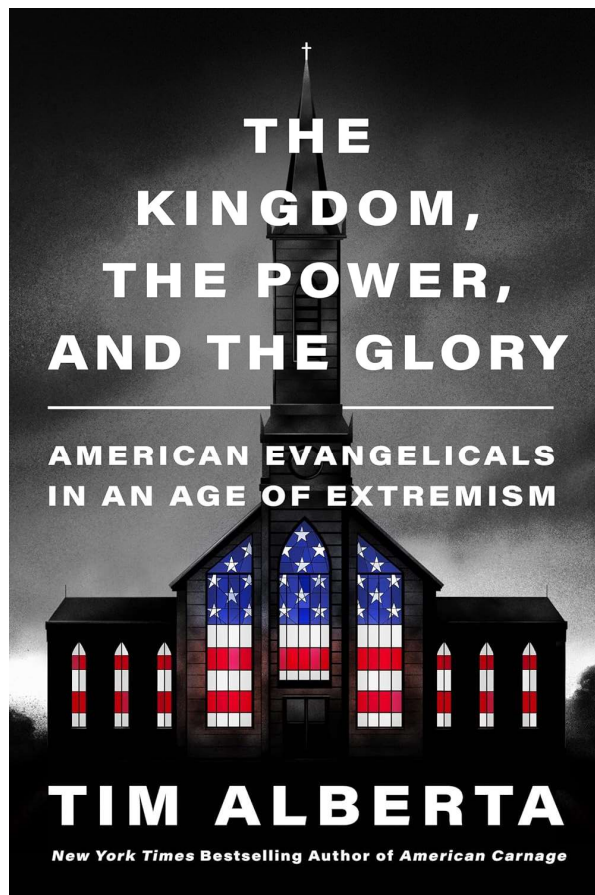


# ‘The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory’ dives into extremism

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*“The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism” by Tim Alberta. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2023, 512 pages, \$35.00 (hardcover).*



“Barely thirty years old, Winans looked to be exactly what Cornerstone (Evangelical Presbyterian Church) needed in its next generation of leadership,” Tim Alberta explains near the beginning of “The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism,” his bold new attempt to decipher what’s currently going on with the religious right in America. “He spoke with precision and clarity from the pulpit. He had a humble, easygoing way about him, operating without the outsize ego that often accompanies first-rate preaching. Everything about this young pastor – the boyish sweep of brown hair, his delightful young family – seemed to be straight out of central casting.”

“There was just one problem: Chris Winans was not a conservative Republican,” Alberta continues. “He didn’t like guns. He cared more about funding poverty programs than cutting tax rates. He had no appetite for the unrepentant antics of President Donald Trump. Of course, none of this would seem heretical to Christians in other parts of the world; given his staunch pro-life position, Winans would in most places be

considered an archetype of spiritual and intellectual consistency. But in the American evangelical tradition, and at a church like Cornerstone, the whiff of liberalism made him suspect.”

So begins one of the more fascinating, enlightening, and ultimately disturbing investigations of the American evangelical movement that I have had occasion to peruse in recent memory. Alberta goes into considerable detail as he clarifies an ideological orientation that is frustratingly enigmatic to those who do not ascribe to this rather narrow interpretation of what it means to be a follower of Jesus in the contemporary United States. Unlike their counterparts in other parts of the world, evangelicals in this country see involvement in politics as a necessary and essential extension of their belief system.

A large portion of the book is devoted to pointing out the inherent contradiction between the teachings of Jesus and the actions espoused by many who see themselves as carrying out His will. For instance, Jesus was clear that his “kingdom” was not of this world. As such, we are to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s (see Matthew 22 or Mark 12 if you are interested in finding out more about this reference). Alberta meticulously documents how conservative Christians have inserted themselves into the political and cultural conversation in a way that has clearly been counterproductive and detrimental to many who do not share their repressive agenda and exploitative objectives. Jesus was clear that his followers should not seek the kind of power many evangelicals seem obsessed with wielding within the American system of governance.

