

How the Religious Right Indoctrinates Its Followers With a False Version of History

The American founding fathers lived in a world that was very different from our own.

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A week ago Sunday, June 24, 2018, First Baptist Church of Dallas held its annual “Freedom Sunday.” The church website described the special service this way: “Celebrate our freedom as Americans and our freedom in Christ with patriotic worship and a special message from Dr. Robert Jeffress, “America is a Christian Nation.”

Not everyone in Dallas was happy about it. Robert Wilonsky, an opinion writer at the Dallas Morning News, [wrote](#) that Jeffress and the First Baptist Church were “divisive” for claiming that America was a Christian nation. Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings agreed. Atheists protested. Eventually, the billboard company contracting with the church [removed signs](#) advertising Freedom Sunday.

This, of course, did not stop the service from going forward. The people of First Baptist Church spent the morning of the 24th waving American flags, wearing red, white, and blue shirts, singing the Star-Spangled Banner, and celebrating the United States military. Vice-president Mike Pence sent a letter of encouragement.

Was this a religious service or a celebration of nationalism? What was the object of the congregation’s worship?

Jeffress has been preaching his “America is a Christian Nation” sermon for a long time. On Sunday he stuck with his usual script. He indicted the “secularists, atheists, and infidels” for “perverting” the Constitution. He chided the federal government’s failure to acknowledge God in the public square. He told his congregation that academics, historians, and teachers have been lying to them about the religious roots of the United States.

Jeffress made one problematic historical reference after another. He made the wildly exaggerated claim that fifty-two of the original fifty-five signers of the Constitution were “orthodox conservative Christians.” He peddled the false notion that the disestablishment clause in the First Amendment was meant to apply solely to Protestant denominations.

Near the end of the sermon, Jeffress suggested that spikes in violence, illegitimate births, divorce, and low SAT scores in America are the direct product of the Supreme Court’s decision to remove prayer and Bible-reading from public schools.

Jeffress concluded the service with an altar call. He asked people to come to the front of the church and profess their faith in Jesus Christ. I am sure Jeffress was sincere in his desire to lead people to Jesus, but after his message it was unclear whether he was inviting them to accept Jesus Christ as Savior or embrace the idea that the United States was founded, and continues to be, a Christian nation. Maybe both.

Robert Jeffress is best known as a Fox News religion commentator and one of the first evangelical leaders to support Donald Trump's presidential candidacy. He has called Trump "the most faith-friendly president in history."

Within two weeks following the announcement of his candidacy, several polls had Trump leading among white evangelical GOP voters. In November 2016, 81% of these evangelicals cast their vote for Donald Trump for President of the United States. The reasons for this are complex, and we probably need to wait a generation or two before historians can begin to make sense of them, but three young sociologists have published a [scholarly essay](#) that suggests the most plausible explanation.

Andrew Whitehead of Clemson University, Sam Perry of the University of Oklahoma, and Joseph O. Baker of East Tennessee State University [argue](#) that "the more someone believed the United States is—and should be—a Christian nation, the more likely they were to vote for Trump." They conclude that "no other religious factor influenced support for or against Trump."

These sociologists found that the average Trump voter believes the federal government should: declare the United States a Christian nation, advocate for Christian values, oppose the "strict separation of church and state," allow the "display of religious symbols in public spaces," and return prayer to public schools. Likewise, Trump voters believe that whatever success the United States has had over the years is "part of God's plan."

This essay is revealing, and it confirms much of what I have written about since the 2011 release of my [Was American Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction](#). But it does not address why and how Americans have come to believe these things. The answer to that question invites us to think historically.

Ever since the founding of the republic, a significant number of Americans have supposed that the United States is exceptional because it has a special place in God's unfolding plan for the world. Since the early 17th century founding of the Massachusetts Bay colony by Puritans, evangelicals have relished in their perceived status as God's new Israel—His chosen people. America, they argued, is in a covenant relationship with God. The defenders of this idea like to apply Chronicles 7:14 to the United States: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

Though dissenters have always been present, the Christian culture of the United States remained intact well into the 20th century. But since World War II, the moorings of this culture have

loosened, and evangelicals have responded with fear that their Christian nation is about to collapse. Robert Jeffress is correct about this.

During the 1960s, the Supreme Court removed prayer and Bible reading from public schools, the federal government cut federal funding to Christian academies and colleges that practiced segregation, the country grew more diverse through immigration, and the sexual revolution threatened evangelical patriarchy and gave women the right to choose to have an abortion.

The fear that America's Christian civilization was falling apart translated into political action. In the late 1970s, conservative evangelicals such as Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye (the author of the popular *Left Behind* novels), and a group of politicians who had been closely affiliated with the 1964 Barry Goldwater presidential campaign, developed a political playbook to win back the culture from the forces of secularization. Most of the 81% of American evangelicals who voted for Donald Trump in 2016 understood, and continue to understand, the relationship between their faith and their politics through this playbook.

This playbook, which would eventually become the culture-war battle plan of the "Religious Right," was tweaked occasionally over the years to address whatever moral issues seemed most important at the time, but it never lost its focus on "restoring," "renewing," and "reclaiming" America for Christ through the pursuit of political power.

When executed properly, the playbook teaches evangelicals to elect the right President and members of Congress who will pass laws privileging evangelical Christian views of the world. These elected officials will then appoint and confirm conservative Supreme Court justices who will overturn *Roe v. Wade*, defend life in the womb, and uphold religious liberty for those who believe in traditional views of marriage.

The playbook rests firmly on the Religious Right's understanding of American identity as rooted in its view of the American past. If America was not founded as a Christian nation, the Religious Right's political agenda collapses or, at the very least, is weakened severely.

