What Kind of Christian?

Evangelicalism, Christian Nationalism, and Public Life

We come together as the nation approaches the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and at a time of hyperpolarization, marked not only by rising political violence but also a growing suspicion across the land that many of our neighbors may in fact be our enemies. We are living through the end of a certain vision of U.S. Christendom and through a period of maximal anxiety across our society about the future of pluralistic democracy itself.

A generation ago a certain kind of Christian had reason to believe that their faith was breaking through in bold and beautiful ways. These folks had long called themselves evangelical but increasingly, by the 1960s, answered to the label Mainline. They were believers who embraced a kind of inclusive, egalitarian vein of what one could call Christian nationalism—certainly they hoped that their nation and the whole world would better reflect the deepest values of their faith. They wanted, as Walter Rauschenbusch once wrote, "to Christianize the social order." Theirs was a faith that increasingly insisted on expanding Civil Rights for African Americans and women, though it was not beyond paternalism and could even be racist and patriarchal. Their faith largely held that the New Deal and Great Society were in some sense faithful responses to biblical calls to care for the poor, the widow, and the orphan, not to mention Jesus's insistence that the laborers are worthy of their hire.

Fast forward to today and we find another kind of Christian reveling in the moment, sensing that a long-hoped-for revival is underway. These folks

also embrace the label evangelical, read the same Bible, and in some cases sing at least some of the same hymns. But their public priorities are at wide variance with the earlier generation I just mentioned and their vein of Christian nationalism is far less optimistic about the promise of pluralism and the benefits of sharing a society with neighbors who hail from other countries and who practice different faiths. The New Deal and Great Society often seem like big mistakes to these folks, who have rallied in vast numbers behind a remade 21st-century Right.

Evangelicalism. Christian Nationalism. Public life. These are not small topics. I teach entire courses on them over at the Seminary. We have four sessions together, so it's going to be a whirlwind tour.

One of the things I'll say at the outset and which I told Dave when we sat down together to plan this series is that, for me, this series is not primarily a primer on "those folks out there." The stories of evangelical Protestantism and Christian Nationalism in the United States are also part of our story, by which I mean the story of a congregation like Nassau and a denomination like the PCUSA.

I hope this will become clear even today, as we think together about the rise of evangelical faith in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yes, we're going back quite a ways in order to get perspective on today.

I want to resist a transhistorical understanding of a continuous evangelical tradition that extends from the Reformation to the present day. There have been different projects or movements that embraced the name evangelical. Today I want to talk about what I'll call Evangelical 1.0—2.0 and 3.0 are

coming! At the same time, we will attend to threads and themes that run through the centuries.

Without further ado…

The Christianity of this Land and the Christianity of Christ

Lethargic Christian adherence in the colonies…

(**SLIDE**)—hardly a golden age for religious belonging. Scrambles many presumptions about the arc of Christian life in the US.

(**SLIDE**)—Anglican establishment in the southern colonies. Congregational establishment in Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut. Fervency there is dying out. Puritan order decaying. Many afraid to join the church. Middle colonies are most religiously diverse.

(**SLIDE**)—long a shortage of clergy. Concentrated in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania.

(**SLIDE**)—clergy go with the establishments—Congregational in northeast, Anglican in the South.

The anxieties of the Puritan-turned-Congregationalist establishment were the backdrop for an important episode in colonial America.

The First Great Awakening.

On September 19th, 1740, George Whitefield (**SLIDE**), a twenty-four year

old, Oxford-educated preacher quickly becoming known for his remarkable

speaking skills, was called before the Anglican clergy of Boston, Massachusetts, to receive a stern talking to. Whitefield was then in the midst of one of the most extraordinary preaching tours the world has ever seen. In the next two months he would preach in seven of the American colonies, often multiple times each day. His meetings were almost always held outdoors, in great fields where the crowds were regularly in the thousands. By the time all was said and done, he would speak before at least half the population of these colonies.

This colonial preaching tour came on the heels of four years of the same in England, where his outdoor services had ruffled the feathers of many a parish priest, who felt he was encroaching on their territory, but had excited the laiety. The American colonists were similarly aroused. The Boston papers had written obsessively about the young preacher's triumphs throughout the preceding months and local excitement had reached fever pitch by the time Whitefield arrived.

