continue to be popular and have spawned a sort of cottage industry of video games and so forth.

But to the extent that there's a little bit of data on who's actually reading these books, not even half of the people who read Left Behind novels—this is from a survey that was published in Christian Century in, I don't know, the early 2000s maybe. Not even half of them even identify as evangelical Christians. So it's not actually clear what's going on, that it's maybe just a thrilling read.

But here's what I do think. I think that even though eschatology does not loom as large in the kind of encounter that the average evangelical has with the day's news and their political decisions, there's a way in which the residue of this worldview, this general sense that history is getting worse and worse, this general sense that the forces of Satan are empowered at this point and there's not anything to be done to fundamentally reverse that and, in fact, Christians need to maintain the mindset of the remnant who are pulling more sinners onto the lifeboat until the second coming rather than to actually try to build the kingdom of God and inaugurate the reign of the saints.

That sensibility, and I would call it more of a sensibility now, is still powerful and there's been a sort of hangover effect and I think is a profound one. I want to come back to Eugene's point about evangelism because I think this is so fundamental and really interesting. There is this sense that evangelicalism is supposed to be the ultimate preaching/missionary faith.

And of course so many of these churches and organizations we're talking about do invest substantially in kind of old-fashioned foreign missions. However, if you actually look at the history of conversions and crusades and revivals, it seems to me that an awful lot of it has always been about bringing members of your own tribe back into a closer relationship with organized Christianity and institutional authority rather than actually doing too much reaching beyond those tribal boundaries.

There are important exceptions, absolutely. But there's been some interesting scholarship on the Great Awakenings, especially the second Great Awakening, but for the first as well, that suggests that people would come to these revivals and they would backslide and they would come to another one. And these were not necessarily individuals who were well-beyond the pale of the worldview of evangelical Christianity.

And the same is absolutely true of Billy Graham crusades. I mean, there's been a couple of interesting sociological studies where they've tried to follow-up with people who answered that altar call and go down and sign the little card and convert.

The upshot of at least some of this information, and it's anecdotal, but I think it's meaningful, is that for a lot of people who have historically gone to Billy Graham crusades, that's not their first conversion. I mean they most of the time grew up in an evangelical context.

Now, don't get me wrong. It is a meaningful moment for them. It is a moment of recommitment to this faith that maybe they've been a bit lax about. But they're already sort of members of the tribe in important ways.

Again, there are of course important exceptions. But we need to at least recognize that this is one important strand of the way evangelism has worked in practice.

What I see, and I think this is also a response to Eugene's point, among younger evangelicals is a real discomfort with sort of an old-fashioned Christian crusade, sort of let me walk you through this pamphlet and pray with you and have a dramatic conversion. Whatever your worldview is, it's wrong and let me show you the right one.

I worked on a newspaper article a year or so ago in which I interviewed some students who are participating in Christian centers on secular college campuses. And they're bringing in speakers and they're trying to kind of talk about Christianity in the public sphere on their secular campuses. And I said, do you view what you're doing as evangelism. And they were very uncomfortable with that word and they felt that that would scare people away.

They said it's about relationships. That's what we're doing. We're building relationships and then that relationship may lead this person to Jesus and that's my hope.

I think there's this partly in response to what Eugene articulated, there is a real discomfort among younger evangelicals that that aggressive evangelism has become too closely allied with kind of Moral Majority, aggressive politics, more lately the sort of Trump style of politics. And so, they're returning to a more profound, much harder kind of evangelism that's more relational.

PETER WEHNER: We'll go to Elizabeth and Molly and Matt and Doyle.

ELIZABETH DIAS: Thank you, Molly. I really appreciated your point, the third story that evangelicals tell themselves about experts and discerning truth. And I have two questions about it, about how evangelicals prime themselves to believe fake news.

One is generally how do you assess the role of education in this whole conversation. I'm thinking Scandal of the Evangelical Mind was two decades ago. We know that education was the way to track results for the selection, or at least one of the closest ways.

