

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Holy Whiteness: How White Evangelicals in  
Christian Higher Education Have Anointed a New “King of Kings”

By

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## ABSTRACT

The marriage between Christianity and white supremacy in the United States has birthed an image, deity, and religio-racial power structure: white Jesus. The figure of a white Jesus has manifested frequently in the history of white evangelicalism, and this phenomenon materializes rather poignantly at the provocative site of Christian higher education. Christian colleges and universities are overwhelmingly white and evangelical. White evangelicals are defined here as white Protestant Christians who are politically conservative and seek to uphold white Christian hegemony in the United States. A consequential amount of this evangelical cultural development takes place at Christian colleges and universities.

Therefore, this research asks, what is the function of Christian colleges and universities within white evangelicalism? And further, what role does white Jesus play in the social reproduction of white evangelicals at Christian higher education institutions? This research concludes that predominantly white Christian colleges and universities reproduce white evangelical racism and white Christian nationalism through the platforming of white Jesus as a visual construction and a representative idea.

**Keywords:** White evangelicalism, racism, white Christian nationalism, Manifest Destiny, Christian colleges and universities, white Jesus, white supremacy, Donald Trump, politics

Dedicated to my family, community, and friends.  
And for all the ones who left in search of something better.

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“Our Father and our God hath said, ‘blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.’ As the prophet Daniel prayed, ‘Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, for wisdom and might are his. He changes the times and the seasons. *He removes kings, he raises up kings.* He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding.’ Our Father, today, as President Donald J. Trump takes the oath of office again, we come to say thank you... *We know that America can never be great again if we turn our backs on you.*”<sup>1</sup>

-Franklin Graham at Donald Trump’s presidential inauguration  
January 20, 2025

## Introduction

The intersection of race and religion in the United States is a crowded one, and this project focuses on this crossroad by examining how and why these two social systems converge in the United States. This research traces the offspring of a centuries-long marriage between Christianity and white supremacy—white Jesus. The figure of a white Jesus has manifested frequently in the history of white evangelicalism, and I argue that this phenomenon materializes rather poignantly at the provocative site of Christian higher education. I will examine this juxtaposition via a case study where all of these topics intersect: a late 20th-century mural depicting Jesus as a white man at an evangelical Christian university.

Regardless of the context, images of white Jesus have played a titular role in the platforming of religious and racial power structures in the United States. Within the context of white evangelicalism, however, “white Jesus” is not just an image or visual stimulant of worship—it is simultaneously a declaration, a theological attitude, and a religio-social power structure. Concurrently, white evangelicalism is a particular brand of Christianity that is dominating the contemporary American cultural landscape, and its power bloc gained its most

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<sup>1</sup> “‘Look what God has done’: Rev. Franklin Graham invocation at Trump inauguration,” January 20, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2k8E7PBs-xw>.

significant notoriety from Ronald Reagan and evangelical Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. The last decade has seen an increase in scholarship on white evangelicalism due to their significant support for President Donald Trump. Their alignment with right-wing conservatism spurred a renewed wave of scholarly attention in 2016 when research showed that over 80 percent of white evangelicals voted for Trump in the presidential election. Similar numbers were reported in the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections as well.<sup>23</sup>

White evangelicals are politically and culturally powerful, as evidenced by Trump's collusion with The Heritage Foundation and enacting policies laid out in Project 2025.<sup>4</sup> But culturally, where do evangelicals come from? What do they believe? I posit that a consequential amount of this evangelical cultural development takes place at American Christian higher education institutions. Therefore, I approached this research by asking, *What is the function of Christian colleges and universities within American white evangelicalism?* Through this question, I examined the role that Christian higher education institutions play in the social reproduction of white evangelicalism. Further, I questioned, *What role does white Jesus play in the social reproduction of white evangelicals at Christian higher education institutions?* This question expands on the first one by analyzing how beliefs about race and power in Christian higher education transfer to white evangelicalism, and vice versa. In this thesis, I argue that predominantly white and Protestant Christian higher education institutions reproduce white evangelical racism, colonialism, and white Christian nationalism through the imagery and platforming of white Jesus as a visual construction and a representative idea. And by chapter three, I argue that the figure of white Jesus has shifted to include a new person entirely.

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Gjelten, "2020 Faith Vote Reflects 2016 Patterns," NPR, November 8, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/08/932263516/2020-faith-vote-reflects-2016-patterns>.

<sup>3</sup> Chip Rotolo, "White Evangelicals Continue to Stand Out in Their Support for Trump," *Pew Research Center*, April 28, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/04/28/white-evangelicals-continue-to-stand-out-in-their-support-for-trump/>.

<sup>4</sup> The Heritage Foundation, "Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise," *Project 2025: Presidential Transition Project*, 2023, accessed July 3, 2025, [https://static.heritage.org/project2025/2025\\_MandateForLeadership\\_FULLL.pdf](https://static.heritage.org/project2025/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULLL.pdf).

## ***Literature Review***

### *White Evangelicalism*

This project is largely indebted to the work completed by scholars who have come before me and who have been engaging in conversation about race and religion in the U.S. for decades. Anthea Butler's book *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* sets the groundwork for this research, as I adopt her central thesis that "racism is a feature, not a bug" of American white evangelicalism.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this research, "white evangelical" will be defined, according to Butler, as American white Protestant Christians who adhere to the conservative ideals propagated by the Republican party and who strive to maintain "the status quo of patriarchy, cultural hegemony, and nationalism."<sup>6</sup> While Butler's definition applies to contemporary white evangelicals who exhibit loyalty to the Republican party, historically, their party affiliations varied due to fundamental changes within the nation's two primary political parties. The pro-slavery and white supremacist Christian Democrats in the 18th to early 20th centuries were staunchly white Protestants who sought the maintenance of the white hegemonic power structure. Evangelicals' change in political party affiliation was due to fluctuations in social understanding of what the core principles of each party were. When Republicans emerged as the party of conservatism and maintaining the status quo following the Great Depression and the Civil Rights Movement, white evangelicals followed. What unified them over time was their belief in white Christian hegemony. This research, while tracing the legacy of white supremacy in Christianity throughout American history, primarily focuses on contemporary white evangelicalism. For this reason, I adopt Butler's definition in my research.

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<sup>5</sup> Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 3-4.



By mapping the history of white evangelicalism from slavery, Reconstruction, through the Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War, and the rise of the Moral Majority, she takes readers on a journey of how anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, and white Christian nationalism have coalesced in the blowback against President Barack Obama and support for President Donald Trump. Her concluding thesis addresses the question: Why do evangelicals vote for people who contradict their stated Christian values? She argues,

My answer is that evangelicalism is not a simply religious group at all. Rather, it is a nationalistic political movement whose purpose is to support the hegemony of white Christian men over and against the flourishing of others. ... Racism in evangelicalism is not only about individual sin. It's about the corporate sins of a religious movement that continues to believe itself good, and that good is predicated on whiteness and the proximity to power.<sup>7</sup>

While Butler focuses almost entirely on white evangelical racism, Kristen Kobes Du Mez's book *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* is groundbreaking research into how white evangelical media paints a wide picture of Christianity's marriage to patriarchy. While she omits race in many respects, her thorough examination of gender in American evangelicalism is significant. Du Mez pays special attention to media produced by white evangelicals, as the proliferation of such media was instrumental in the movement's growth. She argues that the spread of "Christian books and magazines, CCM (Christian contemporary music), Christian radio and television, feature films, ministry conferences, blogs, T-shirts, and home decor" created an evangelical culture that transcended denominational barriers.<sup>8</sup> White evangelical media creation and distribution are central to the development of evangelical theology and are a window into the thoughts of evangelical leaders and the evangelical public alike. Her chapter "A New High Priest" chronicles the lead-up to the

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<sup>7</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 138.

<sup>8</sup> Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 7-8.

2016 election and explains the mass appeal that Donald Trump had for white evangelicals who wanted a show of strength from Washington. She proves that support for him did not start with white evangelical leaders, but instead began with the people.

Evangelicals were looking for a protector, an aggressive, heroic, manly man, someone who wasn't restrained by political correctness or feminine virtues, someone who would break the rules for the right cause. Try as they might—and they did try—no other candidate could measure up to Donald Trump when it came to flaunting an aggressive, militant masculinity.<sup>9</sup>

White evangelical leaders eventually got on board despite the release of the *Access Hollywood* tape, where Trump openly bragged about assaulting women.<sup>10</sup> Du Mez primarily concentrates on the patriarchal roots of this shift in evangelical values, and her analysis is wholly relevant to this research. However, I intend to draw slightly more intersectional attention to the collusion between white evangelicals and right-wing politics to examine the gendered *and* racial dynamics at play.

