

Opinions

Trump evangelicals have sold their souls



By [Michael Gerson](#) Opinion writer March 12 [✉Email the author](#)

With their reactions to the [Roy Moore candidacy](#) and the [Stormy Daniels scandal](#), the Trump evangelicals have scaled the heights of hypocrisy to the summit. Family-values conservatives who dismiss credible accusations of sexual abuse and wink at hush money for a porn star have ceased to represent family values in any meaningful sense. They have made a national joke of moral standards that were once, presumably, deeply held. At least when a Democrat violated them.

My friend Pete Wehner proposes a thought experiment: If a militant atheist were to design a trap with the goal of discrediting evangelical Christians, could they do better than Moore and Daniels? It would take some consideration. But this barely scratches the surface of the moral compromises being made. The problem with Trumpism is not only the transparent excuses it offers (and requires others to accept) for shoddy and offensive behavior. [As I argue in the Atlantic](#), the deeper issue is the distinctly non-Christian substance of President Trump's values. His unapologetic materialism. His tribalism and hatred for "the other." His strength-worship and contempt for "losers," which smack more of Nietzsche than of Christ.

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Trump's nasty mash-up of the power of positive thinking, the Playboy philosophy and the will to power is a naturally poor fit for religious conservatives. Or so one would have thought.

Trump evangelicals defend their support for the president in the pose of political realists. A president, they argue, is not a pastor. A certain amount of compromise is necessary to get conservative judges and more favorable treatment of Christian institutions. This is the way of the world.

There are sometimes conflicted political choices in a fallen world. But this argument would be more credible if so many Trump evangelicals were not such sycophants. It is one thing to point to the difficult binary choice between Trump and Hillary Clinton. It is another to provide Trump political cover in every scandal and offer preemptive absolution of every character failure.

There is something else at work here than weary realism — something that [Tony Perkins](#) of the Family Research Council recently clarified. Conservatives, he said, "were tired of being kicked around by Barack Obama and his leftists. And I think they are finally glad that there's somebody on the playground that is willing to punch the bully." In this explanation, Trump's approach to public discourse is actually the main selling point. His bullying — his cruelty, crudity and personal insults — is admired because it is directed at other bullies.

This is, perhaps, politically and psychologically understandable. But it has absolutely nothing to do with the Sermon

on the Mount. Nothing to do with any recognizable version of Christian ethics. The very thing that should repel evangelicals — Trump’s dehumanization of others — is what seems to fascinate and attract some conservative Christians. It is yet another example of discrediting hypocrisy.

The Trump evangelicals are best understood as conservative political operatives, seeking benefits for their interest group from politicians who are most likely to provide them. So how good is the quality of their political advice? Not particularly good. Identifying evangelicalism with Trump’s ethno-populism may have some short-term benefits. But public influence eventually depends on the persuasiveness of public arguments. And close ties to Trump will eventually be disastrous to causes that evangelicals care about. Pro-life arguments are discredited by an association with misogyny. Arguments for religious liberty are discredited by association with anti-Muslim bias. Arguments for family values are discredited by nativist disdain for migrant families.

The damage radiates further. Trump evangelicals are blessing the destruction of public norms on civility, decency and the importance of public character.

And the ultimate harm is to the reputation of faith itself. The identification of evangelical Christianity with ethno-nationalism and white grievance is a grave matter. Evangelical Christians hardly distinguished themselves during the civil rights movement. Some used Christian academies as a cover for continued segregation. Getting this issue wrong again would be particularly damning in a nation — and in Christian churches — growing inexorably more diverse. Here are the sources of hope: Evangelicals have a rich history that includes abolitionists and social reformers to inspire them. They have a rising generation of leaders — from [Pastor Timothy Keller](#), to the Southern Baptist Convention’s [Russell Moore](#), to [Bishop Claude Alexander](#), to [Bible teacher Beth Moore](#), to anti-slavery activist [Gary Haugen](#) — who are embracing a different and better model of social engagement. And they hold to a faith that for two millennia has survived not only the wrath of its opponents but the cynicism of its advocates.

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