Then, historically, disinformation campaigns and evangelicals believing various alternative realities is not new in American experience, right? So are there examples historically that you can point to of when the evangelical communities pushed against that within themselves successfully or not?

And then, I'm wondering what changed then in the last 20 years. Or, and if there were those moments, were they connected to politics or was it just something else?

MOLLY WORTHEN: The role of higher education or I guess education generally, I think it's hard to disentangle here. I've spent some time recently on the campuses of Christian liberal arts schools. And seminaries also. I've encountered a level of sort of muted, but sustained horror among the faculty and bafflement and a generally quite progressive politics.

I mean, maybe those who support Trump, I mean, they detect the tenor of the conversation. I mean, we know there seems to be a lot of this that helps explain how people missed even members of their own family who were sympathetic to Trump and then didn't reveal it until after the fact.

There's some way in which the conversations themselves become kind of isolated. But my impression of the quality of intellectual life on Christian liberal arts campuses is that it's generally very, very high.

I think, in a way, if you go and visit a Wheaton or a Gordon and you try to take that as a microcosm for all of evangelicalism, you're going to go down a very wrong path partly because there is this sort of mushy demographic of individuals who told pollsters that they're evangelical.

But they maybe haven't set foot in church in a while. They don't really have sustained relationships to institutions like a Wheaton. They mean by it something like a white Christian, true American identity.

If you grilled them on some of the theological points I've noted, their view of the end times, they would probably have kind of mainstream evangelical answers. But they're not necessarily in relationship with an institution that's kind of drawing on theology in a serious way that could correct some of these deeper narrative stories about American identity that are equally powerful.

I think these young people who come to even Christian campuses, I mean, they often have a very low level of biblical knowledge. They often don't like the label evangelical. So they're very hard to categorize. They seem simultaneously more secular and also more committed to a particular church tradition maybe and rejecting a kind of mainstream evangelical identity. I guess the general patterns of bifurcation and isolation apply in some sense to any analysis we would impose on education.

And private primary Christian schools, the growing and powerful homeschooling movement, which often these systems produce young people who then go to a secular school. But I think they go very much armed and ready to resist and ready to compartmentalize what they learn from what they've received from their home cultures.

And maybe actually more so than I think young people who are at Christian colleges might be a little bit more willing to take their guard down and hear out the Nigerian transfer student who's a deeply pious Pentecostal but has a very different view on social justice than they might be in a classroom at Carolina where they've been programmed, before they get to my campus, to expect their professors to be these materialist progressives who have no respect for Christianity.

And learn from this person, sort of put it in the right boxes, but keep it demarcated away from your faith. Your question about kind of the history of evangelicals and disinformation, I can think of examples of successful disinformation.

I mean, the tarring of Civil Rights agitation in the South as Communist infiltration jumps out as a recent and very successful one. Certainly all the kind of anti-immigrant propaganda that was tied up in the Prohibition movement.

I'm struggling to think of a movement that successfully overturned the power of one of these false narratives. And again, I mean, maybe this is just more demonstration of that human compulsion toward confirmation bias. If someone gives us a piece of news that slots into our worldview, we embrace it and it's very hard to shake.

NAPP NAZWORTH: Just one quick counterexample would be so-called evolutionary creation, where there's just been some really interesting polling data that shows there's a real shift a quite significant shift towards openness to evolution among people of faith --

MOLLY WORTHEN: Is there?

NAPP NAZWORTH: --they're not shifting to a kind of fully secular kind of evolution. They're just changing creationist accounts from kind of a fideistic account to an evolutionary account.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Well, what would account for that? Because theistic evolutionism has been around for as long as Darwin's been around.

NAPP NAZWORTH: I think effective persuasion.

MOLLY WORTHEN: By who?

NAPP NAZWORTH: Francis Collins.

PETER WEHNER: BioLogos.

NAPP NAZWORTH: And BioLogos, the organization that he founded.

