

# [***The relentless focus on White Christian nationalism is spreading a racist myth***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B7W-KKD1-DY7V-G000-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; It's been called an "[*imposter Christianity,"*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/24/us/white-christian-nationalism-blake-cec/index.html) a heretical faith that "[*sanctifies lies*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/21/us/william-barber-christian-nationalism-blake-cec/index.html)," and "[*the most serious threat*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/24/us/white-christian-nationalism-blake-cec/index.html)" to democracy in America.

That's how critics have described White Christian nationalism, a [*deviant*](https://jemartisby.substack.com/p/is-white-christian-nationalism-christian?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=242650&post_id=140756126&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=78clo&utm_medium=email) strain of religionthat has [*infected*](https://scholarship.shu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3514&context=shlr) the political mainstream. White Christian nationalists believe the US was founded as a Christian nation, although the Constitution[*never mentions God*](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/07/05/10-facts-about-religion-and-government-in-the-united-states/#:~:text=While%20the%20U.S.%20Constitution%20does,Allegiance%20and%20on%20U.S.%20currency.)and [*enshrines*](https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-1/) the separation of church and state. Itsadherents twist biblical language to justify violence, sexism and hostility toward people of color.

But there is another cost to the spread of White Christian nationalism that no one mentions.

The relentless coverage of White Christian nationalism is spreading a racist myth: that Whiteness is the default setting for evangelical Christianity.

This is one of the unintended consequences of the media and public's fascination with the subject.Feeding this perception is an avalanche of [*books*](https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/christian-nationalism), articles and now a [*Hollywood film*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/entertainment/2024/01/21/evangelical-voters-christian-nationalism-god-and-country-documentary-rob-reiner-acostanr-vpx.cnn) on the beliefs of White evangelical Christians - the biggest followers of Christian nationalism. In[*a February 2023 survey*](https://www.prri.org/research/a-christian-nation-understanding-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism-to-american-democracy-and-culture/),nearly two-thirds of White evangelical Protestants qualified as sympathizers or adherents to Christian nationalism.

The constant linking of Whiteness with evangelical Christianity, though, obscures another major story. There are millions of Black, Latino, African and Asian evangelical Christians who are already profoundly changing America. They represent what one scholar [*calls*](https://wheatonbillygraham.com/de-europeanization-american-christianity/) the "de-Europeanization of American Christianity."

And these non-White evangelicals will likely not only save the American church but transform the nation's ***politics***.

This future will belong to people like [*Pastor Peter Lim*](https://www.4pointes.org/staff), founder of a growing congregation of Asian-Americans called "[*4Pointes Church of Atlanta*](https://www.4pointes.org/)." Lim, a Korean American evangelical, says the media's hyperfocus on White Christian nationalism often renders communities like his invisible.

He says he's attended evangelical conferences where the only people who are featured onstage are White pastors or leaders. He wrote in an [*essay*](https://sola.network/article/unintentional-invisibility/) that Asian-American evangelicals often experience "perpetual invisibility" - akin towhat Asian Americans encounter more broadly in this country.

"You just feel overlooked - your story or your experience is minimized," he says. "It's not done intentionally. But you don't feel like you belong. It tells you that your stories don't belong. It does hurt."

Lim's experience is the result of a [*passive form of racism*](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/oacs/wp-content/uploads/sites/140/Key-Terms-Racism.pdf). It's [*not deliberate*](https://www.teenvogue.com/story/racism-against-native-americans) or malign; it's a [*sin of omission*](https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/i/invisible-man/about-invisible-man) rather than commission by many journalists, church leaders and commentators who rightly warn about the dangers posed by White Christian nationalism.

I've [*done it*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/24/us/white-christian-nationalism-blake-cec/index.html) myself:In the past, when I thought about evangelicals, I only saw White Christians.

Why evangelical Christianity may become less conservative

The true definition of "evangelical" has nothing to do with a color or a political party. Evangelicals are [*loosely defined*](https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical/) as Christians who share a "born-again" dramatic personal conversion, who take the Bible seriously or literally and believe they're supposed to spread their faith to others.

Today, however, the definition of an evangelical Christian has been reduced to one category: a White conservative Republican.

Click on any story about evangelicals and you're liable to see a White person, usually a man, clutching a Bible.

But it may surprise some people to learn that in 2024**,** the face of evangelical Christianity in the US is more likely to be brown than White.

The numbers tell the story:

-According to [*a 2017 survey*](https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/september/1-in-3-american-evangelicals-person-of-color-prri-atlas.html), one in three American evangelicals is a person of color.

-A higher number of Black Christians - [*41%*](https://www.prri.org/spotlight/the-importance-of-christianity-to-black-americans/#:~:text=Among%20Black%20Christians%2C%2041%25%20identify,important%20thing%20in%20their%20life) - identify as evangelicals than their [*White Christian counterparts*](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition/white/).

-The [*fastest-growing*](https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/07/latinos-will-determine-future-american-evangelicalism/619551/) segment of evangelicals in the US are Latino Americans.