In *The Myth of Colorblind Christians: Evangelicals and White Supremacy in the Civil Rights Era*, Jesse Curtis relies heavily on written correspondence between white evangelical media outlets and their audiences, such as bulletins, Christian higher education and denominational magazines, and the popular evangelical publication *Christianity Today*, to interrogate white evangelical discourse against Black evangelical discourse. This ultimately leads to his primary argument that white evangelicals, especially post-Civil Rights Movement, continue to disguise their racism as colorblindness, which is viewing a person as disconnected from their race.<sup>11</sup> While some saw this as an improvement from the overt racist segregation of the

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<sup>9</sup> Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 253.

<sup>10</sup> “Donald Trump Makes Lewd Remarks About Women On Video | NBC News,” October 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYqKx1GuZGg>.

<sup>11</sup> Jesse Curtis, *The Myth of Colorblind Christians: Evangelicals and White Supremacy in the Civil Rights Era* (New York University Press, 2021), 2-3.

early to mid-20th century, Curtis argues that colorblindness is equally problematic.<sup>12</sup> The 1950s and 60s were a tumultuous time for white evangelicals as they hotly debated integrating their churches, schools, and Christian communities. The shifting social landscape gave way to varied opinions on how integration would reflect on pre-existing power structures, with many concluding that they were okay with sharing space, but not authority. Curtis refers to this as “sacred whiteness.” “In evangelicalism, whiteness was often associated with doctrinal purity and theological authority,” he explains. “Many white evangelicals were skeptical of African American Christians exercising spiritual authority over white Christians. They were much more comfortable ministering *to* African Americans or training them for separate black ministry.”<sup>13</sup> This paternalistic flavor of white supremacy insists on white spiritual authority and translates smoothly into the eventual physical acceptance of Black people and other people of color into Christian higher education institutions. The new inclusive policies (which will be discussed further in later chapters) were partially implemented out of guilt about having deprived Black people of their education, not because they wanted their institutions to be transformed by diversity from top to bottom. They could physically integrate, but white hegemony would remain steadfast.

Another key work on white evangelicalism is Bradley Onishi’s *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism—and What Comes Next*, which is part memoir and part socio-political, theological reflection. Onishi shares his personal experiences growing up in white evangelicalism and questions how white evangelicalism developed to the point of leading an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021. Through interviews he conducted with scholars, journalists, and experts on his co-hosted podcast *Straight, White,*

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<sup>12</sup> Curtis, *Myth of Colorblind Christians*, 1-3.

<sup>13</sup> Curtis, *Myth of Colorblind Christians*, 21.

*American Jesus*, and secondary scholarship about white evangelicalism, Onishi concludes with a warning that white Christian nationalism's increasingly violent rhetoric is leading to a national movement to "take America back."<sup>14</sup> Onishi's research covers the entirety of the Christian Right, which includes both Protestants and Catholics, and emphasizes throughout his work that their inter-Christian alliance helped to develop the Christian Right into the force it is today, which includes sustaining the Trump administration. However, he does note that white evangelicals in particular are the primary conductors aboard the Trump train.<sup>15</sup>

Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, who are both reputable scholars of Christian nationalism, have described white Christian nationalism as a deeply entrenched socio-political set of beliefs that are born out of religious myths of God-ordained American exceptionalism. Its central myth is that the United States was founded on traditional Western Christian values. White Christian nationalists also believe that everything from the land to the promise of the American dream was given by God specifically to white Christians.<sup>16</sup> Gorski and Perry note that white evangelicalism and white Christian nationalism are not completely synonymous, as the large camp of white Christian nationalism also features "a significant number of mainline Protestants, white Roman Catholics," and others.<sup>17</sup> It should also be noted that not all white evangelicals are white Christian nationalists, but the group's faithful solidarity with Trump and his Project 2025 agenda renders the two bodies almost indistinguishable. These reflections on white Christian nationalism greatly help to color my analysis of the partnership between Christian higher education institutions and right-wing politics.

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<sup>14</sup> Bradley Onishi, *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism and What Comes Next* (Broadleaf Books, 2023), 15.

<sup>15</sup> Onishi, *Preparing for War*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*, (Oxford University Press, 2022), 3-6, Oxford Academic.

<sup>17</sup> Gorski and Perry, "Flag and Cross," 10.

*White Jesus and Christian Higher Education*

The playbook on the history of white Jesus is Edward Blum and Paul Harvey's *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. Their key insights on the transience of white Jesus are central to my thesis. Building off of theories of embodied and social religion, Blum and Harvey write:

By wrapping itself with the alleged form of Jesus, whiteness gave itself a holy face. But he was a shapeshifting totem of white supremacy. The differing and evolving physical renderings of white Jesus figures not only bore witness to the flexibility of racial constructions but also helped create the perception that whiteness was sacred and everlasting. With Jesus as white, Americans could feel that sacred whiteness stretched back in time thousands of years and forward in sacred space to heaven and the second coming.<sup>18</sup>

The whiteness of Jesus, therefore, was not simply about paintings or art. Rather, it crafted a narrative of divinity inextricably linked to whiteness and ultimately white supremacy. The whiteness of Jesus was developed in the American psyche through a process of normalization that can be referred to as “white normativity.”<sup>19</sup> This normativity constructs what Alexander Jun, Tabatha L. Jones Jolivet, Allison N. Ash, and Christopher S. Collins, authors of *White Jesus: The Architecture of Racism in Religion and Education* and faculty in Christian higher education, refer to as the “white architecture of the mind” and the “white architecture of salvation.”<sup>20</sup> While the former refers to the mental arrangements “that influence and predispose individuals to react based on a systemic logic that was socially constructed,” Jun and his colleagues explain that “The White architecture of salvation illuminates the role of White supremacy and domination in prescribing who is accepted, legitimized, and powerful—hence, rationalizing who is chosen, set

<sup>18</sup> Blum and Harvey, *The Color of Christ*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Amanda Jo Pittman and John H. Boyles, “Challenging White Jesus: Race and the Undergraduate Bible Classroom,” *Religious Education* 114, no. 3 (2019): 316, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2019.1603943>.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Jun et al., *White Jesus: The Architecture of Racism in Religion and Education* (Peter Lang, 2018), 4.

apart, and saved.”<sup>21</sup> This structure is an effective means of establishing the power of white supremacy to control the confines of “normal” and “deviant.”

Quoting from Reggie L. Williams’ *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*, Jun and his colleagues contest that,

If White Jesus is the ‘theological muscle of the power structure of the color line and its global manifestations: colonization, imperialism, national, and white terrorism in America,’ then the White architecture of salvation is the logic by which those who do not fall under the White sacred canopy can be saved, redeemed, and justified through subservience to White domination, authority, and power. Redemption under this scheme requires assimilation and/or annihilation—physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, epistemologically, and ontologically.<sup>22</sup>

White Jesus, therefore, is a visual and representative manifestation of the “white architecture of salvation,” and Christian higher education institutions in particular have been poignant sites of this manifestation. Jun and his colleagues argue that Christian higher education institutions were created for white evangelical knowledge production. In his chapter “Creating the Colorblind Campus,” Curtis draws from campus media outlets, correspondence between university administrators and other evangelical leaders, and first-hand accounts from Black students to tell the story of evangelical colorblindness in Christian higher education. He details the widespread anxiety and defensiveness in Christian higher education as schools began to integrate, and how Black students in particular pushed back against the power structures of whiteness.<sup>23</sup>

Many people, regardless of their religious affiliation and through no fault of their own, envision Jesus as white by default because of publicly available media. By building on the work of these scholars, my research challenges those perceptions of visual depictions of the divine and the role they play in Christian higher education and white evangelicalism. This project’s

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<sup>21</sup> Jun et al., *White Jesus*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Jun et al., *White Jesus*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Curtis, *Myth of Colorblind Christians*, 49-77.

significance lies in the fact that white evangelicals are prominent actors within the American political system, as evidenced by Trump's rise to political power over the last decade. Examining the intersectional religious and racial motivations of this group and the Christian higher education institutions that produce white evangelical leaders will allow for a greater understanding of some of the most powerful political actors in the United States. Additionally, this research provides helpful historical context for white supremacist and anti-Black oppression in Christianity and illuminates the implications of these serious issues.

