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Abstract

"*Believe Me* chronicles the story of evangelical political engagement in American history and seeks to come to grips with the stark paradox of evangelical support for a president whose character falls so short of their professed ideals."

Posting about the book *Believe Me* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/how-evangelical-fears-paved-the-way-for-donald-trump-a-review-of-believe-me/>

Keywords

In All Things, book review, John Fea, Believe Me, evangelical, Donald Trump

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

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How Evangelical Fears Paved the Way for Donald Trump: A Review of “Believe Me”

Scott Culpepper

Title: *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*

Author: John Fea

Publisher: Eerdmans

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Pages: 248 pages (Hardcover)

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The mystery of evangelical support for Donald Trump touches more than just American politics. Messiah College historian John Fea admits from the outset of *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump* that he is employing the tools of his academic vocation to understand issues that are very personal to him. He recounts how he looked around his congregation on the Sunday morning after the 2016 election, realizing that most of the people worshipping with him were Trump supporters. The sense of betrayal that Fea describes is shared by many who make up what Fea calls the “nineteen percent” of evangelicals who did not support Donald Trump.

Believe Me chronicles the story of evangelical political engagement in American history and seeks to come to grips with the stark paradox of evangelical support for a president whose character falls so short of their professed ideals. Fea argues that the evangelical rights’ political “playbook” utterly failed to persuade mainstream American culture as a whole. While the playbook failed to persuade that segment of Americans outside the Christian fold, Fea indicates it was successful at prescribing the options for political engagement for Christians within the evangelical subcultures. In essence, conservative evangelicals failed to convince mainstream culture but succeeded in radicalizing Christian subcultures. Fea’s thesis connects with my own research and observations at this point as he asserts that much of the credit or blame for that reeducation of evangelicals stems from the effective use of Christian media to steer perspectives towards the right. The playbook has so skewed and limited conservative evangelical political perspectives that many of them assume that there are no other legitimate ways to engage culture as a Christian than the path prescribed to them by the Court Evangelicals.

Believe Me includes several important contributions to the current conversations concerning the role of religion in public life. Any one of them would be significant in their own right. Their presence in the same text arises from Fea’s keen sense of both historical and cultural dynamics of the American story. Chief among them stands Fea’s argument that these shocking “new” developments are not new—and they should not shock us. Fea demonstrates with precise detail how the currents that propelled Donald Trump to the presidency are only the latest examples of evangelical tendencies that stretch back to the colonial era. Examples of evangelicals’ embrace of racist rhetoric to achieve their political goals are provided from the

antebellum period to the efforts of Christian private schools to resist integration in the seventies. Allegations of spiritual infidelity thrown at progressives by Court Evangelicals today bear a resemblance to the allegations tossed at the Democratic-Republicans and the “infidel” Thomas Jefferson in 1800. John Fea’s most valuable contribution here may well be to force us to face a historical reality that we already knew but did not want to acknowledge. The tendencies within American Christianity that enable Donald Trump are not an anomaly. They have always existed within the mainstream of evangelical culture, embedded alongside the better angels of evangelical spiritual outreach and social activism.

Fea’s analysis of the character and foundation of the evangelical tendencies that led to Trump’s election provides another valuable contribution. Fea writes, “The evangelical road to Donald Trump has been marked by the politics of fear, power, and nostalgia” (179). Fea amply demonstrates with supporting evidence how each of these factors have framed the “playbook.” Fear of change, addiction to political power, and adherence to a cleverly devised fable of an American Christian golden age merged to create evangelical subcultures ripe for exploitation by a figure like Donald Trump. Fea unites the work of many scholars here in one cogent and thorough diagnosis of the ills afflicting modern American evangelicalism. His argument contains careful nuance and contributes light to a conversation suffused with too much darkness.

Fea’s conclusion offers a way forward that both inspires and demonstrates the humility he encourages us to adopt. Rather than provide a prescription for our ills, Fea points us to a healthy example of Christian political, social, and cultural engagement in the history of the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement involved Christians making a difference from the margins rather than from the centers of public power. Their adoption of courage in the face of fear, humility rather than hatred, and hope for the future rather than slavery to nostalgia provide a model for us all. Fea’s poignant description of his tour of civil rights sights and interactions with leaders of the movement connects his readers to this living history in a powerful way. His work deserves the label “jeremiad” in the very best sense as Fea laments the folly of Court Evangelicalism while moving beyond history to a prophetic “social criticism.”

John Fea’s *Believe Me* delivers a message primed to provoke conversations. It should be the starting point for sober and sustained dialogue concerning where we go from here. Like every good jeremiad, it is also a stirring call to action. While some may argue that Fea places too much emphasis on fear to the exclusion of other conservative evangelical motivations, these individuals underestimate how much other conservative evangelical motivations are founded on and permeated by their fear. No matter their personal politics, Christian readers are confronted with the paradox of evangelical support for a leader whose personal and political life repudiates many of the ideals they claim to hold dear. In the end, the book is less about Donald Trump than it is about what support for him reveals about the persistent failure of white American Christians to deal with the problems of racism, materialism, legalism, and xenophobia. It is about the consequences that follow when Christians choose to resort to the easy road of political coercion to produce change rather than trusting in the power of their message to change hearts and minds. *Believe Me* challenges hearts and minds in all the best ways.