To indoctrinate its followers in the dubious claim that America was founded as a Christian nation, the Religious Right has turned to political activists, many of whom claim to be historians, to propagate the idea that the founding fathers of the United States were in the business of building a Christian nation.

The most prominent of these Christian nationalist purveyors of the past is [David Barton](#), the founder of Wallbuilders, an organization in Aledo, Texas that claims to be "dedicated to presenting America's forgotten history and heroes, with an emphasis on the moral, religious, and constitutional foundation on which America was built—a foundation which, in recent years, has been seriously attacked and undermined." Barton and Wallbuilders were the source of most of the historical information Jeffress presented in his Freedom Sunday sermon on June 24th.

For the past thirty years, Barton has provided pastors and conservative politicians with inaccurate or misinterpreted facts used to fuel the Religious Right's nostalgic longings for an American Christian golden age. American historians, including those who teach at the most conservative

Christian colleges, have [debunked](#) Barton's use of the past, but he continues to maintain a large following in the evangelical community.

David Barton peddles fake news about the American past. Yet, if Andrew Whitehead, Sam Perry, and Joseph Baker are correct, his work is essential to the success of the Trump presidency in a way that I imagine even Donald Trump and his staff do not fully understand or appreciate.

Trump does not talk very much about America's supposedly Christian origins. His grasp of history is not very strong. But his evangelical supporters see him as a gift of God—a divinely appointed figure who has emerged on the scene for such a time as this. He is in the White House to preserve God's covenant with America, to make America Christian again.

The support for the President is a sign of intellectual laziness in the evangelical community. Rather than thinking creatively about how to move forward in hope, Trump evangelicals prefer to respond to cultural change by trying to reclaim a Christian world that is rapidly disappearing, has little chance of ever coming back, and may never have existed in the first place.

The American founding fathers lived in a world that was very different from our own. In the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, America was a nation of Christians—mostly Protestants—who put their stamp on the culture.

Yet, amid this Christian culture, the founders differed about the relationship between Christianity and their new nation. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison defended the separation of church and state. John Adams and George Washington also opposed mixing church and state, while at the same time suggesting that Christians, because Christianity taught an ethic of selflessness, could be useful in the creation of a virtuous republic in which citizens sacrificed self-interest for the common good.

The founding fathers believed in God, but most of them did not believe that God inspired the Old and New Testaments or sent His son to die and rise from the dead as the ultimate payment for human sin. The God of the Declaration of Independence is a providential deity who created the world and the people in it, but there is nothing in this important American document that defines this God in terms of the Incarnation or the Trinity.

The United States Constitution never mentions God or Christianity but does forbid religious tests for office. The First Amendment rejects a state-sponsored church and celebrates the free-exercise of religion. This is hardly the kind of stuff by which Christian nations are made. Yet Barton and Jeffress invoke these founders and these documents to defend the idea that the United States was founded as a distinctly Christian nation.

If the Christian Right, and by extension the 81% of evangelical voters who use its political playbook, are operating on such a weak historical foundation, why doesn't someone correct their faulty views and dubious claims?

We do.

We have.

But countering bad history with good history is not as easy as it sounds. David Barton and his fellow Christian nationalist purveyors of the past are well-funded by Christian conservatives who know that the views of the past they are peddling serve their political agenda. Barton has demonized Christian intellectuals and historians as sheep in wolves' clothing. They may call themselves Christians on Sunday morning, but, according to Barton, their "world view" has been shaped by the secular universities where they earned their Ph.Ds. Thanks to Barton, many conservative evangelicals do not trust academic and professional historians—even academic and professional historians with whom they share a pew on Sunday mornings.

I know this first-hand from some of the negative emails and course evaluation forms I received after teaching a Sunday School course on the history of religion and politics at the Evangelical Free Church congregation where my family worship every Sunday. Because I was a college history professor—even a college history professor at a Christian college with strong evangelical roots—I could not be trusted.

What David Barton does not understand is that there are hundreds of evangelical historians who see their work as part of their Christian identity and vocation. These historians are women and men who pursue truth about the past wherever it leads. This pursuit of truth is a deeply Christian pursuit, as is the case with all efforts to distinguish truth from error.

When people like David Barton cherry-pick from the past to promote political agendas, they do a disservice to the past, fail to treat it with integrity, and ultimately harm their Christian witness in the world. They make evangelicals look foolish. This is not what Paul described in 1 Corinthians 1:18 as the "foolishness of the cross," it is just good old-fashioned foolishness. It is a product of what evangelical historian Mark Noll has described as the ["Scandal of the Evangelical Mind."](#)

Many of us engaged in trying to bring good history to the evangelical church need the support of Christians who are concerned about the direction Donald Trump, the Christian Right, and the pseudo-historians who prop-up their political agenda are trying to take the country and the church. Good history is complex. It is nuanced. And it is an essential part of truly worshipping God with our minds (Luke 10:27). Unfortunately, complexity, nuance, and intellectual discipleship are not the kinds of subjects that inspire Christians to dig into their pocketbooks.

What would it take to fund evangelical historians to travel to receptive churches around the country and spend some concentrated time teaching American religious history, and American history more broadly, to lay men and women? Perhaps such visits could also include times of worship and prayer?

It is unlikely that such an effort would reach the Robert Jeffress' of the world. but there are many evangelicals who are open and willing to listen and learn. This was another lesson I took away from my Sunday School class. In fact, the criticism I received paled in comparison with the

positive comments I got from those who had never heard a fellow evangelical offer a different, more accurate, view of American history.

American evangelical political engagement is built on a very weak historical foundation. It is time that Christian philanthropists, motivated by an entrepreneurial spirit informed by the pursuit of truth and a concern for the testimony of the Gospel in the world, take the long view and invest in responsible Christian thinking about the American past. The American republic, and more importantly, the witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, depends on it.

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