## Chapter One: Chronicling White Christian Hegemony

Christianity has a long history of being tied to white supremacy, and one of the first manifestations of this that historians can point to is a 15th-century religious edict known as the Doctrine of Discovery. The Doctrine comprised a series of papal bulls that granted Europeans the legal power and religious justification to take over lands that they had “discovered.” Issued by Pope Nicholas V in January of 1455, the papal bull *Romanus Pontifex* spelled out the terms for international conquest permitted for the Portuguese King Alfonso V. The bull was originally written in Latin, and an English translation for *Romanus Pontifex*, along with other bulls in the Doctrine such as *Dum Diversas* and *Inter Caetera*, can be found online via the Indigenous Values Initiative.<sup>24</sup> The bull *Romanus Pontifex* states that Pope Nicholas V and King Alfonso V both sought

...the salvation of all ... [and that] he may bring the sheep entrusted to him by God into the single divine fold, and may acquire for them the reward of eternal felicity, and obtain pardon for their souls. This we believe will more certainly come to pass, through the aid of the Lord, if we bestow suitable favors and special graces on those Catholic kings and princes, who, like athletes and intrepid champions of the Christian faith, as we know by the evidence of facts, not only restrain the savage excesses of the Saracens and of other infidels, enemies of the Christian name, but also for the defense and increase of the faith vanquish them and their kingdoms and habitations...<sup>25</sup>

The most explicit portion of the bull gives the Portuguese King Alfonso V permission

to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties,

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<sup>24</sup> “Papal Bulls,” Doctrine of Discovery Project, Indigenous Values Initiative, July 23, 2018, <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/papal-bulls/>.

<sup>25</sup> “The Bull *Romanus Pontifex*,” Doctrine of Discovery Project, Indigenous Values Initiative, July 23, 2018, <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/the-bull-romanus-pontifex-nicholas-v/>.



principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit...

This excerpt illuminates the colonial worldview of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic church and the Portuguese crown. Historical records indicate that the Portuguese were engaging in slave trading on the West coast of Africa prior to 1455, but this papal bull, along with others, catalyzed the enslavement of Africans alongside the colonization of the “New World.” *Romanus Pontifex* also indicates a marriage between Christianity (specifically Catholicism, although this will soon expand to Protestants as well) and colonial conquest.

While this doctrine is religious in nature and provided sanction to take over inhabited lands, it was not legally upheld by Protestants on American soil until the groundbreaking *Johnson v. McIntosh* case in 1823, which ultimately ruled that Native Americans could not own land.<sup>26</sup> Widespread dispossession of Indigenous lands at the hands of American Protestants persisted after this case, all centered around the premise of white Christian entitlement to land, otherwise known as Manifest Destiny. As the United States expanded West in the 19th century, John L. O’Sullivan coined the phrase Manifest Destiny to affirm the United States’ position as God-given harbingers of goodness and freedom to the frontier and the world.<sup>27</sup> To reinforce this belief, white Protestants used a theological concept called the “dominion mandate” given in the biblical book of Genesis. In the Genesis creation narrative, God tells the first humans to “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28, NKJV).

O’Sullivan believed that only white people had this divine right to dominion and deemed

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<sup>26</sup> National Institute of Health, “1823: Supreme Court Rules American Indians Do Not Own Land,” Native Voices: Native Peoples’ Concepts of Health and Illness, accessed July 3, 2025, <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/timeline/271.html>.

<sup>27</sup> John Wilsey, ““Our Country Is Destined to Be the Great Nation of Futurity”: John L. O’Sullivan’s Manifest Destiny and Christian Nationalism, 1837–1846,” *Religions* 8, no. 4 (2017): 68, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8040068>.

everyone else unfit to govern themselves.<sup>28</sup> Under these beliefs, American westward expansion further into Indigenous-inhabited Mexico was divinely sanctioned. The land was theirs, no question.

The Doctrine also permitted the enslavement of non-Christian peoples, and there were centuries of debate in the United States about how the Bible should be read and understood in regards to slavery. As the Bible does not explicitly condemn slavery and in multiple places endorses the practice, white Protestant elites had no problem drafting biblical justifications for human bondage and forced labor. The popular 19th-century author Josiah Priest outlined many such justifications in his 1851 book *Bible Defence of Slavery*. Priest argues for “the mark of Cain” and “the curse of Ham,” declares that the Sodomites were “negroes,” and that “Queen Jezebel and all her priests were black.” He also claims to expose the “first instances on a great scale of white men enslaving the race of Ham in ancient times” and that the continuance of that tradition should be respected.<sup>29</sup>

The issues of slave owning and trading were contentious for white protestants, and denominations split as a result. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), currently the largest evangelical Protestant denomination in the United States, was formed in 1845 from the split between Northern and Southern Baptists over slavery. The Methodist Church also split in 1844, the southern pro-slavery faction being the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.<sup>30</sup> The fundamentalism and conservatism of the SBC persist today, as the denomination launched a full-scale public campaign against Critical Race Theory in 2021, which they claimed was incompatible with the Christian message of unity and identity in Christ.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Wilsey, “Manifest Destiny,” 4.

<sup>29</sup> Josiah Priest, *The Bible Defense of Slavery* (United States: W.S. Brown, 1851), 9-12.

<sup>30</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Kate Shellnutt, “Southern Baptists Keep Quarreling Over Critical Race Theory,” *Christianity Today*, December 3, 2020. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2020/12/southern-baptist-critical-race-theory-debate-crt-seminary-s/>.

Through slavery, the white Protestant elite built a social hierarchy that designated white men as the sole beneficiaries of wealth, dignity, and holiness. This sentiment was clearly exemplified in D.W. Griffith's 1915 film, *Birth of a Nation*.<sup>32</sup> In one of the film's final scenes, the Ku Klux Klan successfully quelled a Black revolution during Reconstruction after the Civil War. White rule is reestablished in the South via the revered KKK, and the film shows a joyous scene of white people celebrating. Floating above them, a figure of Jesus depicted as a white man appears. He is benevolent, and looks as though he is blessing the new white supremacist order (and by proxy the violent means it took to reach those ends). This brings the religious undertone of the film full circle, as the very first scene depicts enslaved Africans arriving in the United States. Standing in chains, they are prayed over by a white Christian religious leader. In this action, we see their enslaved, dehumanized state as being sanctioned by God, which is then reinforced by the ending scene of a white Jesus bestowing his blessing on white supremacy. *Birth of a Nation* was groundbreaking and wildly influential. It was one of the first feature-length silent films, was a blockbuster success, shown in the White House, and led to the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in the 20th century.<sup>33</sup> The explicit religious undergirding via white Jesus cannot be ignored.

### ***Whiteness Defined as Holy***

In the tumult of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the nation struggled to define itself. Through slavery, the influx of European immigration, and westward imperial expansion increasing contact with Indigenous people, whiteness was being defined as *not* Indigenous, Black, Irish, or Catholic. The white Protestant elite felt their grip on America slipping. Protestant organizations such as the American Bible Society, the American Sunday School Union, and the

<sup>32</sup> "The Birth of a Nation - Full Movie - (1915) HD - The Masterpiece of Racist Cinema," August 1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebtjJH3EOHo>.

<sup>33</sup> William Spivey, "When 'Birth of a Nation' Was Screened in the White House," *Medium*, February 24, 2023, <https://zora.medium.com/when-birth-of-a-nation-was-screened-in-the-white-house-70bd9896a064>.

American Tract Society were all founded in the early 19th century to steer the American public toward Protestant Christian theology.<sup>34</sup> A large part of this was through Sunday school cards and tracts that depicted Bible stories and featured a white Jesus.

With industrialization, white protestants inundated the American public with imagery of Jesus as white. While the history and culture surrounding Catholic imagery are well documented, Protestant Christian images depicting Jesus are less so. Catholicism is known for embracing visual art mediums, from statues of saints and the Virgin Mary to stained glass windows in ornate cathedrals. However, Protestants were bolstered to create religious imagery by a description of Jesus in the *Publius Lentulus* letter, a forged letter from around the tenth century. While it claimed to be written by a Judean governor to the Roman Senate in the time of Jesus, its fraudulent nature was widely and sometimes begrudgingly accepted. Despite this, many desired for the letter's contents to be a valid description of Christ.<sup>35</sup> The letter reads in part:

[...]a Man of stature somewhat Tall and Comely, with a very reverend Countenance, such as the beholders may both *Love* and *Fear*; his Hair of the colour of a Chestnut full ripe, and plain almost down to his ears, but from the ears downward somewhat curled, and more orient of colour waving about his Shoulders.

