

Are Christians Who Support Trump Abandoning Their Faith?

Donald Trump's candidacy has sparked a civil war inside American Christianity.

Trump's popularity among self-identified evangelical Christians has led national figures in American Christianity to question whether large swaths of the church even know what their faith teaches, and how it applies to public and political life.

The split is between a subset of evangelicals best categorized as "creedal" believers—those who take their faith most seriously and who oppose Trump. Less devout Christians, often described as "notional" or "cultural," are more open to the businessman and GOP front-runner. The majority of national evangelical leaders are on the side of creedal believers.

If Trump becomes the Republican nominee, many of these creedal evangelicals who have traditionally voted Republican say they would distance themselves from the GOP. But nobody knows whether this would result in evangelicals moving over to vote for the Democratic nominee or whether there would be a broader movement among conservatives to form a third party.

Nonetheless, many anti-Trump Christian leaders believe that the American church has been in decline for decades, leaving many casual Christians – for whom faith is more of a cultural identity rather than a day-to-day experience – vulnerable to Trump's appeals to anger and resentment.

Anti-Trump evangelicals have not quite questioned the faith of Trump voters. But they've come close, arguing that Trump supporters are not applying Christian thinking and values to their decisions at the polls.

“For some evangelicals, Christianity is no longer shaping their politics,” Peter Wehner, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, wrote recently. “With Mr. Trump in view, their faith lies subordinate.”

Mike Farris, the chancellor of Patrick Henry College, a Christian university in Northern Virginia, told me that Christians who “stay true to their faith” would vote for someone other than Trump.

And Russell Moore, head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s public policy arm, considers a vote for Trump “deeply inconsistent with an application of the Christian faith.” Moore wrote an op-ed in February for *The Washington Post* with the headline, “Why this election makes me hate the word ‘evangelical.’”

These Christian leaders see Trump as the antithesis of everything they and their faith stand for. Trump’s arrogance and brashness – including his statement that he has never had to ask God for forgiveness – contradict their belief in the importance of humility. His past infidelities, divorces and his long record of misogynistic comments stand in opposition to their high regard for personal character. They see Trump’s willingness to lie, blatantly and repeatedly, as morally wrong, alarming and insulting.

To take just one example, this past Sunday Trump denied that he’d said Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., was not a war hero because he was captured and held as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. “Oh no, no, no. What I was – I never did that. You know that,” Trump said in Ohio to Keith Maupin, whose son Matt was taken prisoner in Iraq and killed.

In July, however, Trump said publicly – in a conversation that was videotaped – that McCain was a “loser” because he lost the 2008 presidential election, and said of McCain, “He’s not a war hero.”

"He's a war hero because he was captured. I liked people that weren't captured," Trump said.

Finally, evangelical leaders see Trump's inclination toward bullying, his admiration for tyrannical governments and his disregard for the rule of law as indications he would seek to use power despotically himself.

True power and strength, according to the Christian faith, is found in service, self-sacrifice for others and in loving and forgiving one's enemies.

The response to all these concerns from the most prominent evangelical leader supporting Trump is simple.

"We're not voting for a pastor-in-chief," says Jerry Falwell, Jr., the president of Liberty University.

"God called King David a man after God's own heart, even though he was an adulterer and a murderer," Falwell said recently in an interview with the Liberty student newspaper. "You have to choose the leader that would make the best king or president, and not necessarily someone who would be a good pastor."

(When Falwell's comment was made public over the weekend, many evangelicals immediately took to Twitter to point out that David repented and asked God to forgive his sins, unlike Trump.)

On that score, Falwell says he thinks Trump is the best leader to stop terrorist attacks, reduce illegal immigration and deal with the national debt.

"I think maybe after the country is saved and restored, perhaps evangelicals will start voting in traditional patterns again," Falwell told the newspaper.

Falwell's dismissal of concerns over Trump's character and moral core are similar to the way many other Christian voters

think about Trump. Most don't focus on, or don't care, about Trump's personal background. They just want him to fix whatever problem they think is foremost in the United States, whether that's too much free trade and joblessness, or Christian values not being respected enough, or the size and scope of the federal government.

Falwell is one of the few national evangelical leaders standing behind Trump. Robert Jeffress, the head of a 11,000-member Southern Baptist megachurch in Dallas, is more of a regional figure. Franklin Graham, son of the famous evangelist Billy Graham and head of the Christian aid group Samaritan's Purpose, has spoken favorably of Trump but has not formally endorsed him. And Trump's only other significant religious backers are televangelists and prosperity preachers such as Paula White and Kenneth Copeland, whose reception around the evangelical world is decidedly mixed.

White recently spoke at a rally for Trump and defended his faith. "He loves God," she said. Raising the religious liberty issue that concerns many conservative Christians, White said that Trump would protect those who worry "that wholesale persecution is coming to the faithful in the U.S."

Concern about an anti-Christian mood in the country is a high priority for many Trump supporters who are practicing, devout Christians.

"Many Christians – and believers in other faith traditions as well – are feeling overwhelmed, sidelined and misunderstood," write the Barna Group's David Kinnaman and co-author Gabe Lyons in their new book, *Good Faith: Being a Christian When Society Thinks You're Irrelevant and Extreme*.

"This isn't just a feeling," they write. "When one-third of college-aged adults want nothing to do with religion, and 59 percent of Christian young adults drop out of church at some point in their 20s, it's the new reality."

