

How the Evangelical Elite Failed Their Flock

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1. by Bethel McGrew 8 . 23 . 24

Shepherds for Sale:

How Evangelical Leaders Traded the Truth for a Leftist Agenda

by megan basham

broadside books, 352 pages, \$32.99

Sometimes, a book comes along that creates irreconcilable differences between sociopolitical factions. Other times, a book comes along that diagnoses them. Megan Basham's *Shepherds for Sale* is the second kind of book. According to its critics, it's a shrill, dissident right propaganda screed, designed to foment civil war within the evangelical church. But to anyone who hasn't spent the past decade in a particular kind of echo chamber, Basham's thesis will ring true: Civil war has been upon evangelicals for a long time, whether it was welcomed or not.

To say the book has hit a nerve would be an understatement. Its heated reception was inevitable, given its audaciously wide scope; chapter topics include antiracism, the #ChurchToo movement, Covid, LGBTQ issues, and more. Much of the material was not new to me, because I have been independently logging these rifts in real time, not just among evangelicals but within my own Anglican tradition. (Parts of the LGBTQ chapter follow my First Things article on the many errors of the "Side B" movement.)

Despite the juicy title, not everyone in the book's large cast of evangelical characters will emerge as a pure heretical sell-out. This has been a common critique, but Basham herself pre-empts it in the introduction, where she acknowledges that people's motives can be complex, and degrees of compromise can vary. As she's documented, big leftist money has certainly changed hands, yet not every commentator will follow David French to the point of stumping for Kamala Harris, and not every pastor will follow Andy Stanley to the point of guiding his flock over a cliff into blatant heresy. Even so, there remain many ways for a "shepherd" to be stubbornly blind.

Basham's highest-profile rebuttal so far has come from megachurch pastor J. D. Greear, who appears in several chapters. The chapter on "critical race prophets" details how he participated in a witch-hunt against members of First Baptist Church Naples who rejected a black pastoral candidate. Their swift and ruthless excommunication as racists, cheered on by multiple high-profile Southern Baptist voices like Greear's, is the most shocking injustice Basham documents in her book. Greear pleads ignorance in his long complaint, claiming that he accepted the account of church leaders "in good faith." In a detailed reply, Basham

responded, “No. One cannot in good faith publicly label ordinary members of a church racists without clear evidence.” Their exchange vividly demonstrates why the loss of institutional trust among rank-and-file evangelicals is so profound, and most likely irrevocable.

One way to crystallize Basham’s thesis is that for far too long, certain “elite” evangelicals have seen themselves as a kind of Protestant magisterium, delivering wisdom to the rank and file while mutually refraining from in-house criticism. Meanwhile, they themselves have uncritically deferred to people who claim “expert” authority, whether on behalf of an “oppressed” group (immigrants, women, black people, gay people) or on behalf of science (environmental science, epidemiology). Not every member of the new magisterium has been equally vulnerable on every issue, but all have sought approval in the eyes of their preferred experts, and all have bought into some manifestation of the leftist logic that if one doesn’t subscribe to a particular political solution, one must not care about the problem it claims to solve. Whether as dupes or as willing collaborators, they opened all manner of doors that should have been firmly shut, and ordinary churchgoers have reaped the consequences—from the excommunicated members of First Baptist Church Naples, to the families whose teenagers have been abandoned or led astray on questions of sexual orthodoxy, to the numerous people shamed into distancing, masking, or vaxxing for “love of neighbor.” And when called out, rather than making full confession and repentance, many shepherds have either downplayed their errors or tried to memory-hole them altogether.

But the internet is forever, and Basham has kept the receipts.

The book’s copious detail is both a strength and a vulnerability. Gritty specificity is a welcome contrast to vague cookie-cutter diatribes against “white Christian nationalism.” Yet with so much specificity, errors are virtually inevitable. Various detractors have diligently compiled some of them. The chapter on climate change attributes some alarmist comments to a conference lecture by Alister McGrath, but he appears to have been confused with another speaker. The chapter on immigration reports that the religious NGO World Relief received \$215.3 million in taxpayer money “in 2018 alone,” but this amount was actually a cumulative total spanning 2008–2018. These and various other errors, while not load-bearing, have still distracted people from a robust debate of the book’s actual thesis, and the editorial process should have caught them.