In the midst of his Head goeth a seam or partition of his Hair, after the manner of the *Nazarites*; his Forehead very plain and smooth; his Face without spot or wrinkle, beautified with a comely red; his Nose and Mouth so formed as nothing can be reprehended; his Beard somewhat thick, agreeable in colour to the Hair of his Head not of any great length, but forked in the midst; of an innocent look; his Eys gray, clear, and quick.

In reproving he is severe, in admonishing courteous, and fair-spoken, pleasant in speech mixed with gravity.

It cannot be remembred that any have seen him *laugh*, but many have seen him *weep*: in proportion of Body well shaped and straight, his Hands and Armes very delectable to behold; in speaking, very *temperate*, *modest*, and *wise*.

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<sup>34</sup> Blum and Harvey, *The Color of Christ*, 80.

<sup>35</sup> Blum and Harvey, *The Color of Christ*, 82.

A Man for his singular beauty surpassing the Children of Men.<sup>36</sup>

This description was interpreted by many white Protestant elites to be emblematic of a white presenting savior, and the image was used on young and old alike. Through lesson cards and tracts created in the 19th century, Blum and Harvey explain that “Jesus imagery may have had its biggest impact on American Sunday schools, where the whiteness of Jesus became a religious fact in the psyches of children long before they could experience conversion.”<sup>37</sup> Sunday school cards were affordable, making them accessible to white and Black congregations alike. The *Publius Lentulus* description almost perfectly matches the Jesus appearance in Sunday school cards from 1910 and the final scene in *Birth of a Nation*, evincing the proliferation of the image into the 20th century.

For Blum and Harvey, this Christ was created by American white Protestant elite and mass-produced to be “Nordic and nativist,” essentially underpinning and blessing whiteness. “As imperialism stretched from the American West to overseas ventures, the white Christ became a big brother figure who sanctified concepts of white racial adulthood and nonwhite racial childhood. He was made into a supposedly universal savior, but one who privileged white authority and dominance.”<sup>38</sup> While he was a malleable figure throughout American history, from the colonies to the Civil Rights Movement, white Protestant hegemony prevented alternative (non-white) perspectives about Jesus from gaining much traction.

However, the Great Depression and the rise of Hollywood films brought new opportunities for Americans to remake Jesus in their image. White people from varying economic backgrounds clashed over who could claim the likeness of Jesus. At the height of the Great Depression, Americans suffered extreme economic challenges, with the poorest among

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<sup>36</sup> Publius Lentulus, “Publius Lentulus His Report to the Senate of Rome Concerning Jesus Christ,” University of Michigan Library Digital Collections, 1680, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A47704.0001.001/1:1?rgn=div1&view=fulltext>.

<sup>37</sup> Blum and Harvey, *The Color of Christ*, 146.

<sup>38</sup> Blum and Harvey, *The Color of Christ*, 154.

them facing the brunt of the crisis. The white Jesus they worshipped, consciously and subconsciously, was not enough anymore. He needed to speak to their economic problems. Blum and Harvey explain that white capitalist elite found the Sunday school Jesus to be too fragile and feminine. They wanted a Jesus who they could aspire to be like, who mirrored back to them toughness, aggression, business acumen, and manliness.<sup>39</sup>

White evangelicals were on the front lines of this battle for a more “manly” savior. In 1924, Warner Sallman, a member of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Chicago, was commissioned to draw cover art for his denomination’s magazine, the *Covenant Companion*. According to Blum and Harvey, Sallman was “inspired by a professor at Moody Bible Institute, an evangelical Bible college in Chicago, who asked for a more ‘manly’ Jesus.”<sup>40</sup> Allegedly, late in the night before the magazine cover art was due, he prayed and was led to draw a rendering of Jesus’ face. He called it *Son of Man*. The cover art was exceedingly popular, and the magazine would go on to sell thousands of copies and reprints. The sketch was shown at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1933, and in 1940, with the emotional and financial encouragement of students at North Park Theological Seminary (affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Church of America) in Chicago, Sallman created a painting based on his original sketch.<sup>41</sup> This he titled *Head of Christ*, and it featured Jesus against a brown background with blue eyes, long wavy brown hair, a short brown beard, a sharp pointed nose, and unmistakably white skin. He is dressed in a bright white robe and gazes distantly to the viewer’s right. This image was quickly mass-produced to the point of becoming a household staple by World War II, and sold over 14 million prints by 1944.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Blum and Harvey, *The Color of Christ*, 177-178.

<sup>40</sup> Blum and Harvey, *The Color of Christ*, 208.

<sup>41</sup> Greg Asimakoupoulos, “A Head of His Time: How One of The Most Recognizable Images of Jesus Came to Be,” *The Evangelical Covenant Church* (blog), February 8, 2016, <https://covchurch.org/2016/02/08/a-head-of-his-time/>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

While Sallman's art was ubiquitous in American life, resistance to the image and theology associated with white Jesus was plentiful, especially from African Americans. Blum and Harvey highlight sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's survey of Black youth before the *Brown v Board of Education* ruling in 1954. Frazier pointedly asked young people, "Is God a white man?" When his results demonstrated widespread belief in a white Christ, a white God, and low self-esteem stemming from those beliefs, he "blamed Sunday school cards and mass-produced images of blue eyed, brunet Christs," and he "blamed" Black churches for displaying and distributing images of "a white God and white angels."<sup>43</sup> Malcolm X famously disparaged images of white Jesus, most notably as described in his autobiography, when he was in prison and challenged a visiting Bible teacher on the Christian savior's race. When Malcolm asserted that Jesus was of Hebrew origin and even Black, he said he watched as the teacher grew embarrassed. "I don't care how tough the convict, be he brainwashed black Christian or a 'devil' white Christian, neither of them is ready to hear anybody saying that Jesus wasn't white."<sup>44</sup> While the Jesus described in the Christian Bible is understood to be a Palestinian Jewish man, some African Americans chose to be intentionally subversive in their portrayals and understandings of Jesus.

Known as the father of Black liberation theology, James Cone asserts in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* that Jesus Christ was well-acquainted with suffering and oppression and therefore had much more in common with African Americans than white people in the United States. Liberation theology was born through Black scholars and leaders who read an overarching message of liberation for oppressed peoples in the Bible and found symbolic similarities with Jewish people in the Bible. While Cone says that "The White Christ gave blacks

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<sup>43</sup> Blum and Harvey, *The Color of Christ*, 181-182.

<sup>44</sup> Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Ballantine Books, 2015), 193.

slavery, segregation, and lynching and told them to turn the other cheek and look for their reward in heaven.”<sup>45</sup> Black theologians asserted that the Jesus they worshipped was “black and recrucified on the lynching trees of America.”<sup>46</sup> Art depicting Jesus as Black was purposeful. It demonstrated with whom he sided, which gave some Black Christians hope. Depicting Jesus as Black was symbolic. It was about what he represented, not necessarily his phenotype. Thus, many Black Christians intimately understood what the depiction of Jesus as white represented, and how incongruent the biblical Jesus was from the white evangelical vision of their savior.

The Civil Rights Movement was instrumental in the fight against white Jesus, and the movement’s leaders were in fundamental conflict with key white evangelical figures who upheld the theology behind white Jesus. “America’s Pastor,” Billy Graham, was a staunch white evangelical. He earned his degree from Wheaton College, a prominent evangelical college in Illinois, and spoke openly against the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s methods. Graham cautioned against the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and in response to King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, Graham said, “Only when Christ comes again will little white children of Alabama walk hand in hand with little Black children.”<sup>47</sup> In the context of white evangelical resistance to integration, Graham’s statement reads more like a threat than a hope.

Contemporary white evangelicals revere Graham as almost holy, the closest thing American Protestants have to a Saint. His son, Franklin Graham, is now a prominent pastor, speaker, conservative political commentator, and the president of the evangelical organization Samaritan’s Purse. He has dutifully carried his father’s legacy into the 21st century by becoming the president of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.<sup>48</sup> Graham is a frequent contributor

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<sup>45</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Orbis Books, 2011), 119.

<sup>46</sup> Cone, *Lynching Tree*, 118.