But Dr. Timothy Cutler, for one, the Church of England's senior minister in New England, was not pleased in the least. He and four others

confronted Whitefield this Friday afternoon with a barrage of accusatory questions:

1. "We hear that you called Gilbert Tennent, the Presbyterian revivalist in New Jersey, a 'faithful minister of Jesus Christ,' but surely someone ordained as a Presbyterian could not be a real minister."
    a. Whitefield's response: Tennent was in his view a faithful minister of the Gospel.
2. "How come your supposed friend and colleague, Charles Wesley, supports the Church of England so vigorously but you do not?"
    a. Whitefield's answer: God has changed Wesley's mind on this matter and he is now as willing to work with non-Anglicans as I.
3. "We have heard that when you were in Savannah, you allowed a Baptist minister to take part in a communion service that you led. Could this really be true?"
    a. Whitefield's reply: The rumor is true, and moreover I am prepared as a minister of the Church of England to receive communion from the hand of a Baptist.

Whitefield went on to elaborate with this intriguing statement:
In his view "It was best to preach the new birth, and the power of godliness, and not to insist so much on the form: for people would never be brought to one mind as to that; nor did Jesus Christ ever intend it." When one of his Anglican interrogators followed up by asserting that the Church of England was the only true church, Whitefield could not agree. "I saw regenerate souls," he related, "among the Baptists, among the Presbyterians, among the Independents, and among the Church [ie. Anglican] folks – all children of God, and yet all born again in a different way of worship: and who can tell which is the most evangelical?"

In retrospect, historians have seen Whitefield as a crucial figure in the emergence of a global evangelical tradition. His speaking tours were part of a larger movement within the Anglo-American world: revivals were then sweeping through the colonies as well as the mother country, leaving the religious landscape transformed in their wake. The kind of Protestantism that emerged from this historical process would become in the succeeding

generations arguably as different from the religion of Luther and Calvin as theirs had been from the Roman Catholicism of the Middle Ages.

Where did evangelical Protestantism come from? The story begins in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, where ever since the Reformation the cultural terrain had been constantly shifting. During this period a series of widespread but poorly organized religious transformations began to occur that historians have since seen as essential precursors to the rise of an evangelical vein of faith. Collectively known as the "religion of the heart," (**SLIDE**) these include transitions:

1. from Christian faith defined as correct doctrine toward Christian faith defined as correct living;
2. from godly order as the heart of the church's concern toward godly fellowship as the principal goal;
3. from authoritative interpretation of Scripture originating with church elites toward lay and more democratic appropriation of the Bible;
4. from obedience toward expression;

5. from music as performed by well-trained specialists toward music as a shared expression of ordinary people;
6. from preaching as learned discourses about God toward preaching as impassioned appeals for "closing with Christ"

These various impulses were carried forward especially in the international Puritan movement,; in pietism, a movement that began in seventeenth-century Germany and soon spread to Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and more, emphasizing at all points the importance of the inner life of faith; as well as amongst some high-church Anglicans, who fought vigorously for a return to the pure faith of the early church.

These groups were developing on parallel tracks for decades, however, before anything resembling what we might call evangelical Protestantism began to emerge. But then, in the 1730s, the pace of events suddenly began to quicken.

In Northampton, MA, a pastor by the name of Jonathan Edwards writes an account of the awakening of his sleepy town and others like it. "This work of God, as it was carried on, and the number of true saints multiplied,

soon made a glorious alteration in the town: so that in the spring and summer following, anno 1735, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of love, nor of joy, and yet so full of distress as it was then. There were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house. It was a time of joy in families on account of salvation being brought to them; parents rejoicing over their children as new born, and husbands over their wives, and wives over their husbands." He went on and on, and described similar happenings in other towns too.

In late 1735, meanwhile, a young man named John Wesley decided to make the dangerous voyage across the Atlantic to accept a call to ministry in Georgia. There he found the going rough. Despite his vigorous preaching to both English settlers and Native Americans, they remained largely lethargic in their faith. But through his interactions with a pietist group known as the Moravians – whose communal meals and collective worship exuded passion and love – he began to experience the divine in ways he never had before. Wesley's ongoing relations with the Moravians proved the single largest factor in his, as well as his brother Charles', experience of

awakening in May of 1738. At a service at St. Paul's Cathedral on the 24th of that month, he remembered,

"while the speaker was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death."

