

Prior, Karen Swallow. *The Evangelical Imagination: How Stories, Images, and Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2023. 289pp. + 10pp. (back matter).

Because this book is essentially a personal ramble through contemporary notions, it is best to begin with a biography of the author.

Karen Swallow Prior, born in 1965, was reared in a conservative home by parents who were adult converts to evangelical Christianity, the sort who read Chick tracts and Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). Nevertheless, Prior was educated in secular schools, "read what I wanted to read, got to date boys and make mistakes, was encouraged to ask questions, and was never told my life or value would be ruined or lessened by any of those things" (230). At nineteen, she married Roy Prior, a guitarist in a local rock band, who became a high school vocational education teacher. Although the Priors are childless, they have been married for nearly forty years.

After earning a PhD in English literature at SUNY Buffalo, Karen Prior taught English—her specialty, Victorian literature—at Liberty University from 1999 to 2019, before resigning to take a position as a research professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. In 2018, while assuming a "public role in fighting the mistreatment of women by the leadership and culture of my Southern Baptist denomination," Prior was literally hit by a bus and spent some months recovering.¹ Then, shortly after publication of this book, she resigned from Southeastern, stating only that "the institution and I do not share the same vision for carrying out the Great Commission."²

Reporters have repeatedly queried Prior about the nature of her evangelicalism, and she has continued to declare herself "orthodox." Even so, controversy swirled around her at Liberty after she participated in an attempt to create "safe space for dialogue about faith, gender and sexuality through the arts." On campus, she was known as a "gay magnet" because of the number of students who confided to her their sexual proclivities.

The Evangelical Imagination reflects Prior's life and career. According to the publisher's blurb, the book "analyzes the literature, art, and popular culture that has surrounded evangelicalism and unpacks some of the movement's most deeply held concepts, ideas, values, and practices." Non-Christian historian Henry Reichman praised the book because it called "on evangelicals to examine their fundamental assumptions and to shed their faith of unwanted elements more cultural and political than religious."

Obviously, choosing the title *The Evangelical Imagination* required Prior to define "evangelical," and her attempt to do so launches the book into confusion from the get-go. Though she identifies evangelicalism as a Protestant movement originating with Wesley and Whitefield in the eighteenth century, she focuses mostly on the Victorian era and, when so inclined, reaches back to John Bunyan

¹ Karen Swallow Prior, "Thoughts on my 5-year anniversary of getting hit by a bus," Religion News Service, May 24, 2023; accessed April 12, 2024, <https://religionnews.com/2023/05/24/thoughts-on-my-5-year-anniversary-of-getting-hit-by-a-bus/>.

² Jeff Brumley, "Prior explores the origin of evangelicalism's 'empire mentality,'" Baptist News Global, September 19, 2023; accessed April 12, 2024, <https://baptistnews.com/article/prior-explores-the-origin-of-evangelicalisms-empire-mentality/>.

in the seventeenth century, and even the Reformers in the sixteenth. Prior never tells us why Bunyan and the Reformers do not officially qualify as evangelicals even though they fit the oft-noted formula of evangelical historian Thomas Bebbington. Bunyan and most of the Reformers emphasized conversion, missionary activity, the authority of the Bible, and the sacrifice of Christ as necessary to salvation. After all, Luther called his church the *evangelische Kirche*, and *Britannica* says that Bunyan had a gift for clothing “evangelical theology with concrete life.”

Prior notes that use of the word *evangelical* declined during the Victorian era but then was revived, with different connotations, in the mid-twentieth century following “the rise of Billy Graham and his decision to adopt the term as a way of distinguishing his ‘big tent’ Protestantism from the increasingly separatist fundamentalists” (26). Evangelicalism (more accurately, in my view, “new evangelicalism”) then became synonymous with a middle way between mainline liberalism and (says Prior) “the anti-intellectualism that characterized the fundamentalist movement” (26)—a change in meaning that would have baffled Wesley and Whitefield.

The remainder of the book runs riot with similar sloppy definitions and loosely organized ideas, liberally cribbed from secular academics. Their use trumpets the author’s intellectual bona fides. (I’d give a list, but the book has no index, a failure for which I hold the publisher responsible. A non-fiction book without an index is book just asking to be treated as ephemeral.) In other words, Prior has created a work that tries to gratify non-Christian intellectuals while simultaneously convincing middle-brow evangelicals that they are reading something profound. For instance, Prior declares that the “way of Jesus is not in the power, celebrity, and corruption that has borne the fruit of sexual abuse, spiritual abuse, systemic racism, and imperialism” (232). That is, she denounces behavior condemned in the Bible but wraps it in politically correct language to score points with her academic colleagues.