-And at least [*80%*](https://caac.ptsem.edu/asian-americans-and-the-future-of-protestantism-in-the-u-s/#:~:text=Asian%20Americans%20comprise%2080%20to,corporations%20like%20Google%20and%20Apple.) of the members of evangelical student groups at competitive universities like Princeton, Harvard and Stanford are Asian-American, according to one [*estimate*](https://www.asianamericanchristiancollaborative.com/article/flourish-aacc-president-raymond-chang-on-the-value-of-asian-american-churches).

As [*Carolyn Chen,*](https://ethnicstudies.berkeley.edu/people/carolyn-chen-1/#:~:text=At%20UC%20Berkeley%2C%20Professor%20Chen,in%20the%20Department%20of%20Sociology.) a professor at UC Berkeley who is an authority on Asian American religion, [*said*](https://caac.ptsem.edu/asian-americans-and-the-future-of-protestantism-in-the-u-s/) during a 2022 speech: "Today's evangelical leaders are not just White men with degrees from Oral Roberts University."

Two Asian Americans, for example, [*hold*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/05/03/asian-american-evangelicals/) leadership positions at major evangelical organizations. [*Walter Kim*](https://www.walterkim.org/), a Korean American, is the president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). And [*Tom Lin*](https://intervarsity.org/about-us/leadership/tom-lin), a Taiwanese American, is the president of [*InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA*](https://intervarsity.org/), a nationwide campus Christian ministry.

The [*Rev. William Barber II,*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/21/us/william-barber-christian-nationalism-blake-cec/index.html) a Black pastor and activist who has been [*called*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2018/10/05/closest-person-we-have-martin-luther-king-jr-pastor-activist-william-j-barber-wins-genius-grant/) the "closest person we have to MLK in contemporary America," also identifies as an evangelical Christian.

This change of complexion often produces a change in political perspective. Scholars say non-White evangelicals tend to be conservative on issues like sexuality and abortion but more progressive in ***politics***. A majority of Black evangelicals, for example, [*say*](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/10/19/across-religious-groups-a-majority-of-black-americans-say-opposing-racism-is-an-essential-part-of-their-faith/) that opposing racism is an essential part of their faith.

Chen predicts that "America will become more secular, and Christianity less conservative" as non-White evangelicals increase in number.

Chen says the browning of Christianity in the US owes much to the passage of the [*1965 Immigration and Nationality Act*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/15/us/where-immigrants-come-from-cec/index.html#:~:text=In%201965%2C%20the%20Immigration%20and,come%20to%20the%20United%20States.). That law paved the way for millions of immigrants from Asian, Africa, and Latin American countries to come to the US.

"When we tell the story about American Christianity, we might start with the Puritans - it's basically a European story," says Chen, author of [*"Work Pray Code: When Work Becomes Religion in Silicon Valley.*](https://www.carolynchen.org/)" "But what if we were to tell the story of American Christianity by what it's starting to look like and how it's changing today? That story begins in a place like Taiwan, Korea, or Mexico."

How it feels to belong to a church that does not see you

The focus on White evangelicals presents their non-White counterparts with a challenge: How do you reconcile belonging to a church that often doesn't see you?

That's a problem Black evangelicals have faced for centuries, says the [*Rev. John C. Richards, Jr*](https://www.johncrichardsjr.com/about)., a Black evangelical pastor at Saint Mark Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas. He wrote in a 2017 [*essay*](https://thewitnessbcc.com/black-evangelicals-rise-woke-evangelicalism/) that "White Christians have historically controlled the evangelical narrative."

"Black Christians have always lived in the peripheral vision of White Evangelicalism - our stories remaining unearthed and untold," he wrote.

But Black evangelicals [*have been in*](https://thewitnessbcc.com/black-evangelicals-rise-woke-evangelicalism/) the US since the country's birth. Richards says they have been the "moral compass of our nation," clinging to their faith during slavery and Jim Crow. He cited the evangelical scholar [*Mark Noll*](https://history.nd.edu/people/mark-noll/), who once [*said*](https://www.firstthings.com/article/2001/10/american-evangelical-christianity-an-introduction):

"Black Christians are the ones who have experienced the cross most traumatically in American history yet have not been included in the stories of Evangelicalism."

Richards deals with this challenge by asserting his evangelical identity in any forum he can. He uses social media, sermons and his "[*The Questions Worth Answering"*](https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/the-questions-worth-answering-podcast-john-I3a_-HMUPLt/#google_vignette) podcast to highlight the faith and contributions of Black evangelicals.

And he continues to claim the term "evangelical," despite its association with conservative White Americans.

"I'm not ready to abandon it just because someone co-opted it and just because people are misusing the word," he says.

The Rev. John [*Onwuchekwa,*](https://www.johno.co/) a pastor and [*entrepreneur*](https://www.johno.co/ventures) based in Georgia, has a different response.

