

REVIEW ESSAYS

Shepherds in an Era of Division

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Tim Alberta's *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory* and Megan Basham's *Shepherds for Sale* explore the ways evangelical leaders and congregations have responded to an era of social and political division in America. Both books, though flawed in important ways, reveal an urgent need for evangelicals to think deeply about ecclesiology, discipleship, and a sanctified and renovated Christian imagination.

Tim Alberta, in *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*, and Megan Basham, in *Shepherds for Sale*, explore the way evangelical leaders and congregations have responded to the deeply divisive eras of Donald Trump and Joe Biden. For Alberta, many evangelical churches have exchanged the Christian gospel for partisan loyalties and political extremism. For Basham, high-profile evangelical leaders have betrayed biblical teaching and the more conservative policy views of their flocks in favor of financially lucrative and more attention-grabbing centrist or leftist positions.

For those of us who care deeply about the health of the Christian church, these books are painful to read, but they ought to be read together. They must also be read for what they are—personal memoirs of two evangelical journalists who rightly sense that something has gone terribly wrong within American Christianity. Both authors display an admirable vulnerability, and it is clear that these volumes are written from places of genuine pain experienced within the church.

Neither book is academic, nor do they pretend to be. Both authors seem unaware of, if not uninterested in, the many scholarly studies regarding evangelicals and politics. The stories and interviews they share are insufficient to support sweeping conclusions. The objective in this review, then, is to consider what further conversations their investigations provoke and how they both miss important underlying questions. Indeed, it would be valuable for clergy and lay leaders alike to read these books and to scrutinize the emotions and questions that Basham and Alberta evoke about ecclesiology, courage, the role of the pastor, spiritual and intellectual formation, and the impact of the culture wars on congregations.

Celebrity Evangelicals and the Culture Wars

Megan Basham's book leans on anecdotes, published articles, interviews, and some old-fashioned "follow-the-money" research to show how some of the biggest names in evangelical Christianity have adopted recognizably unbiblical views on questions related to abortion and the LGBTQ+ movement, and left-leaning (though not *necessarily* unbiblical) positions on immigration, racial justice, COVID-19, the #MeToo movement, and climate change. She especially focuses on Tim Keller, David French, Russell Moore, J. D. Greear, Andy Stanley, Francis Collins, and other figures recognizable to evangelicals.

Basham aims to show that some of these "celebrity" evangelical leaders have exhibited a tendency to move left in return for financial benefit or, at least, for more attention. Left-leaning nonprofits, including some explicitly *designed* to move evangelical influencers to the left, may offer lucrative speaking and media engagements, book deals, and more. It is unclear, however, whether these benefits directly produced a genuine change of mind and heart.

In the chapter on LGBTQ+ issues, for example, we learn how major figures such as Andy Stanley and Rick Warren have tended to equivocate and dodge straightforward questions on the compatibility of same-sex marriage with Scripture. They and others have given a platform to hear from LGBTQ+ affirming organizations, such as Embracing the Journey and Matthew Vines's Reformation Project (funded by the Arcus Foundation). This is indeed problematic from a theologically conservative standpoint, but greed does not sufficiently explain why these otherwise very wealthy churches and pastors would take left-leaning positions. It is also not clear that the pastors' theological or ideological starting points were as far to the right as Basham insinuates. The pursuit of higher *status* among secular elites may be a more compelling explanation for their behavior, but it may also be driven by the everyday context of leading a church in the United States.

Tim Alberta's approach and perspective differ from Basham's. He focuses less on social media posts and "receipts" and goes straight to the particular people and places shaping evangelical Americans' political perspectives, such as Liberty University, various megachurches, televangelists, and the occasional conventions functioning as political "revival-rallies." Unlike Basham, Alberta's platform as a staff writer for *The Atlantic* allows him far greater access to the major "villains" of *Shepherds for Sale*. Over twenty-one chapters, a prologue, and an epilogue, he chronicles revealing encounters and conversations with Russell Moore, Robert Jeffress, Ralph Reed, Greg Locke, and many others.