One factor complicating attempts to understand how religion may be driving voters in this presidential election cycle is that when the term “evangelical” is defined – instead of letting poll respondents self-identify – support for Trump within that community drops off dramatically.

Among evangelicals who go to church every week or regularly, one Barna Group study found, Cruz is the preferred candidate of 30 percent, while Trump earned 24 percent, Rubio 14 percent and a handful of other candidates 30 percent. In the South Carolina primary, Trump did well in counties where church attendance is low, and poorly in counties where church attendance is high.

The Barna Group has also worked to drill down with even more detail to identify serious, practicing evangelicals. In late January, it conducted a weeklong national survey of 869 registered voters. If anyone identified as a Christian, pollsters asked them nine theological questions. Voters who answered affirmatively to all nine questions were classified as evangelicals. Voters who answered yes to some of the questions but not all were labeled either “non-evangelical born again” or “notional Christian.”

“Among evangelicals, voters were split between Cruz (38 percent) and Carson (35 percent). Rubio only attracted 14 percent, and Trump got 11 percent,” said Barna’s Kinnaman, who conducted the survey.

“Non-evangelical born again voters showed little resemblance to the preferences of their evangelical brethren,” Kinnaman wrote. “Among the non-evangelical born-again public, Trump was the clear favorite (38 percent), equaling the support for Cruz (23 percent) and Carson (15 percent) combined.”

And among notional Christians, Trump’s numbers were even higher. He drew 43 percent of their support, compared to Rubio’s 26 percent and Cruz’s 15 percent.

It's also worth noting that Trump's support numbers are higher among Catholics than they are among evangelicals. Trump won 30 percent of Catholics in New Hampshire, compared to 27 percent of evangelicals, and 44 percent of Catholics in Iowa, compared to just 22 percent of evangelicals there. In South Carolina, Trump captured 42 percent of the Catholic vote while picking up one-third of evangelicals.

But among Catholics as well, there is a divide between grassroots voters who have been marking their ballots for Trump and national elites who oppose his candidacy. A group of 37 Catholic leaders signed a letter this past week urging their fellow believers to support other Republican candidates.

"We understand that many good people, including Catholics, have been attracted to the Trump campaign because the candidate speaks to issues of legitimate and genuine concern," states the letter, written by Robby George of Princeton University and George Weigel of the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

"We urge our fellow Catholics and all our fellow citizens to consider, however, that there are candidates for the Republican nomination who are far more likely than Mr. Trump to address these concerns, and who do not exhibit his vulgarity, oafishness, shocking ignorance, and – we do not hesitate to use the word – demagoguery," they wrote.

The fact that evangelical support for Trump comes primarily from those for whom orthodox belief or daily practice of their faith is least in evidence indicates that something other than theology is driving their political decisions.

"There's a class component. Working-class and lower-class white evangelicals have tended to like Trump," said John Green, director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron in Ohio. "The social profile of the evangelicals for Trump is remarkably similar to

the non-evangelical Trump supporter.”

“It suggests it has more to do with class and economics,” Green said.

There is disagreement among Christians about whether Barna defines evangelicals too narrowly. The National Association of Evangelicals estimates that about 30 percent of the country should be defined as evangelical. But Barna, with its more detailed questions and precise definition, says evangelicals are more like 7 to 11 percent of the population.

And just as conservatives who believe in ideological orthodoxy oppose Trump because he threatens to fundamentally change the belief system of the Republican Party, evangelical leaders who oppose Trump do so because they say he is compromising the core message of Christianity.

Moore said the roots of the Trump phenomenon were clear to him six years ago, when then-Fox News personality Glenn Beck held a massive rally on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The response from evangelicals to a Mormon TV celebrity calling for religious revival demonstrated to Moore that many Christians had lost sight of the true aims of their faith.

“I had all these Christians tweeting, ‘Turn on C-SPAN. Glenn Beck is preaching the gospel,’” Moore said.

That word – gospel – means “Good News” in its original Greek form. To the most devoted evangelicals, the term refers to something very specific: the Good News of the Christian gospel is the virgin birth, sinless life and substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, to save sinners and reconcile them to God.

That message, and its implications for everyday living, is what evangelicals like Moore believe Christians are called and commanded to devote their lives to embodying and sharing.

But many evangelicals have begun to look to cultural or

political outcomes to be a different form of “Good News,” Moore said.

With the Beck rally, Moore said, “what you had happening was a populist movement led by a charismatic figure that religious Christians were encouraged to embrace as a civil religious awakening in the country.”

“What’s happening now is you have the very same sort of populist sloganeering coming from Donald Trump,” he said. “Where people were encouraged to ignore Glenn Beck’s heretical Christology, now many Christians are ignoring Donald Trump’s personal character, and many of them are receiving him as a Christian, while redefining the gospel to do so.”

“The faith demands priority over the politics. The faith should shape the politics, not the other way around,” Moore said. “And once that is compromised, then the entire point is winning elections and building coalitions. If that’s the case, then whatever is in the majority at the moment can be seen as right.”

In that sense, Moore and a substantial number of other evangelical leaders believe, Trump is misleading American Christians about the very nature of power. Rather than having confident faith that empowers them to love and serve others, Trump has tapped into fear and anger, and channeled it into hatred of the stranger.