

## Introduction

# REORGANIZED RELIGION

NOT LONG INTO MY CAREER as a journalist, a friend passed on a piece of advice: It's time to leave when you stop believing the lies they tell you.

My friend had left a prominent position at a well-known religious magazine several years earlier to start his own marketing and communications company dedicated to helping nonprofits. The decision baffled me—at the time, I was new to the journalism business and wondering if I'd make it long-term. Here was someone who had everything I wanted and left it all behind.

What he meant by that advice was that the magazine he worked for told a story about the work they did and why it mattered—and when he started, he believed in that narrative, because it gave him work that had meaning and a community of friends where he belonged.

After some time, however, the story didn't match the reality he experienced. It wasn't that the people he worked with were dishonest or intentionally deceitful or that the story they were telling was some

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kind of con. The people he worked with were people of good faith and the best intentions. And the company he worked for still did good work.

But he no longer believed in their story. Or perhaps more precisely, he no longer had a place in that story.

It was time for him to go.

My friend's advice came back to me in mid-September 2021, when I took a road trip to Nashville to see two of the best-known former Southern Baptists in America: beloved Bible teacher Beth Moore and ethicist Russell Moore.

The Moores—who are not related—had both made spectacular departures from the nation's largest Protestant denomination earlier in the year, not because they stopped believing the doctrine of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), a 13.7-million-member evangelical denomination, or because they lost faith in the message of Jesus. And not because they'd had bad experiences in their own local churches. Both, in fact, have testified to how much they loved the denomination they had grown up in and how their experiences in Baptist churches had shaped the course of their lives.

"Church was my safe place," Beth Moore told a gathering of about two hundred people at Immanuel Church, a small nondenominational congregation that meets in a rented auditorium not far from downtown Nashville.

She'd grown up in a troubled home and found refuge and community in her local Baptist church.

That church gave her a sense that she was loved and safe and that God had a plan and calling on her life. She eventually rose from church member to aerobics instructor—one whose every meeting included a devotional—to women's Bible teacher and eventually to best-selling author and personality.

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Her Living Proof events for women—named after her ministry—could pack stadiums.

The headline of a 2010 profile in *Christianity Today* magazine described her this way: “Homespun, savvy, and with a relentless focus on Jesus, Beth Moore has become the most popular Bible teacher in America.”<sup>1</sup>

At the time Moore was at the height of her popularity, appealing to women and men from all kinds of churches. And her future seemed bright.

“There’s no end to how far she can take her teaching,” James Robison, a televangelist who hosted Moore once a week on his *Life Today* broadcast, told *Christianity Today* in 2010.<sup>2</sup>

Few people, if any, however, realized at the time that a rival was making his way into the hearts and minds of the women and men who loved Beth Moore. Not by preaching the Bible or writing Christian books, but by starring in a prime-time television show. Six months after that profile ran, Donald Trump, then the star of *The Apprentice*, a long-running staple of prime-time television, began making noise about a serious run for president, during a speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference, known more commonly as CPAC.

“Our country will be great again,” Trump told the CPAC crowd in 2011, promising a return to America’s glory days if he were to run for president.

Trump decided against running in 2012. But he became a candidate in 2015 and by 2016 was the Republican nominee for US president, with his campaign’s success fueled by the love and support of evangelical voters, many of whom likely had Beth Moore books on their shelves.

But about a month before the election, Trump’s evangelical followers faced a test of faith, in the form of videotapes from *Access*

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*Hollywood*, featuring the business tycoon turned political and reality television icon boasting about groping, kissing, and sexually harassing women.

“When you are a star, they let you do it,” he said, then going on to describe the groping in lewd detail.

The release of those tapes did not prove to be fatal to Trump’s presidential ambition. Those tapes, however, were a turning point for Beth Moore. After hearing those comments, she expected her fellow Southern Baptists, especially those in leadership roles, to denounce them. After all, she reasoned, many of the leaders she knew had been alive and well in the 1990s and had called for Bill Clinton’s resignation once news of his misconduct became public.

She expected a backlash against Trump. Instead, she became a pariah after publicly condemning Trump’s remarks, a turn of events that still stunned her, years later.

“I expected Donald Trump to be Donald Trump,” she told those gathered in Nashville that evening. “That was not a shock to me. I didn’t expect us to be us.”

What she meant was that she did not expect her fellow Baptists to abandon their values and belief in character for political power. Instead of condemning Trump, her colleagues in ministry dismissed his comments as unimportant.

“Suddenly everything was turned completely upside down,” she said that night in Nashville. “And as a woman who comes from a background of abuse, I cannot begin to tell you what it is like to hear someone say something about being able to just grab onto someone without permission or consent. And then shoulders are shrugged over it.”

Moore’s decision to criticize Trump cost her millions.

Book sales plummeted, as did ticket sales to her events. During

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the fiscal years from 2017 to 2020, Living Proof, Moore’s ministry, lost more than \$3 million because of the backlash against her. Pastors who once championed her labeled her as liberal or dangerous. Things got even worse in 2019, when she mentioned on Twitter that she would be speaking on Mother’s Day at her church—something she had often done in the past. This sparked a national debate among Southern Baptists about the role of women.