<sup>47</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Derek Brower, “Evangelical leader Franklin Graham: ‘Americans realise Trump is not pastor-in-chief,’” *Financial Times*, July 26, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/f2b17cb7-f179-4b06-bbe1-15f682ba16a5>.



on Fox News, has spoken at multiple Trump rallies, and gave the invocation at Trump's presidential inauguration in January 2025. Graham said before his prayer, "Mr. President, the last four years, there are times I'm sure you thought it was pretty dark—but look at what God has done. We praise him and give him glory."<sup>49</sup> Through the Graham legacy and blessing of Trump, and among decades of work to build a partnership between conservative Christians and the Republican Party, white evangelicals have embraced the racism featured in their theological DNA.

This chapter traced a brief history of the relationship between Christianity and white supremacy in the United States and detailed how the concept and imagery of white Jesus is a direct manifestation of these social systems. Further chapters will discuss the important role that Christian higher education institutions play in manufacturing this white evangelical racism, beginning with a very literal illustration of the convergence of the themes of racism, colonialism, colorblindness, and right-wing politics discussed in this chapter.

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<sup>49</sup> "Franklin Graham invocation."

## Chapter Two: The Jesus Mural and the “White Box”

“What if the symbol of divinity to you was the symbol of oppression to me? What if the symbol of truth to you was the symbol of deception to me?” These words flashed across the screen in a packed Biola University (pronounced *bye-ola*) auditorium. It was May 13, 2008, and the symbol in question was a 30-foot-tall mural of Jesus Christ on a wall at the center of Biola’s campus. The auditorium was silent save for a gospel song blasting through the speakers. “What if the symbol of beauty to you was the symbol of pain to me? What if the symbol of heritage to you was the symbol of ignorance to me? What if the symbol of freedom to you was the symbol of captivity to me?”<sup>50</sup> The “Jesus mural,” as Biola students affectionately call it, was the epicenter of a heated controversy yet again. The aforementioned quotes were shown in a video at the beginning of a forum to discuss the mural and its meaning for the Biola community. In examining this forum discussion, I ask, what does having a painting of white Jesus on a Christian university campus say about the institution—its history and values, and white evangelicalism as a whole?

Founded in 1908 as the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, Biola University’s mission is “biblically centered education, scholarship and service — equipping men and women in mind and character to impact the world for the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>51</sup> The university’s founder, Lyman Stewart, was additionally the founder of an oil company in Pennsylvania.<sup>52</sup> As African Americans fled the South during the Great Migration and new immigrants moved into urban centers, white Christians moved away from cities en masse, including majority white Christian colleges. In Southern California, Westmont College, Point Loma Nazarene University, and

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<sup>50</sup> TheJesusMural. “Biola Jesus Mural ‘Forum’ - Part 1 of 11.” YouTube. October 4, 2009. Forum discussion, 8:41. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCxXrPrGytI>.

<sup>51</sup> Biola University, “Mission, Vision and Values,” Biola University website, n.d. <https://www.biola.edu/about/mission>.

<sup>52</sup> Biola University, “History and Heritage,” Biola University website, n.d. <https://www.biola.edu/about/history>.

Pepperdine University all relocated to hilltop suburbs that offered seclusion from city centers<sup>53</sup> in 1945,<sup>54</sup> 1973,<sup>55</sup> and 1972,<sup>56</sup> respectively. Biola was no exception, which relocated from Los Angeles to La Mirada in 1959.<sup>57</sup>

Biola's "Jesus mural," formally titled "The Word," was completed in 1990 by prominent Los Angeles painter Kent Twitchell. It depicts Jesus draped in a bright red robe, gazing upward, and holding a Bible. His features are unmistakably racialized as white. Twitchell's Jesus has skin that is slightly tanned and purposefully matches the color of the Bible's pages, in reference to the biblical passage in John 1:14 (NIV), which says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."<sup>58</sup> His red robe represents blood, and together with the figure of Jesus, the two shadows on the left side of the wall signify the Trinity. Twitchell is responsible for another mural of a Latino Jesus in the streets of Los Angeles, which, according to Biola's president, brought healing to rival gangs in the area.<sup>59</sup> At Biola, however, the Jesus on the wall was white. In a statement from Biola's art department that was read aloud at the May 2008 forum, moderators mentioned that:

Twitchell visited the 'Holy Land' on a number of occasions, carefully observing the features and characteristics of [Jesus'] people. He knew what kind of model he wanted, and when he discovered [indiscernible], a Russian Jew, he was satisfied. He was also pleased that an olive tree stood on the ground in front of the mural site. For him, the tree was another reference to authentic, historical content.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Jun et al., *White Jesus*, 75-76.

<sup>54</sup> "About: History," Westmont College website, n.d., <https://www.westmont.edu/about/history>.

<sup>55</sup> "History: University Overview," Point Loma Nazarene University website, n.d., <https://www.pointloma.edu/about/university-overview/history>.

<sup>56</sup> "History," Pepperdine University website, n.d., <https://www.pepperdine.edu/about/our-story/history/>.

<sup>57</sup> Biola University, "History."

<sup>58</sup> "Biola Mural – Part 1."

<sup>59</sup> Barry Corey, "Office of the President: Contemplations on the Jesus Mural Decision," Biola University website, March 19, 2019, <https://www.biola.edu/president/messages-media/contemplations-jesus-mural>.

<sup>60</sup> "Biola Mural – Part 1."

Biola's Jesus mural, therefore, was modeled after a Russian Jew from the modern state of Israel. Scholars understand the biblical Jesus to be of Palestinian Jewish descent, not Russian, therefore rendering this artistic depiction historically inaccurate. However, as the panel discussion makes clear, the root of the mural's problems does not lie in historical accuracy, but in what the art represents—and what it says about the place it was painted in.



*THE WORD by Kent Twitchell at Biola University in La Mirada, CA. Photo courtesy of Keziah Wilson.*

In 1993, a group of Biola students took a trip to a social justice conference and discussed the mural with Christian minister Tony Campolo, who is known for his work in the progressive Christian movement.<sup>61</sup> When they told him that Biola had erected a “white supremacist Jesus” on campus, he told them to “Go back and tear it down.”<sup>62</sup> A meeting was arranged for the students

<sup>61</sup> Tony Campolo: The Positive Prophet of Red Letter Christianity—About Tony,” TonyCampolo.org, n.d., <https://www.tonycampolo.org/about-tony/>.

<sup>62</sup> Karen Myers, “The story so far: Jesus and the mural,” The Chimes, April 15, 2010, <https://chimesnewspaper.com/12800/archives/features/jesus-mural-sofar/>.

to dialogue with Twitchell, and he offered to sandblast the mural off the wall, but the students backed down. Student newspaper articles claim that with enrollment turnovers every four years, fresh waves of controversy arose until they reached a peak in 2008, when the university president, Barry Corey, set out to refurbish the fading and chipping mural.<sup>63</sup> Corey said that he chose to delay the restoration at the behest of a friend who encouraged him to open up a campus-wide dialogue about the mural and its racial impact.<sup>64</sup>

The May 2008 forum mentioned above was held in an effort to facilitate this dialogue, and students were able to voice their opinions and concerns. After opening in prayer, showing the “What if...?” video, and reading the statement from Biola’s art department, the moderators said they “don’t want to be divisive, but want to open up dialogue,” and they understood that the intent of the mural is very different from its impact.<sup>65</sup> They said the artist’s aim, as a devout Christian himself, was to gift Biola with a beautiful and meaningful piece of art. The moderators understood that there were four primary approaches to issues with the mural: Artistic expression, historical accuracy, the biblical command against “graven images,” and understanding the role of images of Jesus in racial oppression. They felt there had already been abundant space and time provided to process the three former issues, and decided to hold this forum to discuss the neglected fourth argument about racial oppression.

### ***Racism, Colonialism, and Colorblindness***

Next, a racially diverse panel that consisted primarily of students each voiced their perspectives on the mural. One Black panelist said he “doesn’t feel oppressed by the mural.” He understood that it is just a picture, but also that if it were historically accurate, Jesus would “look

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<sup>63</sup> Myers, “Jesus and the mural.”

<sup>64</sup> Corey, “Contemplations.”