Alberta lets the various contrasts speak for themselves, juxtaposing educated evangelicals with those who have found political evangelicalism to be economically lucrative and therapeutic. In some places, the fringe of

evangelicalism has become mainstream, adopting an ecclesiology indifferent to things divine and eternal, while prioritizing the protection of American Christians' privileges and power in the here and now. Alberta's description of Greg Locke is representative of this: "[Locke] discovered that there was a market for being irrational. He came to appreciate that wrath is a business model, that crazy is a church growth strategy, that hating enemies is far more powerful—at least in the immediate sense—than loving them" (Alberta 2023, 229).

These high-profile evangelical leaders are important for the arguments of both books. In the decentralized world of evangelicalism, where there is little in the way of formal hierarchy and doctrinal structure, the loudest voices and most visible figures often function as the primary luminaries for guiding beliefs and practices. Indeed, it is striking how both books unintentionally reveal that celebrity evangelicals are the central spiritual and intellectual authority for many networks of churches. While there may be formal overseers, committees, and assemblies exercising varying levels of accountability, their actual authority over local pastors and congregations is minimal.

Shepherding in a Minefield

Faced with the incredibly challenging environment of even the smallest churches, pastors need not only financial resources but also ideas and guidance for confronting social, ethical, and political questions for which they usually have no training. Their congregations look to them for direction and comfort, often expecting superhuman effort and sacrifice that leads to burnout and acts of desperation. Whether the issue is climate change, racial reconciliation, abortion, COVID-19, or any number of similarly contentious issues, pastors are expected to publicly take a position in the minefield of the culture wars. When they do, or when they choose to remain silent, they risk upheaval and division in their congregations, not to mention the unforgiving scrutiny of social media. For Basham and Alberta, the problem is that many evangelical church leaders rely on sources of information that are not adequately rooted in, or sensitive to, Scripture and church teachings. It may also be the case that some of these sources only *seem* to be biblically grounded but are primarily partisan in nature. Some shepherds may simply not possess the discernment to know when a source of information is faithful to Christian teaching or when it is hostile. While some pastors, in Basham's and Alberta's telling, may turn to extremism of the left or right for lucrative ends or to earn the respect of a secular culture, the real culprit seems to be poor theological and intellectual preparation, along with the absence of doctrinal accountability or authority.

At times Basham, and occasionally Alberta, struggles to find much grace in describing these church leaders. Yes, cowardice and even apostasy occur, but most evangelical leaders do not have a large following on X and YouTube,

and they are just trying to hold congregations together. While some shepherds may seem to wear a proverbial For Sale sign, it is quite clearly a bipartisan phenomenon. Indeed, one of the unintended consequences of these books may be to provoke reflection on the way evangelical pastors—and, frankly, all clergy—are prepared and continually equipped for ministry. While greater theological and biblical literacy is needed, there is also, among clergy and lay leaders alike, an obvious lack of genuine spiritual formation, an epidemic of emotional immaturity, unhealthy levels of isolation, and a disturbing tendency to conform to the norms of mass media and digital technology at the expense of the gospel.

Throughout Basham's book especially, an underlying ecclesiology animates her analysis. She frequently emphasizes a growing divide between the "rank-and-file" evangelical and the "respectable" evangelical, the latter preoccupied with criticizing other Christians and seeking the approval of secular elites. There is more than a little populism in Basham's approach, which raises important theological and practical questions. Should the shepherds fear the sheep? Should a pastor's beliefs represent or reflect those of his congregation, even if he may disagree on theological and biblical grounds? This clearly would not describe the example set by Jesus or his apostles or the early church. But over time and in various geographical and denominational pockets, the theologically undisciplined world of evangelical Protestantism has developed an ecclesiology whose sources are more political than biblical. The result is that the authority of the shepherds comes not from ordination, apostolic succession, or anything spiritual, biblical, or traditional. Their authority—on the left and the right—emerges from signaling partisan loyalties and by identifying with whatever rage or fear their congregations are experiencing.