In the months following this experience Wesley set out with a band of friends to Moravia, where he further immersed himself in the pietist tradition. He returned to England in mid-September of 1738, and Whitefield arrived back in the motherland shortly thereafter. When the Wesleys and Whitefield gathered in December for feasting and prayer, they marveled at the work God was doing. And this was only the beginning.

Whitefield returned to America in 1739, where he set off on the preaching tour with which we began. "My one design is to bring poor souls to Jesus Christ," he declared. Most Anglican ministers refused to let him preach in their churches, so just as in England, he took to the fields and parks. On

October 12 Whitefield's farewell sermon at Boston Common attracted the largest crowd ever gathered in colonial America, 23,000 listeners, which is to say, more than the population of the city itself. One Bostonian described the experience this way:

"To have seen him when he first commenced, one would have thought him anything but enthusiastic and glowing; but as he proceeded, his heart warmed with his subject, and his manner became impetuous, till, forgetful of everything around him, he seemed to kneel at the throne of Jehovah and to beseech in agony for his fellow-beings."

Whitefield's success depended not only on his dramatic personal style, but also upon his marketing savvy. He regularly used the press to his advantage, publishing glowing reports of his accomplishments in one town even while building anticipation of his arrival in the next. He was the first in a long line of evangelicals who found ways to harness popular culture and the latest technologies as they went about their gospel work.

Whitefield and Edwards were both enslavers. They were not seeking to overthrow all authority. Yet the early revivals produced unexpected

challenges to the received order and entrenched hierarchies of the colonial world.

Edwards thought he could control the energies but he was wrong.

The revivalists kept breaking the rules of this traditional game by preaching in other pastor's parishes and thereby trampling upon the local authorities. And if this wasn't bad enough, imagine the dismay that ensued when, on March 8, 1740, a Presbyterian minister by the name of Gilbert Tennent preached a sermon entitled, "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry," in which he declared that many New England preachers were not themselves saved. His words created a schism within Presbyterianism between "Old" and "New" Lights, those who opposed the revivals and those who supported the same. Similar infighting had already erupted amongst the Congregationalists by the time that James Davenport arrived in Boston on June 25, 1742, and named 12 Boston ministers that he believed had not yet been converted. Equally horrifying for Old Lights was the book-burning that Davenport organized the following year in New London, Connecticut. This sending of Christian classics up in flames was

exactly the kind of excess that worried the defenders of the traditional order.

Yet there even deeper threats to authority abroad in the land. Whereas the English had long believed that the divine communicated primarily through structures and leaders – the king, the archbishop, etc – the revivalists preached about a God who spoke directly to individuals. And not just to the rich and famous, but also to the lowly. As the revival fervor quickened throughout the colonies in the 1740s, 50s, and 60s, it increasingly attracted not the wealthy merchants and planters but rather the enslaved, indigenuous persons, poor white men, and women of all classes.

We have record for example of a visionary woman named Bathsheba Kingsley, who several times in the early 1740s stole away on a borrowed horse on the Sabbath without her husband's consent to deliver messages in other towns. Not surprisingly, she was called before a cadre of [male] religious authorities to explain her disorderliness: she explained that she had been "caught up in God," and was no longer an ordinary goodwife but instead a divinely inspired prophetess. The church council decided she had

"gone quite out of her place" and had proved a "brawling women," but in a sign that times were changing, issued only a mild punishment and sent her on her way.

Even more striking is the story of Sarah Osborn, who was born in 1714, the same year as Whitefield, in England. Her family moved to Newport, Rhode Island, when she was young. During the 1760s she led a revival that brought as many as five hundred people—including large numbers of enslaved persons—to her house each week. The very idea of interracial and interdenominational prayer meetings was as much of a scandal as you might imagine. "As God has gathered I dare not Scatter," she reflected. In response to the many who wondered how a woman could lead such gatherings, she pointed out, "Christ's strength is made perfect in my weakness. I am nothing and can do nothing without Him. He has chosen the weak things of the world."