MOLLY WORTHEN: So because they've been at that for a long time, it's sort of reaching a critical mass or --

NAPP NAZWORTH: I think there's been really effective theological work done to integrate a kind of broadly evolutionary perspective into an evangelical hermeneutics of Scripture and that's opened up space for people to shift their position on the plausibility of evolution proper. It's been the combination of kind of recounting the arguments for the empirical facts with a new kind of hermeneutical strategy,

interpretative strategy.

MOLLY WORTHEN: That's really interesting.

PETER WEHNER: And there's one empirical, I think, thing that's changed, which is the growing evidence on the genetic side, which --

NAPP NAZWORTH: Yeah, that's true.

PETER WEHNER: Which is now I think almost indisputable. It doesn't mean everybody's in favor of it. But it is changing some minds. We'll go to Molly and Matt and then Doyle. Maybe the way we can do it, since we're running out of time, is maybe we can ask the questions. You can write them down and then we'll take them in order.

Molly, if you can go, and then we'll go to Matt and then we'll go to Doyle.

MOLLY BALL: I wanted to underscore first something that you made reference to, which is that Trump started winning evangelicals in the primary.

This wasn't just a phenomenon of having a binary choice in the general election and being opposed to Hillary Clinton. And this is when they had a lot of other options in the form of candidates who had really courted the evangelical vote, who were evangelicals themselves, who had tried very strenuously to meet every single litmus test, check every single box and who thought that Trump's history of positions like being pro-choice would be disqualifying immediately.

Even when you talk about like being a fighter, certainly Trump's history of being a fighter was not against a secular culture. He was a fighter. But Ted Cruz shut down the government to fight for the things that he believed. You can't say that he was not a fighter. And again, he was working very hard to court evangelical leaders in places like Iowa. And he did win Iowa.

But his whole strategy, his political strategy was predicated on being able to win the South by winning the evangelical vote. And it was when those Southern evangelicals particularly started to coalesce behind Trump that Cruz didn't have a chance. And so, part of my question here is trying to untangle like which is the tail and which is the dog because you did have a lot of evangelical leaders coming out against Trump. But that's not where their base was.

I'm trying to parse like to what extent this was a matter of sort of the silent majority, I guess, of evangelicals going one way and not listening because, on the other hand, we're talking about so many phenomenon of there are people being led in a direction by leaders who stake out positions, whether it's abortion or something else, pushing their followers in a particular direction. So I'm trying to sort that out.

The other thing that I'm interested in is the role of Islam because you mentioned sharia as this sort of

incidental issue or an example of something.

But I spoke to a lot of evangelical Trump supporters who really felt that they were in a civilizational war of Christianity versus Islam. And when Trump was willing to say that he was going to ban Muslims, that was really, really powerful for a lot of people who identified as Christian.

And so, I think that that wasn't just another on the litany of others and scapegoats that he created. But I think singling out Islam in that way was important to a lot of people.

And I wonder what kind of history that has or whether that's a relatively novel motivator among Christians or whether it has a genealogy like some of these things we've been talking about.

PETER WEHNER: Good, and Matt and then Doyle?

MATT LEWIS: All right. My question is about the presuppositionalism that we spent a lot of time on this morning. And I mean, I agree. Like it obviously could be negative if you're using it to dismiss any opposing viewpoint if you're using this as an argument to not even consider the possibility that someone else is right.

On the other hand, it strikes me as true that if you come from a Christian worldview, say, for example, where you believe in original sin, that you would understandably have a different take on almost everything from somebody who has a different viewpoint than that.

And in a pluralistic society, in a society where civility is important, I think that understanding that and recognizing that could actually help us sort of basically come to a conclusion that we're going to agree to disagree. You come from a different viewpoint than I do.

I guess the question is, presuppositionalism, is there an upside to it or is it solely negative.

PETER WEHNER: Great question. And Doyle, final one?

DOYLE MCMANUS: Final question and to paraphrase Mo Udall, every question has been asked, but not everyone has asked it. And so, naturally I want to take one last pull at the thread of God's imperfect vessel.

It seems to me, but I want to be corrected on this, that Donald Trump did something that no previous president has done. He made a very explicit bargain with evangelical leaders, as if they were an interest group.