For those who share (as I do) many (though not all) of Basham's political and theological sympathies, the book may be a disturbing wake-up call. Indeed, her most compelling argument is that some well-funded and recognizably un-Christian or anti-Christian organizations, such as the Arcus Foundation, have done much to deliberately undermine key institutions and publications through strategic donations and well-placed influencers. This seems to be confirmed in Alberta's book, where at least one important evangelical figure, Curtis Chang, was actively seeking secular support for "healing" the evangelical churches. Do evangelical leaders possess the discernment to recognize friendly voices from hostile ones? Neither Basham nor Alberta provides much ground for the affirmative.

Which Way, American Evangelical?

Basham's and Alberta's books seem to suggest that there are two options for American evangelical churches, viewed positively or negatively depending on one's theological disposition. One route, championed by Basham, embraces evangelicalism as a force for advancing a primarily political vision of America,

opening churches to sympathetic partisan voices, and focusing more on electoral and policy victories to safeguard their vision of America. This route tends to be theologically shallow, confrontational, uncompromising, and more reliant on its appeal to strong emotions, especially fear.

The other route for churches, which Alberta may prefer, calls for a nonpolitical evangelicalism that emphasizes a sober-minded political civility. It is a church that is less confrontational, uninterested in winning, and more focused on personal growth and a theologically vague understanding of “loving one’s neighbor.” While this may be a socially and politically safer route, it too comes with problems. It is less willing to draw meaningful doctrinal lines, is more susceptible to cultural conformity and secular acquiescence, and leads to churches functioning more as therapeutic support groups.

There are two additional problems with calls for civility. The first is that “civil” and “uncivil” are terms more popularly defined by those hostile to Christianity. It is increasingly the case that simple and legitimate disagreements are viewed as uncivil, and anything less than total affirmation is considered an act of violence. Of course, Christians should never engage in violence, destruction, ridicule, lies, deception, and meanness. The problem Christians are facing, however, is that some actions and words once thought civil have been redefined as uncivil at the expense of legitimately pursuing and sharing truth.

This leads to the second problem with a call for civility. The apostle Paul writes to Christians in ancient Rome, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). Many Christians who call for civility appeal to this verse and have a good and genuine desire for peace, but the Scriptures do not call us to a false peace. Saint Paul, furthermore, leaves open the possibility that peace with everyone will not be attainable in some circumstances.

False peace is characterized by escapism, dishonesty, injustice, and an aversion to conflict. It is the kind of peace that a community achieves by abandoning integrity and moral boundaries and by eschewing truth. Basham believes such things are happening, especially in churches embracing political agendas with nonbiblical views for the sake of trying to appease secular culture. The same could also be said of those Christian leaders on the right who refuse to denounce the blatant immorality of Donald Trump and many of his political allies. Basham and Alberta are both trying to expose that false peace.

There is also throughout both books a struggle to articulate what it means to love one’s neighbor. Basham seems suspicious of how it has been defined so broadly, and Alberta thinks it is too narrow. Alberta correctly calls out the right’s neglect of the command for Christians to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. Basham confronts the way in which

“love thy neighbor” has been corrupted to mean that Christians must affirm sinful choices or embrace feel-good policies with negative consequences. After reading these books, clergy and lay leaders alike would do well to reflect more deeply and carefully on this confusion and how it has impacted their congregations.

Neither the aggressively partisan path of Basham nor the therapeutic political indifference of Alberta will suffice for a shrinking church. Furthermore, a Christianity without creeds or structures of accountability cannot endure these confusing times. Such churches will be too easily co-opted and hollowed out. Evangelical leaders regularly need to examine their ecclesiology and whom they and their congregations are *actually* following, especially on unavoidable questions about abortion, same-sex marriage, pandemics, racial injustice, and similarly divisive issues. These issues are not going to disappear. To whom will evangelical leaders go for counsel? Basham and Alberta lend greater urgency and weight to how churches answer this question.

Ultimately, both books demonstrate the ongoing need for intellectual discipleship and for a sanctified and renovated Christian imagination. This is an imagination in need of recovery, formation, and expression so that the church may have shepherds and sheep who are less enamored by presidents and political idols and more genuinely committed to the kingdom of God.

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