Though Prior is fully aware that language changes over time, she becomes truly testy about those “asleep to systemic racism” who have altered the meaning of the word “woke,” using it “as an insult or accusation.” “To destroy a metaphor,” she scolds in a series of opaque sentences, “is to destroy more than a word. It is to destroy a likeness seen and articulated by those made in God’s likeness. To allow a metaphor to dull is to dull, too, the perceptions that allow us to make, recognize, and weigh connections. Dulled perceptions create false intuitions, and flawed imaginations construct a distorted sense of reality” (48). (Note that the actors in these sentences are abstractions rather than real people, suggesting an authorial vantage point above the common fray.)

Prior regularly quotes non-evangelicals, men like Samuel Richardson (1689–1761)—who suggested that the truly pious can be found beyond Christianity—or Charles Dickens (1812–1870)—whom Prior describes as “a Christian, although not entirely orthodox and not at all fond of evangelicals” (138)—or the agnostic Edmund Gosse (1849–1928), before claiming that their views reflect those of contemporary evangelicals. It is true that Dickens’s Ebenezer Scrooge experiences a transformation, but no true Christian would equate it with the sort of conversion urged on the hearers of Wesley or Whitefield or even Charles Grandison Finney. (As for Gosse’s *Father and Son* [1907], Prior is unaware that the specifics of his beautifully written and highly regarded memoir—which

depicts Gosse père as an evangelical tyrant—have been thoroughly demolished by Anne Thwaite.³) Prior reprints Rudyard Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden” in its entirety in order to pillory evangelical foreign missions; but she does not mention that Kipling was inscrutably unorthodox, a man who enjoyed manipulating religious themes without subscribing to any religion himself and who, at forty-two, described himself as a “God-fearing Christian atheist.”

Often Prior’s sentimentalism gets the better of her. She aptly skewers Victorian romanticism and its modern posterity while discussing Sallman’s *Head of Christ* and Thomas Kinkade’s fantastically popular paintings. (Having grown up in a more iconoclastic corner of evangelicalism than Prior, I was told that Sallman’s paintings might well depict the *anti-Christ*.) But Prior seems confident that her readers will not call her out for her own sentimentalism. For instance, she recounts Louisa May Alcott’s description of the March sisters in *Little Women* who are in the process of preparing a domestic dramatization of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Meg March says, “It is only another name for trying to be good, and the story may help us, for though we do want to be good, it’s hard work and we forget, and don’t do our best.” Prior adds, “No one more than Bunyan would have been pleased with such a result” (96). Of course, Bunyan would have been appalled at such a result. In *Saved by Grace* (1675), he wrote, “None are received for their good deeds.” God “has rejected the persons that have at any time attempted to present themselves . . . in their own good deeds for justification.”

I was half-disappointed that Prior did not tackle some of the sentimental religious lyrics of the Victorian era, but perhaps she realized that contemporary Christian music can be just as vacuous and as vulnerable to the charge of sentimentality. In a truly silly piece of writing, Prior recalls attending a rock concert where the headline band lowered the volume on its final number: “We in the audience could hear only ourselves as our voices rose above those of the band members, lifting upward and outward into the darkness, singing and pleading, ‘Awake, my soul!’ Many in the crowd held up their cell phones like prayer candles lit to an unknown god as we sang on. . . . All—drunken college boys, cutoff-clad teenage girls, aging hippies, and cool aunts—were, in singing these words, whether we realized it or not, praying” (33–34).

In the book’s introduction, Prior pleads that she is simply an English professor. “I am not a historian. I am not a theologian. I am not a philosopher” (5). A systematic student of any of those disciplines will find additional discipline-specific problems. (One for theologians: “Not only the conversion testimony itself but the retelling of it, too, helps deepen the assurance of salvation” [84].) Prior is not wrong all the time, but few serious students of Scripture will care to rifle through so many woke-wrapped commonplaces in a search for memorable truths.

While taking notes on Prior, I was also reading Iain Murray’s *Heroes*,⁴ a book of almost exactly the same size with a nearly opposite goal, to honor evangelicals of the Victorian era and present them as models for our own. One of Murray’s heroes is Charles Colcock Jones (1804–1863), an owner of three antebellum plantations and hundreds of slaves, a man of both learning and persistence who exhausted himself evangelizing the enslaved people of coastal Georgia. Jones’s unlikely ministry was no theory or

³ See *Glimpses of the Wonderful: The Life of Philip Henry Gosse* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002).

⁴ *Heroes* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009).

abstraction, so I do not think Prior would be likely to accept his sacrifice at face value or could even find intellectual room for it in the misty flats of her evangelical imagination.

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