The son of Nigerian immigrants, he says he grew exhausted trying to defend his perspective on race while he was a pastor with the Southern Baptist Convention, an [*ultra-conservative*](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/southern-baptist-convention-bans-female-pastors-ejecting-several-churches-in-the-process), predominately White evangelical denomination.

Onwuchekwa and the congregation he co-founded, the [*Cornerstone Church,*](https://cornerstoneatl.org/) eventually [*left*](https://baptistnews.com/article/john-onwuchekwa-leaves-atlanta-pastorate/) the Southern Baptist Convention.

Onwuchekwa says he no longer uses the term "evangelical" to describe himself.

"It's become an unhelpful label," he says. "It's almost become an exclusively political term. The point of a label is to reduce the time it takes to communicate. Whenever you use the term 'evangelical' in public discourse, it achieves the opposite because you have to say, 'Oh, but wait, here's what I mean.' ''

This pastor wants the 'full intricacies' of his humanity to be seen

Some non-White evangelicals are ignored in a more subtle way. Their perspective is only sought on issues related to race, like Christian nationalism.

Onwuchekwa says he was once participating in a panel discussion on theology at a large evangelical conference with another Black pastor. Both answered questions about race for 15 minutes. When the other panelists turned the conversation to other theological matters, no one had a question for either of them for the remaining 45 minutes.

Sometimes your race or ethnicity is ignored; at other times, that's all White people see.

"It made me feel belittled, used and it made me feel like this isn't the space for me," says Onwuchekwa, [*author*](https://faithgateway.com/products/we-go-on-finding-purpose-in-all-of-life-s-sorrows-and-joys?variant=39462895026312) of "We Go On: Finding Purpose in All of Life's Sorrows and Joys."

"There need to be spaces where the full intricacies of my humanity are more fully appreciated," says Onwuchekwa, who is also a co-founder of the [*Crete Collective*](https://www.thecretecollective.org/), which opens churches in communities of color.

Some non-White evangelicals feel overlooked because church leaders don't acknowledge their pain.

Lim, the Korean-American pastor, says several Asian-American families joined his church following a 2021 tragedy that rocked Atlanta's Asian community. A man entered several Atlanta-area spas and [*shot*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/27/us/atlanta-spa-shooting-plea/index.html) and killed eight people, including six Asian women. The shooting underscored a recent [*surge*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/05/us/anti-asian-hate-crimes-study/index.html) in hate crimes against Asians in the US.

Some of the new members of Lim's church had been congregants in large, White evangelical churches. They told him they left because of the spa shootings, he says.

"It wasn't addressed at the churches; it wasn't even talked about," Lim says. "These Asian Americans, who were key members of the church, felt invisible. Their hurt was overlooked. That was the final straw for them."

Non-White evangelicals may save the American church

It may soon be impossible to ignore the importance of non-White evangelicals because of one reason: demographics.

At first glance, the numbers don't look good for Christians in America. Commentators have longed warned that Christianity in the US is [*dying*](https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-religious-right-is-right-to-be-scared-christianity-is-dying-in-america).

Church membership in the US has been declining and in 2020 [*fell below 50%*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx) for the first time. Church leaders fret that the American church is poised to follow the path of West European churches: soaring Gothic cathedrals with [*empty pews*](https://www.imb.org/2019/02/11/empty-churches-europe/) and shuttered church sanctuaries converted into nightclubs.

The numbers look grim for White evangelicals as well. They are the oldest religious group in America, and their numbers are [*declining*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/07/08/rapid-decline-white-evangelical-america/), Chen, the UC Berkeley professor, says.

But for evangelicals, the [*migration*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/08/us/christianity-decline-easter-blake-cec/index.html#:~:text=About%2064%25%20of%20Americans%20call,US%20may%20disappear%20by%202070.) of non-White immigrants to the US from Latin America and Asia could represent a more earthbound form of salvation.

The US has more immigrants than any country. Many of them are evangelicals and they, along with their children, are bringing their religious fervor with them and planting churches.

"For so long we've talked about Christianity or evangelicalism as a White phenomenon," saysChen, who is also the executive director of the [*Asian Pacific American Religions Research Initiative*](https://bcsr.berkeley.edu/aparri/#:~:text=APARRI%20is%20a%20vibrant%20scholarly,of%20scholars%20and%20community%20leaders.).

"We're on the cusp of this demographic change and there's evidence of it all over. But we don't even see it because we're so focused on this population that's dying out."

No one is saying there will be a "[*great replacement*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2022/05/22/exp-gps-0522-roots-of-racist-conspiracy-theory.cnn)" of White evangelicals by hordes of brown or Black migrants elbowing them out of the pews. White evangelicals will remain a potent political force in American ***politics***.

But there is a rich and vibrant world of non-White evangelicals in America whose stories remain "unearthed and untold." Not every discussion of evangelicals should feature White faces.

It's time to bury the myth that White Americans have a monopoly on evangelical Christianity.

John Blake is the author of [*"More Than I Imagined: What a Black Man Discovered About the White Mother He Never Knew."*](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/706045/more-than-i-imagined-by-john-blake/)

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