The frustration for those attempting to keep up with the discourse is that for every true error caught, one must sift through numerous claims of “error” that are simple disagreements or misreads on the critic’s part. For instance, one critic claimed that Basham misread and unfairly critiqued a 2022 article by Karen Swallow Prior on pandemic protocol, which doesn’t even try to disguise its thesis that pro-lifers will lose their pro-life credibility unless they comply. This insistence on missing the clear rhetorical thrust of a text only makes Basham’s point for her.

This doesn't mean Basham couldn't have been more precise for her part, even while making fair points. For example, her much-discussed criticism of YouTube apologist Gavin Ortlund may be correctly diagnosing a kind of trickle-down condescension toward evangelicals hesitant to trust "experts" on climate change. His one-sided presentation of the facts in the name of "neighbor love," complaints about conservative political bias, and urgent insistence that Christians must "hit the books" and "lead the charge" on the topic all create a certain cumulative rhetorical impression. Yet, *contra* Basham's summary, Ortlund never explicitly says one must agree with him to be "responsible." Such lapses in rigor provide unnecessary excuses for bad-faith critics to miss the forest while fixating on a few leaves of one tree.

Still, the double standard is undeniable when reviewers obsessively pick apart these sorts of imprecisions while turning a blind eye to truly egregious misrepresentations by an "approved" figure such as Russell Moore. In *Losing Our Religion*, Moore implicitly warps James Wood's fair critique of Tim Keller and accuses Wood of being a "fundamentalist Calvinist." A similar double standard is at work in the gleeful promotion of Kevin Williamson's non-review "review" of Basham's book at *The Dispatch*. Williamson's savage rhetoric wouldn't be tolerated for a moment if it was directed against a writer within the evangelical guild.

Even *The Dispatch's* review by Warren Cole Smith misses the mark, insisting that the book is really about (who else?) Donald Trump. Basham does give Trump credit for overturning *Roe*, and she does criticize leaders such as Tim Keller who made the degree of one's support for Trump a litmus test for evangelical credibility (see this paper, for example, whose inclusion would have strengthened Basham's citations). Yet the book is, quite obviously, far bigger than Trump. A more nuanced critique would be that Basham's upbeat take fails to capture the real tragedy of the evangelical voting dilemma. She praises Christians who sought to wield the power of their vote "for the right reasons," and yet those Christians have in turn been overpowered as Trump rewrites the Republican platform by fiat. *Roe* was defeated, yes, but at what cost? Voters who chose Trump may have nothing to apologize for, but neither do voters who abstained. The tragic vision lies somewhere in between Basham's optimism and David French's dark, all-corrupting obsession.

To be sure, the Christian right is not lacking for MAGA shills, grifters, or disgraced "shepherds" such as Mark Driscoll who will happily endorse this book to deflect attention from their own corruption. The book's targets, in turn, will smugly deflect to said endorsements while pretending Basham hasn't caught them dead to rights. Both sides' reactions reveal a great deal more about themselves than they reveal about the book. The challenge for Basham herself is to retain her own distinctive voice without being coopted.

Oddly absent from most reviews is any discussion of Basham's concluding testimony, which she presents as the key to understanding the entire book. After the degradation of her "wasteland years," a chance reading of *The Quest of the Holy Grail* finally pierced her prodigal heart. In the hermit's righteous rebuke of adulterous Lancelot, she found herself convicted too. Subsequently, she was nourished and disciplined by simple gospel preaching.

To more “missional” evangelicals, her church might have seemed too fundamentalist. But perhaps evangelicalism today could use a little less missiology and a little more fundamentalism.

In the end, Basham desires not to tear the church down but to build it up. She desires to see the pure gospel truth that saved her soul taken up and preached without compromise, without apology. It is that saving gospel, undiluted by political pandering and corporate double-speak, that “still brings dead girls to life.”

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