

Moore, Russell. *Losing Our Religion: An Altar Call for Evangelical America*. New York: Sentinel, 2023. 256pp.

The title of Russell Moore's book might lead readers to guess that he is writing about the increasing number of "Nones," the people who identify with no particular religion or religious body. While that topic is certainly germane to Moore's discussion, it is not his chief point. When he writes about "losing our religion," he has two main ideas in mind.

The first is the distinction, often drawn in evangelical preaching, between religious people and true followers of Jesus Christ. Preachers sometimes tell sinners that religion cannot save them; only Jesus can. People can go through the forms of religion and even adopt a religious identity while rejecting Christ, just as they can receive and follow Christ without putting on religious airs. Moore believes that a significant proportion of modern evangelicalism is using religion, and particularly the religious structures of evangelicalism, to mask a departure from devotion to Christ. Moore believes that evangelicalism needs to lose this religion and to get back to following Christ.

The second sense in which Moore uses the expression "losing our religion" is in the sense of failing to exercise informed, righteous anger. He believes that some evangelicals have become involved in so much religious pretense that they are saying and doing things that should provoke justifiable anger from biblical Christians. He says (and shows) that he personally is angry about some of these things.

What sorts of things make Moore angry? One is perceived hypocrisy in the conservative wing of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). The other is Donald Trump. Moore is at his angriest when these two converge. Indeed, he suggests that his anger over this convergence was the very thing that led to his exit from the SBC.

For some years, Russell Moore was a poster boy for success in the Southern Baptist Convention. After earning his PhD from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, he served briefly as an associate pastor. He was then offered a professorship in ethics and theology at his *alma mater*. Within three years he had become dean of the School of Theology and was promoted to the vice-presidential level. He then served four years as pastor of an SBC church in Louisville, simultaneously taking an increasing role in convention politics. Then in 2013 he was appointed president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC), a subsidiary organization of the SBC. He was one of the brightest rising stars in the Southern Baptist sky.

Moore's trajectory began to change with the candidacy and then presidency of Donald J. Trump. Like many evangelicals, Moore expressed alarm over Trump's personal morality. Additionally, Moore echoed the concerns of many Trump opponents over issues such as race and immigration. Vocalizing these concerns placed Moore at odds with a segment of the Southern Baptist leadership that supported Trump.

Around this time, accusations were leveled against a couple of prominent Southern Baptist conservative leaders. These accusations also came at roughly the same time that the "Me Too" movement was riveting American interest with its demand to "believe all victims." Moore echoed these concerns within the SBC.

Moore's willingness to criticize old-line SBC leaders and his refusal to support Donald Trump led to closer inspection by powerful figures in the convention. These figures decided that his position on issues such as race and immigration was less like theirs and more like that of their political opponents. Soon there were accusations that Moore was "woke" and that he was a "cultural Marxist." This controversy eventually led to Moore's departure, not only from the ERLC, but from the Southern Baptist Convention altogether.

This background (which Moore references throughout his book) is essential for understanding *Losing Our Religion*. The book is an indictment specifically of the SBC, but also of the political tactics and internal inconsistencies of political versions of conservative evangelicalism. Moore says at the outset that he is angry, and the text shows it.

What upsets Moore is that (as he sees it) evangelicals who have aligned with Donald Trump have given up their biblical witness. The titles of his chapters disclose what he thinks they have lost in the process: their credibility, moral authority, identity, integrity, and stability. Of course, the problem that Moore perceives is larger than Trump, but Trump is the focus. On average, Moore singles Trump out by name every six pages, besides alluding to the former president many more times without naming him. Outside of God and Jesus, Trump is the most frequently named individual in the book.

Is *Losing Our Religion* simply an exercise in what some on the Right would call "Trump Derangement Syndrome?" No, Moore's work cannot be so easily dismissed. Donald Trump really does confront biblical Christians with a dilemma. On one side of the dilemma is a history in which evangelicals used to insist that character matters in political candidates (a fact of which Moore reminds his readers). Trump is clearly not a man of character. His repeated infidelities, his demonstrated disrespect of women, his willingness to engage publicly in gutter talk, and his eagerness to default to personal abuse rather than measured argument are the marks of an unprincipled man.

Moore thinks that evangelical leaders have backed Trump so they can gain political influence. As Moore sees it, these churchmen have been willing to trade their moral reservations about Trump in exchange for access to the levers of power. Such leaders have been willing to excuse their promotion of Trump by claiming that they are not voting for him to be a pastor, by minimizing the significance of his transgressions, by denying that he has committed them, by claiming that he has recently trusted Christ and is now a baby Christian, and even by claiming that Trump has done God's work.

