

Why some fear this election's lasting damage to American Christianity



Teryn O'Brien has stopped calling herself evangelical. As a 28-year-old living in Colorado Springs, O'Brien has held concerns with the conservative brand of evangelical Christianity for several years now, but she described this election as "the final straw."

O'Brien said American evangelicals have historically held the upper hand in America and are seeing that power slip away. Searching to recapture it, many of them turned to Donald Trump, someone she sees as racist, misogynist and antithetical to Christian behavior.

Now O'Brien, who attends an Anglican church, has dropped the "evangelical" label, simply calling herself a Christian. But she said it has become hard to distinguish "evangelical" from "Christian," given that evangelicals make up about a quarter of the U.S. population.

Among evangelicals, which as a group are about three-quarters white, are definitely the loudest group by far, she said. And so they often get the most attention. Exit polls show 81 percent of white evangelicals across the country backed Trump, the vast majority of whom are Republican and lean conservative, constituting the highest percentage that has voted for the Republican nominee since they voted overwhelmingly for President George W. Bush in 2004.

"This election has truly shown the underbelly of the toxic relationship that can develop between politics and religion," O'Brien said.

Political divisions have run deep within churches and families, and observers say this election cycle has exposed underlying political and racial divisions within Christianity as a whole, but especially among evangelicals. As a result, some religious leaders are afraid of damage done to the perception of the Christian faith in the United States during this election cycle and fear its long-term effects.

Tensions high

Evangelical pastors say tensions have soared during the election season, and some are questioning whether they can even continue to use the label evangelical for fear of being associated with Trump.

"I keep trying to disavow that I am 'that' brand of evangelical, but after tonight, I don't know if I even want to have any association with that label anymore," Helen Lee, an evangelical author, said on Tuesday.

Eugene Cho, a pastor of an evangelical church in Seattle, said that his church building was recently painted with "F? organized religion," though he is unsure whether it's connected to Trump or the election.

"The election has made things more hostile or given permission to people to be more aggressive on both sides," Cho said.

Cho, who has pledged that he will never endorse a candidate from the pulpit, joined a group of evangelicals in the fall condemning Trump, arguing his campaign "affirms racist elements in white culture."

The letter, which was also backed by about 80 evangelical pastors and other leaders, decried Trump's comments on women, Muslims, immigrants, refugees and the disabled.

'People just think that all evangelicals support Donald Trump or support particular platforms or a certain way of thinking,' Cho said. 'This was just to communicate there isn't a monolithic thought within the so-called evangelical wing of Christianity.'

Who speaks for evangelical Christians?

After a video of Trump was released showing he joked about sexually assaulting women, some religious leaders said that while his comments were inappropriate, he was still the best leader for the country. Others rejected the idea that those leaders were speaking on everyone's behalf.

'The evangelical support of Trump will be an indictment against its validity as a Christian movement for generations to come,' Richard Rohr, a Franciscan author and teacher, tweeted after those comments.

Some leaders are worried about the lasting impact this election will have inside churches. Russell Moore, who leads the Southern Baptist Convention's political advocacy arm, is deeply concerned about the impact of Christian leaders who defended Trump and the potential damage it has had within churches, especially among women and younger evangelicals.

'One evangelical woman said to me, 'I've spent all my life saying the church is going to be a place where you can go when you face this sort of thing.' Now I'm looking around, and a pastor is saying 'This isn't a big deal.' That's going to take a lot of work to undo,' he said.

Christianity's political ties

The contrast between different groups of religious voters this election season is striking, said Mark Silk, professor of religion in public life at Trinity College. Polls ahead of the election showed Catholics divided, and that many Mormons abandoned the Republican Party compared with years past. But evangelicals voted for Trump in even greater numbers than they voted for Republican candidates Mitt Romney and John McCain.

'Trump has been a candidate where one could say, 'Is there no point at which you won't vote for the Republicans?'' Silk said. 'I think that's what's given away the extent to which personal identity for religious conservatives and churchgoers has become wrapped up in Republicanism.'

In their book, 'American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us,' Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam and Notre Dame political scientist David Campbell argue that the extraordinary rise of people who affiliate with no religion is due in part to their rejection of its entanglement with politics. Today 22 percent of the population says they have no faith.

'For many, their aversion to religion is rooted in unease with the association between religion and conservative politics,' Putnam and Campbell wrote. 'If religion equals Republican, then they have decided that religion is not for them.'

Michael Wear, who did evangelical outreach for President Obama's campaign in 2008 and now consults with evangelical groups, said that people have been talking about rebranding evangelicals or even Christianity in America now for several years.

'The people I work with view Trump as a moment for Christians to actually separate themselves from towing a particular party line,' Wear said. 'We're going to have four years to test that theory.'

Shifting demographics

White Christian Protestants have dominated America's political and social landscape for most of its history. But in recent decades, the number of Americans who stopped affiliating with religion has surged, along with a rise in Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and other Americans. The year 2008 marked the last in which Protestants represented a majority of Americans, according to demographer Robert P. Jones.

For most of American history, mainline and evangelical Protestants have dominated the landscape, spiritually and politically. But as Protestants' majority has waned, Jones writes in his book, 'The end of White Christian America,' Americans who are between 18 and 29 are less than half as likely to be white Christians as those who are 65 and older.

This election season, there was a divided voice among Christian leaders as a whole, Jones said. The Catholic bishops in the United States were much quieter than in elections past, while the so-called 'values voters,' Christian conservatives who historically coalesced on issues, such as abortion and same-sex marriage, largely backed Trump.

'It's going to be poignant that the group that has sold themselves as 'values voters' has abandoned those arguments and justifications,' Jones said.

The dividing lines

Faith often becomes front and center during election years, said Barna Research President David Kinnaman, because it reveals the fault lines along gender, generations and ethnicities, and between theological traditions.

'It's a powerful moment where people are organizing themselves and making those differences more clear,' he said. 'There are larger questions about why and how Christians should engage on cultural matters, and this election is redefining how Christians interact.'

When reports emerge about whom evangelicals voted for, they usually mean 'white evangelicals,' glossing over a growing racial division within Christianity. Latino evangelicals are one of the fastest growing segments of churchgoers in America and have largely been fueling the growth among evangelicals, and many did not favor the Republican candidate.

'There is some real angst when there is a blanket statement that 'evangelical supports .??.'' Salguero said.

Latino Christians are different from their white Christian peers, Salguero said, because they don't have a history of being a majority in America.

'We don't have messianic expectations for our politicians,' Salguero said. 'We don't have this moment of 'we're not at the center of power anymore.' Latino evangelicals were never at the center of power, so we can be a prophetic voice independent of who gets into office.'

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