Such challenges to existing order were pronounced.

In contrast to the stiff formality characteristic of Southern Anglicanism, the Baptists addressed each other as "Brother" and "Sister," dressed in conspicuously plain clothes, and gathered regularly for "love feasts" in which they engaged in an emotional kind of worship, praying, singing, and displayed affection for one another in ways that would have made the southern gentry cringe. One dissenting minister, Daniel Fristoe, later recalled this of a baptism service:

"Being Sunday about 2000 people came together; after preaching I heard others that proposed to be baptized…then we went to the water where I preached and baptized 29 persons…When I had finished we went to a field and making a circle in the center, there laid hands on the persons baptized. The multitude stood round weeping, but when we sang "Come Ye That Love the Lord" and they were so affected that they lifted up their hands and faces toward heaven and discovered such cheerful countenances in the midst of flowing tears as I had never seen before."

Converts found in these communal gatherings an escape from the harsh realities of disease, debt, and deprivation, an alternative to a life with which they had grown disenchanted. Indeed, there was great power not only in the internal dynamics of the community, but also in the contrast it posed to the life of the broader society. The great draw of the dissenting groups is seen in their rapid growth, in part driven by ordinary people's intense dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Across the South, evangelical revivals attracted the poor and the lowly, those on the margins of society. These people found in the revivals a new

source of dignity and worth, as well as love and community, and all of it outside the established channels of high society from which they had long been disaffected. Enslaved persons found an affirmation of their basic humanity, women a confirmation of their significance in the eyes of God.

Historians have long debated the relationship between the Awakenings and the Revolution. There's no doubt that the latter accelerated the former.

In the era of the Revolution many Christians come to take Republicanism, which had long been viewed as suspicious, for granted. Here I mean not the political party but rather a set of ideas about society: worries about concentrated power; belief in the benefits of liberty; and an understanding of the reciprocity of personal morality and social well-being. Christianity had long been pro-monarchy. For reasons I don't have time to get into today, that changed in the era of the Revolution and a certain vein of evangelical Protestant faith and U.S. nationalism are fused. Worries that disestablishment would undermine faith but it did the exact opposite.

--Boomtowns and fields like Cane Ridge, awash in a sea of faith

Evangelical Protestantism 1.0 (SLIDE)

--suspicion of authority and expertise

--elevation of the ordinary person, who could hear directly from God and read the Bible for themselves, and common sense interpretation of scripture. Powerful encounters with God. Religion of the Heart indeed.

--No better illustration than Jarena Lee (**SLIDE**), who was born into freedom in Revolutionary-era Cape May, NJ—1783. She wrote about her spiritual life in an autobiography, where she remembered a "voice whispered in my heart, saying, 'Pray for sanctification,' I again bowed in the same place, at the same time, and said, 'Lord sanctify my soul for Christ's sake.' That very instant, as if lightning had darted through me, I sprang to my feet, and cried, 'The Lord has sanctified my soul!' There was none to hear this but the angels who stood around to witness my joy—and Satan, whose malice raged all the more. That Satan was there, I knew; for no sooner had I cried out 'The Lord has sanctified my soul,' than there seemed another voice behind me, saying 'No, it is too great a workd to be done.' But another spirit said 'Bow down for the witness—I received it--

thou art sanctified!' The first I knew of myself after that, I was standing in the yard with my hands spread out, and looking with my face toward heaven."

As if that wasn't enough, Lee went on to recount that the Lord called her—a Black woman, in the time of slavery—to preach. It was four and five years after her sanctification. "to my utter surprise there seemed to sound a voice which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understand, which said to me, 'Go preach the Gospel!' I immediately replied aloud, 'No one will believe me.' Again I listened, and again the same voice seemed to say—'Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and will turn your enemies to become your friends."

She goes to Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He says another woman had come to him "But as to women preaching, he said that our Discipline knew nothing at all about it—that it did not call for women preachers." A good institutionalists answer. It's not in the book.

But the Spirit would not let Lee go. She went on to exhort and to preach. "O how careful ought we to be, lest thorugh our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God."

It was the spirit of the awakenings.