He did not really try to masquerade as a converted evangelical Christian. It was an I'm going to give you Supreme Court justices. I'm going to work on abortion. I'm going to give you the Johnson amendment, which few of us had ever heard of. And that helped.

Okay, so that's data point number one. Data point number two, we had that amazing photo op a few weeks ago of the laying on of hands in the Oval Office. And maybe Mike and Pete can help me understand whether we've ever seen anything that explicit before. George W. Bush, we thought of as our first evangelical president in some ways. But I don't think we ever quite saw that institutional anointing. What does that mean?

And then, finally, I'll just throw in one random data point to suggest that maybe there's a possibility that evangelical support is conditional. If a bargain here has been made with a strong leader who can deliver stuff they want, what happens if circumstances change and he is no longer the strong leader who can deliver what they want?

Polling this fall shows that Donald Trump's approval rating among evangelicals has fallen from the mid-70s to the mid'60s, a couple of polls, Reuters and Fox, almost in tandem with the overall curve. That may or may not mean anything. There's still a very strong group in his corner. He's lost maybe 12 percent of his evangelical point. So put a question mark on the end of that and take whichever part makes sense.

PETER WEHNER: Okay. You go, and then I'll wrap up.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Well, I'll do my best to say something coherent in response to these final very interesting questions.

Molly, I think you hit on a couple of very important realities, this question of the relationship between the evangelical laity and their leaders is a complicated one that I struggle with. My next book project is a history of the idea of charisma as a religious and a political notion.

And one reason I'm interested in it is because of this sort of fluid reciprocal simultaneously very authoritarian but deeply sort of populous and democratic dimension to the phenomenon of charisma generally, but maybe particularly in terms of the evangelical pastorate and the simultaneous existence of this tradition of quite authoritarian, verging on cult-like leadership in some evangelical circles, this tendency of evangelical pastors to build their own kind of fiefdoms and a very powerful laity that, when it wants to, can pull away with tremendous decisiveness.

This is part of the story, I think, of the secularization of the liberal main-line too in the 20th century. I'm convinced that a large number of the individuals who left those congregations in the 1960s and since then did not go on to necessarily become progressive, totally secular liberals but in fact were conservatives who were still Christian in some sense but totally disillusioned by the radical sort of, as they saw it, social progressivism of their pastors.

Because of the very weak ecclesiology in most evangelical traditions, the weakness of church institutions, the fact that congregations in most cases have so much power over who gets to be the pastor, this sort of exacerbates that tendency in Protestantism generally.

You know, at least the liberal mainline traditions tend to have a little bit more of a hierarchy, presbyteries and so forth to kind of insulate that influence. I think the narrative about Islam, I mean, you're absolutely right. It's part of this broader sense of the siege that Western civilization faces. There's a long history of kind of evangelical awareness of Islam going back to the Barbary pirates and so forth in the 18th century. And there's a historian at Baylor named Thomas Kidd who's written about this in quite a lot of detail.

I tend to think that it's not really until more recently that Islam has emerged and kind of outpaced other civilizational threats. Whether it's kind of fascistic, materialist Germany who you encounter if you read the speeches of William Jennings Bryan and his fear about the amalgamation of higher biblical criticism and the Kaiser's dangerous desires to dominate the world.

Or if you read kind of the neo-evangelical founders of the National Association of Evangelicals talking about the kind of demise of Western civilization, I mean, it's all a narrative that seems to come to a fine point in our own time in this conflict with Islam. But it seems to me to be much broader than that.

I think that the answer, Matt, to your question is of course there's a fundamental truth and a need for—if we're going to be empathetic and have a meaningful conversation across some sort of profound philosophical boundary—recognizes the sources of that divide. There's a difference between that, between respect for an opposing worldview and the actual practical matter of making policy under which we all have to live. And I think when it comes to that latter, the compromise that has worked best—and it is not a perfect one—is the compromise of essentially Enlightenment empiricism, particularly in the pragmatic tradition.