“The Kingdom” is comprised of a prologue, 21 chapters arranged in three major sections, and an epilogue. Following the structure alluded to in the title, Part I (The Kingdom) consists of the first seven chapters; Part II (The Power) is made up of the next seven chapters; and Part III (The Glory) concludes with the last seven chapters. The writing is crisp and clear and the evidence offered in support of the thesis being advanced is formidable and convincing. In the very least, the manuscript is an important contribution to the collective dialogue and debate we are currently having that warrants being read by anyone who is concerned about the current direction of the republic and what is precipitating the anti-democratic and pro-authoritarian trend we seem to be experiencing. More importantly, Alberta provides a roadmap detailing what we can do to deal with it. He is not against religion or the freedom Americans enjoy to worship God (or not) in their own way; at its core, the author is making the case that the evangelical movement has basically gone off the rails and seeks to turn the United States into a Christian version of the Taliban.

Alberta traces the rise of the movement through cases studies at key locations and pivotal historical moments. This approach adds a certain relatability to the narrative that brings the subject matter to life in a personal and even visceral way that would not have been possible otherwise. You feel like you know the characters you are introduced to intimately; moreover, you can actually feel the conflictedness that seems to permeate their existence on a daily basis. Many seem caught up in something that has taken on a life of its own and moved beyond their ability to control – even against their better judgment. Witness the following from “Montgomery, New York,” the second chapter and one I found especially instructive:

“Chastened and thoroughly disheartened, (John) Torres decided to revert to his old rules: no politics in church. He would stick to scripture. Apparently that’s what his people wanted. He began to realize, however, that this wasn’t necessarily the case. During Obama’s eight years in office, Torres observed more and more partisan hubbub inside the church. Some of it was harmless enough. But some of it was unhealthy and even unsafe: the murmurs of Obama as a Muslim Manchurian candidate, appointed by Satan himself, on a mission to destroy America and the American Christianity. Torres couldn’t decide whether to confront this talk. It was clearly untrue, the byproduct of too many nights spent marinating in hateful rightwing media. But Torres didn’t want to turn his church into a cable news set, and he worried that engaging this nonsense would only create more of a distraction. He resolved to just keep pushing Jesus, in higher and higher doses, hoping to re-balance perspectives and restore some normalcy.”

“It didn’t work. Torres knew, when Trump charged the political scene in the summer of 2015, that things were going to get worse. The candidate was serving up a cocktail of discontent – one part cultural displacement, one part religious persecution, and one part nationalist fervor – that would prove irresistible to certain people he pastored, people who were scandalized by shifting public norms and by the prospect of Christians losing their status in a secularizing America.”

An award-winning journalist, Alberta is currently a staff writer for The Atlantic. A former chief political correspondent for POLITICO, his work has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, The Hotline, National Journal, National Review, Sports Illustrated, and Vanity Fair. He is also a frequent commentator on most of the cable news shows. His first book, “American Carnage: On the Front Lines of the Republican Civil War and the Rise of President Trump,” debuted at No. 1 and No. 2 respectively on the Washington Post and New York Times best-seller lists in 2019. A 2008 graduate of Michigan State University, where he majored in journalism and political science, he currently lives in southeast Michigan with his wife and three sons.

As Alberta argues persuasively, the result of the conservative evangelicals’ pursuit of power has had deleterious effects on both the movement itself as well as how an increasing number of Americans view Christianity. As the true believers have become more consumed with enforcing their values and beliefs on those who do not share their faith by electing representatives, appointing judges and enacting laws that reflect their cause, they have alienated many of their neighbors and fellow citizens who do not share their passion for re-creating their communities in their own image. Church membership is down and Christianity’s reputation has suffered enormous harm. Personally, I can’t see Jesus being pleased by what is being done in His name.

True Christianity – as I have come to understand it - is not about being judgmental, dividing people, or forcing your interpretation of Scripture on others. It is about being empathetic to the plight of others, bringing them together, and discussing alternative interpretations in a civil manner. Alberta reminds us of this – and what the stakes are if we continue down our present path. Highly recommended.

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*

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