<sup>65</sup> TheJesusMural, “Biola Jesus Mural ‘Forum’ - Part 2 of 11.” YouTube. October 4, 2009, Forum discussion, 9:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2CROA8XCMY>.

more like Saddam Hussein.” He argued that if the Jesus on the wall looked like “Denzel Washington or Snoop Dogg,” the mural would have been torn down long ago and accused of being “sacrilegious” instead of a beautiful and artistic expression of faith. “It’s easier when the image looks more like you to see it as art. But when you see it and it’s not like you...”<sup>66</sup> As this panelist explains, one’s perception of art is contingent on their social position. As a white person, this makes viewing art of white Jesus likely a less confrontational and less threatening experience than it would be for a non-white viewer. He also thoughtfully pointed out that images of Jesus depicted as Black are often scrutinized more severely than the commonly accepted art of white Jesus. White Jesus, though just as “historically inaccurate” as Black Jesus, is understood to be the default. This panelist pointed out that common understandings of church history are very Eurocentric and ignore contributions from places like Ethiopia, for example. He explained:

I realized that has an effect on people now, because it’s very difficult for us as Black people to sit back and make this clean snip from the present and the past. Because in the past, it was Christians who were oppressing us. It was people who were using the Bible and images of Christ to oppress us. So there’s a lot of people I know who really have a difficult time, and one of their main objections with Christianity is this Eurocentric aspect. And it actually, literally, is keeping people from Christ.

He stated that multiple Black people he knows reject Christianity due to racial issues like the church’s history, and argued later in the discussion that “The mural is not the problem. It is symbolic of a bigger problem, the bigger problem being a Europeanization of Christianity, a Europeanization of the church.”<sup>67</sup> This student recognized the connection between white Jesus, Eurocentric teaching about church history, and anti-Black racism in the church, and framed it as an issue for Black believers.

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<sup>66</sup> “Biola Mural – Part 2.”

<sup>67</sup> TheJesusMural, “Biola Jesus Mural ‘Forum’ - Part 7 of 11.” YouTube. October 4, 2009, Forum discussion, 10:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2rI-E6EGzM>.

A young white man on the panel said that growing up, he never questioned the whiteness of his faith, so he admitted to really struggling to understand what any of the racial problems with the mural meant. He stated,

It's only been until recently that I've been starting to hear these other sides of the issue, and I still don't fully understand. But I think my biggest thing is that I want to make sure that I'm not just writing this off like it's no big deal, like 'these people just need to deal with it and it's not my problem.' Because even though I don't get it, and even though I grew up in a white context and that Jesus—it doesn't really matter what color he is, except that he is white to me. I want to be able to sit here and actually hear that my brothers and sisters are saying there is a problem.<sup>68</sup>

He went on to explain that because there are different ethnicities represented at Biola and in the United States more broadly, Jesus at Biola should not be portrayed as white. He understood Jesus to be white in his own subconscious and saw no racial implications in the mural, so he expressed that he could relate heavily to anyone in the audience experiencing confusion and frustration. Despite this, he said he wanted to take a listening posture toward his “brothers and sisters” experiencing pain. He did not speak for the rest of the discussion.

A woman of color on the panel then asserted that there are profound psychological impacts to this issue as well, citing a book she had recently read, titled *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery* by Black psychologist Na'im Akbar. She read an excerpt aloud: “‘If you can put God in a frame, then you have got him and he does not have you. If you can hang him up on your wall, then he belongs to you. You do not belong to him. You can take his picture, put it in a frame, lock him up in a room, and do whatever you want.’” She continued,

So I just want to put that out there, that it's tough for us. Because psychologically, it's deeply entrenched for us that Jesus is white. When you close your eyes and pray, what do you see? What do you envision? And that's something that, as a person of color, is a

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<sup>68</sup> “Biola Jesus Mural ‘Forum’ - Part 3 of 11,” October 4, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNc6DgFkHCI>.

struggle. As [previous Black panelist] was talking about, this can be a burden to people of color trying to have a close relationship with Christ. A lot of my peers and myself have had this struggle.<sup>69</sup>

When she finished speaking, a man from the audience sitting off-camera immediately shouted at her, “Are you saying that we should sandblast the mural?” Someone else off-camera quickly jumped in before she could respond to explain that a time for Q&A would take place shortly. The moment was notable, as she, the only woman of color on the panel, was the only panelist addressed in this way. Though she did not specify the exact psychological impacts of perceiving Jesus as white, E. Franklin Frazier’s study of Black youth in the 1950s, mentioned in the previous chapter, supports her claim. What does believing in Christ’s whiteness say about Blackness, or other racial and ethnic backgrounds?

A panelist who identified as a Hispanic man then spoke up, asserting,

When I look at this mural, I do see a depiction of a white Jesus. And I feel that a lot of people continue to say, ‘Well, he’s not white, he resembles a Russian Jew.’ Or, ‘I don’t see color whenever I see that Jesus, it’s just Jesus.’ So, for me, speaking as a minority and a Hispanic on campus, I see a white Jesus. That’s what I see when I look at that. And I may not be oppressed by this, but I am offended by it. Because he wasn’t white. I feel like this conversation has been going on for about 17 years, since the beginning of this, and no one has really validated that concern. And I feel like we talk a lot about the ‘artistic expression,’ we talk about the ‘historical accuracy,’ we even talk about the ‘graven images.’ But speaking as a minority, it hurts me when people make comments like, ‘it doesn’t matter, just get over it,’ ... and degrade this issue and make it feel like it’s nothing, because for me, this *is* something. This *does* bother me.<sup>70</sup>

This panelist’s passion was palpable as he spoke, and others on the panel acknowledged the rising tension in the room and that some attendees were even walking out. His comments suggest that he had previously overheard or participated in discussions about the mural, and was

<sup>69</sup> TheJesusMural, “Biola Jesus Mural ‘Forum’ - Part 4 of 11.” YouTube. October 4, 2009, Forum discussion, 10:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GK8Kqty1P4k>.

<sup>70</sup> “Biola Mural - Part 4.”



frustrated by those who used colorblindness as a means to dismiss the historic realities of racism perpetuated by images of white Jesus. White evangelical colorblindness in this context proved to be just as harmful as, and can even be considered to be a different form of, overt racism.

Another Black panelist said that he was very taken aback by the mural and that in another place on campus, he saw photos of Black and Brown children from different parts of the world. He said the way he immediately interpreted this was along the lines of “we’re going to bring the gospel to these backwards people.”<sup>71</sup> This student instantly read a colonial, religio-racial narrative onto the art and displays on campus, resurrecting themes that stretch back to the 15th-century Doctrine of Discovery. He later added that a speaker at a previous Biola Missions Conference explained that millions of images of a white Protestant Jesus were spread all around the world. “Even people outside of America associate Jesus with the Jesus that we have on the wall,” the panelist said emphatically.<sup>72</sup> International missionary work is often likened to neo-colonialism.<sup>73</sup> What does it mean to take the Gospel to the nations when the gospel is held by a white Christ? This gives the term “white savior” a whole new meaning. The same student also argued, “I believe that this Jesus thing is an impediment to diversity on Biola’s campus. And if we are really serious about diversity on this campus ... and are really serious about having a genuine, intentional, diverse community at Biola, this right here is a stronghold that’s stopping that from happening.”<sup>74</sup>

When the floor opened for the audience to ask questions, one white male student asked why they couldn’t just paint more murals instead of tearing down the one that some people found

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<sup>71</sup> TheJesusMural, “Biola Jesus Mural ‘Forum’ - Part 5 of 11.” YouTube. October 4, 2009, Forum discussion, 10:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6feYFHLJfw>.

<sup>72</sup> “Biola Jesus Mural ‘Forum’ - Part 8 of 11,” October 4, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtctICEbZB8>.

<sup>73</sup> Columbia University Libraries and Kristen Leigh Southworth, “The Messy Truth About Foreign Missions,” *The Burke Library Blog* (blog), August 30, 2012, accessed July 23, 2025, <https://blogs.library.columbia.edu/burke/2012/08/30/the-messy-truth-about-foreign-missions/>.