Evangelical 1.0 continued (SLIDE). Benevolent Empire. Postmillennial.

--all kinds of voluntary societies. American Bible Society. American Tract Society. American Home Missionary Society. American Temperance Society. American Sunday School Union. Society for the Relief of Poor Widows. Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. American Colonization Society, which was founded out of this town and church and Seminary.

Focus on improvement. Building the Kingdom of God. Optimistic postmillennial eschatological vision. Remarkably ecumenical, with Methodists and Baptists supplying many of the people, and Presbyterians and Congregationalists much of the organization.

The Beecher family:

Lyman campaigns for temperance and the evangelization of the West

Catharine is an educator and leads a campaign against Indian Removal that would also channel energies into abolition

Harriett Beecher Stowe, the author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, to whom Abraham Lincoln purportedly said in 1862, "So you are the little woman who made this big war."

American Anti-Slavery Society was at the radical edge.

The fight over slavery would tear this whole evangelical Protestant world apart. (**SLIDE**)

One key development was the emergence in the 1830s of a massive Plantation mission.

- 3 components:
  - mission to society: make the South safer
  - mission to masters: to see slaves as persons
  - mission to the enslaved: to convince slaves that whites had their best interests at heart and to convert them to the gospel
- assessing the mission

- in part, an assertion of evangelicals' newfound power and prestige
- in part, an effort to make southern society into an integrated whole where everyone shared the same values and behavior patterns
- above all, the Mission represented a major departure from a now bygone time, when marginal evangelicals preached that egalitarian gospel. Then they had stood for an alternative to the cold, hierarchical norms of Southern society, preaching a gospel that undermined traditional patterns of deference. Now they preached a gospel in which the message was not so much to repent and throw off the authorities of this world but rather to repent and submit to those who ruled the world. Once radicals, they had become the guardians.
    - One historian creatively writes that southern evangelicals came up with a new litany: "Slaveholding is a civil institution and we will not interfere. The character of civil institutions is governed by politics and we will not

interfere. Politics are beyond the scope of the church and we will not interfere.

In the antebellum South we see the rise of white Christian pro-slavery theology, with Presbyterians like James Thornwell, making the case that slavery was not something to be tolerated but rather a positive good. "The parties in the conflict are not merely abolitionists and slaveholders. They are atheists, socialists, communists, red republicans, Jacobins on the one side, and friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battleground—Christianity and atheism the combatants; and the progress of humanity at stake." Thornwell had raw material to draw upon, as Christianity and white supremacy had been entwined going back centuries by that point.

Mass conversion of the enslaved, who did not take up the faith as it was handed to them.

- Lucretia Alexander, for example, had this to say about what slaves did when they grew tired of the white folks' preacher:
  - "The preacher came and…He'd just say, 'Serve your masters. Don't steal your master's turkey. Don't steal your

> master's chickens. Don't steal your master's hogs. Don't steal your master's meat. Do whatsoever your master tells you to do.' Same old thing all the time. My father would have church in dwelling houses and they had to whisper…Sometimes they would have church at his house. That would be when they would want a real meetin' with some real preachin'…They used to sing their songs in a whisper and pray in a whisper. That was a prayer-meeting from house to house once or twice – once or twice a week."

Hush harbors.

Out of this tradition grew support for radical abolition and a ferocious critique of white Christian enslaving. As Douglass (**SLIDE**) writes, "What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference…I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ. I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land."

Most White Christians did not support radical abolition. As Mark Noll writes, the plain reading of scripture that they embraced made it seem like

the Bible was on the side of the enslavers. That would have been the view of many of the folks who once sat in the pews of this very church.

The Methodist and Baptist churches split in the 1840s, the Presbyterians in 1861, with the coming of war.

Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address

"Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered ~ that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses for it must needs be that offenses come but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which in the providence of God must needs come but which having continued through His appointed time He now wills to remove and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him. Fondly do we hope ~ fervently do we pray ~ that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword as was said three thousand years ago so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

How does this relate to evangelicals today:

Populism

Religion of the heart

Sense of entwinement between destiny of church and nation

Entrepreneurial

Conflict over race, gender, and authority

Contrast:

Big-Tent

Postmillennial optimism

Eventually more institutional and bureaucratic