Moore's accusations are easy to substantiate, but the situation is a bit more complicated than he portrays it to be, which leads to the other side of the dilemma. Most evangelicals who have voted for Trump have probably not done so because they wanted power or because they admired or even liked the man. More likely, they have been voting against the alternatives. Before Trump took office, the Supreme Court had forced the entire nation to pretend that two people of the same sex could be married to each other. The Obama-Biden administration was moving toward forcing people to recognize that men could become women or *vice versa*. Children who questioned their "gender identity" were to be given drugs and even surgeries to make them look like children of the other sex. The promoters of this agenda intended to apply it eventually to all institutions, including Christian churches, schools, and adoption agencies. There were to be no religious exemptions. At the same time, people who affirmed a realistic and biblical view of marriage, sex, and gender were to be denied

privileges that were available to the rest of the public. They were even to be subjected to civil penalties. Hillary Clinton made it clear in advance that she would further these policies; the Biden-Harris administration has consistently tried to push them.

Under these circumstances, evangelicals could (and can) perceive Trump as the lesser of two evils. Indeed, when men are being admitted into women's and girls' private spaces, when men are trouncing female competitors in women's sports, when children are being mutilated because of gender confusion, and when violent male criminals are being imprisoned with women, Trump's transgressions pale to the point that he can seem virtuous by comparison. That is why many evangelicals have held their noses and voted for him.

Moore knows all about this dynamic. He replies by noting (with Hanna Arendt) that choosing the lesser evil is still choosing evil. Moore seems to think that the solution lies in rejecting both alternatives and trusting God for the result. His point is certainly defensible, but it is not the only conclusion at which biblical Christians can arrive without violating Scripture or conscience. To substantiate his point, Moore appeals to the example of certain kings in Israel and Judah who appealed to Gentile alliances for help, noting that God uniformly condemns those appeals. The status of Israel and Judah as a covenant people, however, limits the usefulness of this analogy. No clear teaching of Scripture requires Christians to become Never Trumpers.

As Moore sees it, the same attitude that excuses the transgressions of Trump was also used to excuse the misdeeds of certain Southern Baptist leaders. Oddly, he never names those individuals specifically, though his descriptions make it clear whom he means. While Moore was head of the ERLC, various pastors and other leaders were accused of sexual predation. Among these were prominent architects of the Southern Baptist resurgence. On Moore's view, too many of these accusations were excused or swept under the rug. He himself spoke out against them, with the result that considerable ecclesiastical pressure was brought to bear against him.

The story Moore tells is believable, even to a non-Southern Baptist. What Moore describes is something that happens somewhere in nearly every circle of organized Christianity. He is right to be angry about it. What is not right is that he should be surprised, let alone shocked. Moore says that he believes in total depravity. He should not be surprised to find that people—even Christian people—act depraved. He should not be surprised to discover that people are willing to cover up depravity when it suits their purposes. But that is not the main problem.

More to the point is the way that the SBC works. In the SBC, churches have formally banded together to erect institutions, including the ERLC, to serve them. While the churches remain technically autonomous, the convention formally ties them to the structure of seminaries, missions, the Cooperative Program, and (among others) the ERLC. Rule number one in this situation is that convention employees must not offer public criticism of other convention entities, and particularly of the presidents of those entities. There is no quicker way for an employee in an SBC institution to face disciplinary measures than to offer such public criticism.

Moore was a convention employee. When he went after pastors, churches, and heads of other institutions, he broke the rules. He should have anticipated what would happen. The reaction may not have been right or fair, but it was foreseeable.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty with Moore's book is his uneven handling of the Left and Right. He holds the evangelical Right responsible to behave in a thoughtful, reasoned, and biblical way. Yet he minimizes the degree to which critical theory (cultural Marxism) has begun to reshape evangelical and Southern Baptist sensibilities from the Left. He seems to dismiss concerns that evangelicals are increasingly woke. Nevertheless, critical theory has begun to set the agenda for many evangelicals. Many see critical theory as a helpful analytical tool. Surely that is at least as great a threat to biblical integrity as the concerns that Moore addresses.

So why not rebuke the Left? An easy guess is that Moore was not spanked by the woke crowd. In fact, the more he protested Trump, the more he became their darling. No, Moore was spanked—hard—by convention polemicists and Trump supporters. Evidently, the locus of Moore's spanking still hurts.

Moore's work has value, but it could have had a much greater value. The concerns that he raises are real, and Christians ought to face them. He channels his pain to energize and direct his presentation. Unfortunately, that same pain leads him sometimes to exaggerate the faults of those he criticizes while simultaneously blinding him to the related and opposite concerns—concerns that may well be more important than the problems he attacks. If Moore had provided a corresponding critique of critical theory and an account of the spread of wokeness within evangelicalism and the SBC, his work could have been much stronger. As it stands, it lacks balance.

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