<sup>74</sup> “Biola Mural – Part 8.”

an issue with. Similar questions to this were posed throughout the evening by audience members of varying racial backgrounds. A white man in the audience asserted that no matter who or what was on the wall, someone was going to be offended. “How can we deal with the fact that no matter what you put up there, some people aren’t gonna like it, some people are gonna love it, some people are gonna be offended by it, [and] some people are gonna go, ‘eh, whatever.’ What are we supposed to do?”<sup>75</sup> Multiple people throughout the Q&A section of the evening questioned what practical next steps should look like given the range of opinions on the panel, with some seeming to argue for its removal and others seeming to only want to dialogue. A self-identified Black Panamanian man from the audience said that he agreed with some Biola professors who argued that “Taking down the Jesus mural would have a much more negative impact than what you guys are trying to push for.” He received a smattering of applause for this comment, though he did not explain what he meant by “negative.” Then he asked the panel if it would be better for Biola to specify that the mural is simply “man’s interpretation of what Jesus looks like,” presumably with some sort of physical text near the mural, instead of simply letting people come to their own conclusions about the art.<sup>76</sup>

The Hispanic panelist reiterated once more that it was not about interpretation, but instead about its impact. One of the moderators, who was a Black woman on staff at the time, reiterated earlier in the evening that the issue was not the mural itself, but rather “that it perpetuates something.”<sup>77</sup> She asserted,

No one is attacking Biola. No one is saying that Biola is a bad school. No one is saying we’re bad Christians or that the artist did a bad job. We’re saying, let’s talk about this. Let’s deal with the fact that we all know that when we go Google Jesus, at least 28 of

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> TheJesusMural, “Biola Jesus Mural ‘Forum’ - Part 9 of 11.” YouTube. October 4, 2009, Forum discussion, 10:00, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_FARpekxZug](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FARpekxZug).

<sup>77</sup> “Biola Mural – Part 5.”

those 30 pictures are going to look alike. And we've already decided that *that's* Jesus. We have a problem even as a community questioning something. Like, what do we fear letting go? What do we fear conversing about? Refurbishing the mural is reaffirming something.

The point that every panelist and both moderators aimed to make was that it was what the mural represented that was the primary issue. Most of the people who spoke from the audience jumped straight to practical solutions, ignoring the pain expressed by the panelists. However, an Asian woman from the audience, who was one of the last to speak, said that she felt it was wrong for Biola as a community to make such a bold claim about Jesus since everyone views and interacts with him differently. "The issue at hand is that Jesus is divinely sacred and we all love him so deeply, so how can we put him on a wall and say, 'this is how we see Jesus.'"<sup>78</sup> Her comment was met with applause and cheers.

In response to suggestions of simply erecting more murals, the woman of color on the panel explained,

I think it's one thing to say, 'This is how I view Christ.' But when you put a depiction of Christ on the wall at a university, that is saying a bigger statement. [It's saying] that this is what the university sees as Christ ... this is what Biola University stands for, and this is what the Christ of Biola is, and this is what you should follow.<sup>79</sup>

With this statement, she reached beyond a debate about more murals or how Black, Indigenous, and other students of color felt and addressed the university's complicity in the issues of racial oppression and colonialism previously discussed. She shifted the blame to the institution, away from the white students in the audience. And just before the forum concluded, one Black panelist

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<sup>78</sup> "Biola Mural – Part 9."

<sup>79</sup> TheJesusMural, "Biola Jesus Mural 'Forum' - Part 10 of 11." YouTube. October 4, 2009, Forum discussion, 10:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRfJaKPzFWA>.

fervently stated: “We’ve been talking about this for over 18 years now. Eighteen years worth of dialogue and it’s still up there...it’s time for action.”<sup>80</sup>

### ***Institutional Response***

In April 2010, Twitchell himself spoke in a chapel service at the university to offer the community his side of the story. According to a student newspaper article about the chapel, Twitchell was appalled by the controversy:

How could an image of the Son of God cause division on a Christian campus? ... He shared after reading some conversations on Facebook about the Jesus Mural, he felt that his piece generated hate and most of the things weren’t very kind. Twitchell compared the criticisms of the Jesus Mural to the spray painters that vandalize his artwork on the streets of L.A. ‘How would you feel if the mural would be taken down?’ [a student] asked Twitchell in Monday morning’s luncheon. ‘It would be a disappointment in so many ways that art would not be safe on a major Christian campus,’ Twitchell responded. ‘It would be a bad signal to the rest of the world....Diversity and open-mindedness have gone by the wayside.’<sup>81</sup>

By comparing Christians of color voicing their feelings about the whitewashing of Jesus to street vandals, Twitchell is dangerously claiming that legitimate feelings and dissent are ruining and destroying his art. His comments almost sound as though this mural is a victim of “reverse racism.” Ignoring the historical weight of his artwork, he complained about a lack of diversity, all while students argued that his *artwork* was actually preventing Biola from fully embracing racial diversity. Ultimately, in 2010, Biola’s president Corey announced his decision to refurbish the mural. Documentary footage of the restoration process, and what the mural looked like before Twitchell’s touch-ups, shows that Jesus’ skin appears to have been visibly darkened to

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Amy Ortega, “Mural artist speaks for himself,” *The Chimes*, April 21, 2010, <https://chimesnewspaper.com/12825/archives/features/twitchell-feature/>.

look more brown.<sup>82</sup> Three years later, Corey released a statement detailing his nine different reasons for choosing to refurbish the mural.

I made the decision because when I looked at much of how Jesus was portrayed in art over the years — anything from Rafael’s *Resurrection of Christ* to Batoni’s *Sacred Heart of Jesus* to the University of Notre Dame’s “Touchdown Jesus” — he was often similar in complexion to Biola’s Jesus. Historically, the Jesus mural was not an anomaly or meant to be a statement. The face of Kent Twitchell’s Jesus, I reasoned, was no different than how artists have painted Jesus throughout the centuries. ... The other Kent Twitchell Jesus, a Latino-faced Christ, was wider by nearly twenty feet than Biola’s Jesus was tall. The artist had more than one perspective of the face of a Jesus mural, not just the Caucasian features on [Biola’s] wall. I understood more about the artist as I learned the Biola Jesus was only one expression of how he saw Jesus.<sup>83</sup>

He also “struggled with how to articulate the mural’s removal to those in our broader constituency who love and support Biola because we’re unashamed to have a bigger-than-life Jesus mural on our wall. These included alumni, supporters, parents and trustees, among others.” He reasoned that keeping the mural “could be a teaching place for all of us,” believing it could foster space for more dialogue, and he “did not believe the best solution was to remove a piece of art that was uncomfortable to some in our community.”<sup>84</sup>

Corey is correct in asserting that Twitchell’s rendering of Jesus is no different from other depictions of white Jesus from over the centuries. Twitchell’s Jesus mirrors D.W. Griffith’s Jesus, Sallman’s Jesus, and is a slightly tanned version of Sunday school cards from the late 19th century. While these artists’ intentions varied based on their historical context, the impact of their art is most notable and arguably very similar across time. Biola’s president knew that removing the art, thereby disturbing the power structure of the “white architecture of salvation,” would

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<sup>82</sup> Kent Twitchell and Scott Haskins, “Restoration of the Jesus Mural,” Biola University Center for Christianity, Culture, and the Arts, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://ccca.biola.edu/resources/2015/restoration-jesus-mural>.

<sup>83</sup> Corey, “Contemplations.”

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

spell trouble for Biola's budget. Corey unintentionally revealed the core of the problem while attempting to explain it away. Twitchell created the "Latino Jesus" on the streets of Los Angeles to fit the surrounding community. What does it reveal about this institution that, instead of being given a historically accurate Jesus, Biola was gifted a "Caucasian" one, especially in light of what white Jesus has represented for centuries?

This case study is a literal example of the representative value of white Jesus at a majority-white Christian university and provides a model for how evangelical institutions often respond to racial issues. From the psychological impact of racialized images of Christ, to white Jesus' part in colonialism, to calls to colorblindness, students (notably Black and Latinx/Hispanic) grasped the historical weight of the image of white Jesus. They tried, and ultimately failed, to convince their peers and the institution of these realities. These students understood what it meant for an institution to platform an image of white Jesus and the message it sends to the nation, to prospective students, and to the world that they want to evangelize to. I would argue that the institution also intimately understands this message as it relates to donors and alumni. Institutional art expresses the values and priorities of the institution, whether conscious or unconscious, and the Jesus mural is no exception.