As she recalled later, all of a sudden, women like Moore were seen as a threat to Southern Baptist preachers and the denomination’s future. It was a “maelstrom,” she told those gathered at the Nashville meeting, with an emphasis on the *male*.

There was more than that.

All of a sudden she no longer believed the lies she had been told. She still believed in Jesus and the Christian gospel. But she no longer believed that the institution—or at least its leaders—was dedicated to living out that mission. When faced with a choice of power or faithfulness, they chose the way of power.

Like my friend, Moore knew it was time to go.

She put it this way in an interview with Religion News Service in the spring of 2021, announcing she was leaving her longtime denomination: “At the end of the day, there comes a time when you have to say, this is not who I am.”<sup>3</sup>

Russell Moore told a similar story that night.

Moore had been a breath of fresh air in 2013 when he was named president of the SBC’s Nashville-based Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC). His predecessor, radio host and longtime Republican activist Richard Land—a legend among Southern Baptists—had retired in disgrace after a plagiarism scandal and controversy over remarks he’d made followed the death of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin.

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Known for his love of Waylon Jennings and poet-farmer Wendell Berry, Moore seemed to represent a new breed of Baptist, still conservative but more interested in the common good than partisan politics.

In the spring of 2018, Moore helped organize what looked at the time like a turning point among American evangelicals: a gathering of pastors and preachers and theologians and regular church folks at a convention center in Memphis to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King Jr., to remember his legacy, and to lament how Christians in the United States had fallen short of King's dream of an America where faith had transformed "the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood."<sup>4</sup>

The event featured a number of high-profile evangelical preachers: Texas megachurch pastor Matt Chandler, neo-Calvinist author and preacher John Piper, NFL player Benjamin Watson, musician Jackie Hill Perry, and preacher Charlie Dates from Progressive Baptist Church in Chicago, where King once preached during a visit to the Windy City.

A number of Black evangelical pastors gave high-profile speeches, while several prominent white evangelical preachers told attendees that it was time for white evangelicals to have a come-to-Jesus moment about race. In his speech, Moore laid out the long history of evangelical indifference to issues of race in the years following King's death and pointed to the even longer history before that of evangelicals endorsing the institution of slavery. Both were worthy of God's judgment.

"God heard the sighs of his people when they were in bondage under Pharaoh. And what Jesus recognizes, what Dr. King was pointing to, is that there is something awful that happens to the conscience of a person who is able to sing 'Oh how I love Jesus' and then rapes enslaved women," he said. "There is something awful that happens to a conscience that is able to sing 'amazing grace how sweet the sound'

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and then to whip enslaved men. The just penalty, the Scripture says, for such sin and such injustice is Hell.”<sup>5</sup>

He went on to say that the white evangelical church’s refusal to deal with the issue of racial justice had led to a “crisis of faith” among younger Christians, who could no longer accept a church that turned a blind eye to ongoing racism and ongoing racial disparities that the country’s past racial history had left behind.

“Why is it the case that we have, in church after church after church, young Evangelical Christians who are having a crisis of faith?” he asked. “It is because they are wondering if we really believe what we preach and teach and sing all the time?”

While that meeting in Memphis was going on, a group of churches near Albany, Georgia, was making history. Those congregations had kicked out one of their fellow churches for racist actions toward another church. Leaders for the larger state network of Southern Baptist churches in Georgia and, later, of the national convention would later also disfellowship the Raleigh White Baptist Church of Albany, Georgia for racism<sup>6</sup>—marking the first time in the denomination’s history that had ever happened.

That moment, however, was fleeting.

Whatever consensus there was on race among white evangelicals evaporated over the next three years, undone by politics, COVID-19, and the racial reckoning following the death of George Floyd. A new movement arose, one that saw the protests following Floyd’s death as a sign that radicals were trying to take over the country and the church—and they began to label anyone who wanted to talk about how to address the legacy of racism in the United States as an enemy of the Gospel.

That movement accused pastors they disagreed with of being “woke”—a term popularized by Black activists during the 2014

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protests in Ferguson, Missouri, after the shooting death of Michael Brown—or being proponents of Critical Race Theory (CRT), an academic theory that describes the way racism affects society and that became a political hot button under Donald Trump.<sup>7</sup>

After a group of seminary presidents condemned CRT as “incompatible” with their denomination’s statement of faith,<sup>8</sup> a number of Black pastors, like Charlie Dates, bid the Southern Baptist Convention goodbye. For Dates, who had convinced his congregation that white evangelicals and especially Southern Baptists had had a change of heart and were committed to racial justice, the CRT debate was a sign that nothing had changed.