It's a perfect philosophical ideal that is definitely not always achieved. But I think it's the only way to have a meaningful conversation about actual policy, if we limit the conversation to evidence that we can all assess by standards that we have some access to, regardless of whether or not we believe in the supernatural.

It doesn't yield a clear black-and-white recipe for how to negotiate these boundaries between organized religion and the sphere that we all share. And there's room for sort of incremental adjustments of compromise as things play out.

But I think there's just no way around it. But this is sort of what's worked. And you see this sort of on the other end of the political spectrum in Canada where kind of for years, there's been this debate in one of the sort of reserves in the north between this company that wanted to develop a resort on a mountain and the First Nations who objected to this because it was a habitat for grizzly bears and needed to be protected as a source for their religion.

And then, one of the elders had a divine revelation that said even though the company had made all sorts of respectful adjustments to their policy and their plans to acknowledge the indigenous position, this indigenous prophet said even though you're protecting the bears, the spirit of the bears is still upset. So

you can't do this.

This went all the way to the Canadian Supreme Court, and actually quite surprisingly given the dynamics of Canadian politics, the court found in favor of the company and said you can't. We can't rule on the matter of divine revelation and that's simply not a legitimate basis on which to propose a policy change when all of these very reasonable accommodations have been made.

Now, the indigenous response to that is, well, you are privileging a Protestant definition of religion, a definition of religion that says place does not matter. That's not the primary thing. The primary thing is what happens in your mind, in your private mind.

And in fact, this pragmatist, secular, compromise-based approach to the public sphere privileges just that, privileges a Protestant definition of religion that does not map very well on the way other civilizations have thought about the interaction between the supernatural and human beings. But it gives us a working basis for peaceful pluralism. And so, I'm inclined to stick with it.

Just last point to try to address, Doyle, the question that you raised, this question of whether this deal between evangelicals and Trump could ever collapse. I think there was this question more broadly when Trump was elected that the Republican Party for a very long time had spoken like populists and governed like plutocrats.

And so, the question was, well, now are they going to come to the point where that paradox is front and center and Trump's actually going to force a breaking of that. Well, as we've seen, right, he's governed like the greatest plutocrat of all. He's filled his Cabinet with plutocrats. And so, I'm not sure I see evidence for a breaking of sort of that paradox, especially because he has delivered on certain key aspects of the deal.

I'd love to talk to you more about that poll that suggests this dip in his support because I don't know how to account for that. I think the broader features of his administration so far don't support a narrative that leads to a great fracturing.

PETER WEHNER: Good. Let me just 60 seconds to tie two things from Molly and Doyle together. I think to understand the evangelical support for Trump, transaction is probably not the right way to think about it or not the full way.

I think if you went through just empirically on the campaign and the reason Ted Cruz said something in emotion but Donald Trump ended up going beyond him, because Trump won a plurality in South Carolina and he won a plurality I think on Super Tuesday of the evangelical vote, when you had all of these other candidates you would have thought would have done better.

And what was it that galvanized the support? It tended to be cultural, hot button issues, right? And so, if you go back, it was comments about the Mexicans or comments about the Muslim ban. He went to those

at moments in which he had to energize. And you can take even recently when he had made comments about DACA and there was some rattling around on his right flank about that.
And what happened right after that? He went down to Alabama and he spoke about the NFL protests. Now, before we talked about the NFL protests, I think there were six people who had kneeled the weekend before. There was no obvious reason to bring that up.

But when he brought that up, that of course lit a fire to it and all of the criticism, as it related to DACA, which is an actual presidential public policy matter, got swept away and it got caught up in this intense debate, which the president has no real say in, in terms of public policy.

I do think that one way to think about this, and this is in my own experience in listening to people, is it's not through traditional thinking about sort of the policy side. It is that it's an appeal to something else, which is sort of visceral and cultural. And so, I think that's one way to think about it.

In any event, you were great, Molly. Thank you very much. Thanks. You were patient and great questions.

(Applause.)

PETER WEHNER: And we'll go off to lunch and then we'll come back to talk about the environment. So, thanks, everybody.

END

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