“When did the theological architects of American slavery develop the moral character to tell the church how it should discuss and discern racism?” he wrote in an essay announcing his church’s departure from the Southern Baptist Convention. “As for me and the Progressive Baptist Church, I keep hearing the words of Harriet Tubman: ‘We out.’”<sup>9</sup>

Moore would eventually be labeled an ally of those who were trying to undermine evangelical churches by allegedly turning them liberal. Things snowballed. Moore sided with survivors of sexual abuse rather than his fellow denominational leaders. That—and Moore’s long-term feud with supporters of Donald Trump—proved too much.

At one point, one of Moore’s sons asked him a pointed question. The question could be summed up like this: Why do you want to work for people who hate you?

Not long afterward, Moore left his job at the ERLC, and then the SBC altogether. In September 2021, Moore and his friend Beth Moore met in Nashville, as we discussed earlier, for a live recording of Russell Moore’s podcast and to talk about the lessons they had learned in leaving.



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That night in Nashville, Russell Moore recalled some of the struggles he'd faced and why he decided to leave his home denomination for a role at *Christianity Today*, a major evangelical publication.

"I could have won the conflict that needed to be fought," Russell Moore told the audience at Immanuel that night, which included many friends, since he is a member of that congregation. "But I realized I would have to have a conflict. And I didn't want to be the kind of person I would be on the other side of that."

Both had left their churches because the cost of staying was much higher than the cost of leaving. Why stay when you are no longer wanted?

Beth Moore and Russell Moore are not alone.

Over the past few decades, millions of Americans have looked at organized religion and said the same thing. Some were disappointed at how their church acted; others disagreed with the church about social issues from climate, politics, and racism to more personal matters, like the role of women in the church or who in the church could get married.

More than a few had been burned by abusive or domineering leaders and given up or had a falling-out with people in the pews.

Some just stopped believing.

A recent survey from Pew Religion, released in late 2021, found that three out of every ten Americans (29 percent) is a so-called None, someone who claims no religious identity—up from only 16 percent in 2007.<sup>10</sup> The percentage of Christians had also dropped, from 78 percent to 63 percent over the same time frame. Earlier in the year, Gallup announced that for the first time since the 1940s, less than half of Americans claimed to be a member of a house of worship.

While most Americans still believe in God—or some kind of

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higher power or spirituality—fewer and fewer have ties to organized religion. And that is something we should all be concerned about.

This is a book about organized religion: why it matters, why it is in trouble, and why the decline of organized religion—in particular, Christian churches in the United States—will affect us all, no matter who we are or what we believe. It's also a book about why organized religion can and should be saved—and what it might cost for that to happen. We may have to stop believing the lies we've been told about the past in order to find a new story for the future.

Here's a roadmap for what lies ahead.

In part 1, we'll look at where we are—how demographic changes and a loss of faith in institutions are reshaping the America we once knew, and how those changes are fueling a decline in organized religion that is unlikely to stop anytime soon. We'll also look at the role organized religion plays in American culture and how it impacts most of our lives and community, no matter what we believe.

In part 2, we'll look deeper into why people leave organized religion—and how the external changes in the culture are playing out in denominations, local congregations, and the lives of individual Americans.

In part 3, we'll look at what comes next—how congregations and institutions are adapting to the changing American religious landscape and how they are, as the famed author E. B. White once put it, “calmly plotting the resurrection.”

There are a few things I'd like to tell you before we get started.

I am a reporter—an observer and chronicler of the way religion shapes every detail of the world around you, from what you eat for breakfast and whom you marry to national policy and global political conflict. I'm not a preacher, theologian, or evangelist. This is not a theological tome or a spiritual guidebook, telling you why God

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wants you to go to church or a mosque or a synagogue, nor is it a book about what the Bible or the Quran has to say about organized religion—though the Bible and other scriptures play a role.

Most of all, it's not a book to tell you what you should believe or how you should practice your religion, if you have one. And it won't tell you how to resolve some of the pressing issues that are driving conflict in American religion.

That is not my job.

For the last twenty-two years, I've made my living by listening to other people tell their stories about why they believe in God or the divine and watching how they practice their religion—both as individuals and as part of a religious institution. I tell people I have the best job in the world: I get to talk to people about God for a living, and I don't have to win.

Instead, I get to listen. And listening, in a world where almost everyone is shouting so loudly that no one can hear, can be a gift and a blessing. I listen to people tell stories about the most important moments of their lives and the things that mean the most to them, and how faith and religion provided comfort when they were grieving, or motivation to keep going, or friendship when they were alone. And I listen as they tell how religion tore their families and lives apart.

In the pages that follow, I'll tell some of the stories I have heard, based both on new reporting and on my twenty-two years on what we religion reporters lovingly call the Godbeat. And I will tell a few stories of my own, since religion has shaped my life on a personal level as well as a professional one.

We will look at how organized religion functions in the world—and the crucial role that churches and other faith-based institutions play in the day-to-day lives of individuals, families, and communities. We'll look at the ties that bind us together and how those ties are

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increasingly frayed. And why the decline and loss of congregational religion—which gathers people together, inspires them to do good, rallies them together in times of joy and sorrow, and then sends them out in the world to make it a better place—should worry us all.

I'll make the argument that organized religion is worth saving. Still, it's going to take a lot of work.