### ***Race in Christian Higher Education***

One racially contentious mural at one Christian university may appear harmless in the grand scheme of things, but Christian higher education has a lengthy legacy of racial exclusion, segregation, and maintaining white Christian hegemony on its campuses. For the purposes of this research, I focused on a handful of Protestant Christian colleges and universities to explore their attachment to, and reproduction of, white evangelical racism and right-wing politics. Protestant Christian colleges and universities were often affiliated with specific denominations at their

founding, and though they may have embraced principles of anti-slavery and racial inclusion in their founding documents, they were built in and primarily served white Protestant communities. Wheaton College in Illinois was originally affiliated with the anti-slavery Methodist Wesleyan denomination,<sup>85</sup> but as will be made apparent in this section and the following chapter, this did not prevent white supremacy from seeping into its roots. Biola's Talbot Theological Seminary and Moody Bible Institute in Chicago identify as non-denominational, with Moody explicitly self-identifying as "generally Calvinistic" and starting as the Chicago Evangelical Society.<sup>86</sup> They are both still committed to conservative theological stances.<sup>87</sup> Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, was founded as a Southern Baptist institution, is currently affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, and self-identifies as "evangelical."<sup>88</sup> Each of these institutions, and all of the Christian colleges and universities mentioned in this research, has a white majority in their student body.

Jesse Curtis, in *The Myth of Colorblind Christians*, details the magnitude and breadth of racism in Christian colleges across the nation as Christian schools tackled integration during the Civil Rights Movement. With the rise of Black Power, many young Black students arrived at Christian schools with the hopes they would be accepted and nurtured, but "Black students often felt that they were welcomed on campus only so long as they submerged their identities and embraced white normativity,"<sup>89</sup> Curtis explains. Christian schools began recruitment efforts to increase enrollment of Black students, but their institutions remained unchanged from the original "ethnoreligious identities"<sup>90</sup> embedded in their schools, which caused major conflict for

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<sup>85</sup> Wheaton College, "Historical Review Task Force Report," 18, *Wheaton College*, September 14, 2023, [https://www.wheaton.edu/media/marcomm/Historical-Review-Task-Force-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.wheaton.edu/media/marcomm/Historical-Review-Task-Force-Report_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>86</sup> Moody Bible Institute, "About Moody," n.d., <https://www.moodybible.org/about/#values>.

<sup>87</sup> Talbot School of Theology, "History and Accreditation," Biola University, accessed July 24, 2025, <https://www.biola.edu/talbot/about/history-accreditation>.

<sup>88</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, "Colleges and Universities: Explanation of Relationships," accessed July 24, 2025, <https://www.sbc.net/resources/directories/colleges-and-universities/>.

<sup>89</sup> Curtis, *Colorblind Christians*, 64.

<sup>90</sup> Curtis, *Colorblind Christians*, 75.

Black students. Some tried to integrate and assimilate, and others ventured to make changes and teach their peers about racial justice.

At Wheaton College, President Armerding and the other leaders described black students as radical, yet their demands were measured: black studies, curriculum reform, clarification on the interracial dating policy. Many white evangelical students and administrators experienced these claims as radical and disorienting because they made so little distinction between their own racial and religious identities.<sup>91</sup>

The normative nature of whiteness was so inextricably linked with white university leaders' Christian faith that Black students asking for change were accused of being a threat to Christian unity. Leaders were fine with integration, so long as submission to white Christian hegemony was maintained. Curtis tells of a special chapel service held by Black student groups at Taylor University in 1970, where Black students attempted to convince the white evangelical majority that "they were not like the black students on many college campuses who insisted on forming a 'black clique.' Instead, they declared, they 'believe in Taylor' and wanted to 'be completely integrated into the college environment.'"<sup>92</sup> This is very reminiscent of the sentiments expressed at the Biola mural forum. Black students and other students of color felt the need to assuage the fears and manage the emotions of their white classmates, and many refused to speak poorly against the institution in an effort to disengage accusations of white supremacy from the institution as a whole. Many Christian schools largely walked back their recruitment efforts in the mid to late 70s, and Black evangelicals cautioned Black students against attending them.<sup>93</sup>

As is apparent through the forum discourse at Biola, ideas of multiculturalism and diversity are still contentious issues for Christian colleges and universities in the 21st century. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU), a coalition of over 180 Christian

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<sup>91</sup> Curtis, *Colorblind Christians*, 69.

<sup>92</sup> Curtis, *Colorblind Christians*, 62.

<sup>93</sup> Curtis, *Colorblind Christians*, 74-75.



higher education institutions worldwide and over 140 in the United States,<sup>94</sup> published the racial diversity statistics of their American institutions in 2021.<sup>95</sup> According to the CCCU, in the 2018/19 school year, 58.5 percent of students and 83.8 percent of faculty were white, compared to 69.37 percent of students and 91.1 percent of faculty in the 2008/09 school year. This accounted for a 10.8 percent increase in “diverse” students on CCCU campuses, which they define as “non-white.”<sup>96</sup> These numbers do not provide insight for individual institutions in the CCCU, but group Christian higher education institutions in the U.S. as a whole. CCCU-affiliated institutions include the majority of Christian colleges and universities, such as Biola University, North Park University, Moody Bible Institute, Taylor University, Azusa Pacific University, Westmont College, Abilene Christian University, Southeastern University, Bethel College, and Wheaton College.

It has been reported that students of color at these institutions experience epistemic violence, that is, a sort of violence of the mind that occurs when one’s ways of knowing and understanding the world are challenged. The Hispanic student on the panel during the Jesus mural forum offered an impassioned response as he talked about his experience in Biola’s Bible classes. The university requires that all undergraduates, save for a select few exceptions for rigorous programs, minor in Biblical Studies.<sup>97</sup>

Being a minority on campus, you are isolated....I came into Biola as a Bible major. I came here thinking, ‘I’m going to learn more about God’s word, I’m going to go out and be a pastor, I’m going to serve’—I hated my Bible classes, I hated what I was learning. My theology and my doctrine, I was basically told I was wrong in how I believed. I was told that I was too emotional, that I was too much with the heart and not with the mind, and I

<sup>94</sup> “About: Our Work and Mission,” CCCU website, n.d., <https://www.cccu.org/about/#heading-our-work-and-mission-0>.

<sup>95</sup> CCCU, “Diversity on CCCU Campuses,” CCCU website PDF, 2021, <https://diversity.cccu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021-CCCU-Diversity-Stats.pdf>.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Dalet Valles, “Biola reduces required Bible units for select students starting fall 2023,” The Chimes, January 20, 2023, <https://chimesnewspaper.com/52652/news/biola-reduces-required-bible-units-for-select-students-starting-fall-2023/#:~:text=Beginning%20in%20fall%202023%2C%20Biola,majors%2C%20along%20with%20transfer%20students>.

think we have to understand that that is not how all churches function. When you come from a background that is different from an Anglo-Saxon Protestant background, studying in your Bible classes, and they tell you that you're wrong in how you view Jesus, it hurts. ... Looking back now, I'm now a Sociology major, I say I'm not wrong in believing what I believed. Yes, there is an importance for doing exegesis on a passage and for me to know intellectually how to serve and worship God with my mind, but my heart is just as valuable as my mind.<sup>98</sup>

Epistemic violence from one's peers presents one set of challenges that can be difficult enough to navigate. But hearing from people in spiritual and academic authority positions with the power to impact your grades, and therefore your future, that the way you understand God is wrong—this can understandably lead to emotional distress. This student's experience is not unusual, according to Amanda Jo Pittman and John H. Boyles of Abilene Christian University in Texas, who refer to these institutions as “Dominantly White Institutions” (DWIs) instead of Predominantly White Institutions.<sup>99</sup> Pittman and Boyles explain that this distinction maintains that whiteness is not only numerically dominant in these spaces but also exists as an overarching structure of power that feeds into every aspect of the institution. From their experience, undergraduate students of color in Christian schools tended to have a more difficult time in Bible classes due to the students' prior engagement in faith settings focusing more on emotion rather than academic knowledge.<sup>100</sup> They found that race was highly correlated with final grades in freshman Bible courses, as “Black and Hispanic participants received lower grades on average than their White peers,” and the largest gap in grades was found between white and Black students.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> “Biola Mural – Part 4.”

<sup>99</sup> Pittman and Boyles, “Challenging White Jesus,” 316.

<sup>100</sup> Pittman and Boyles, “Challenging White Jesus,” 321.

<sup>101</sup> Pittman and Boyles, “Challenging White Jesus,” 318.

Jason J. Cha of Westmont College and Alexander Jun of Azusa Pacific University—two scholars at CCCU institutions in Southern California—additionally argue that due to the racial homogeneity of Christian higher education institutions, white students do not question their race. “Many White people never consider their own whiteness, and this obliviousness to their own social location is fundamental to the problem of White college students’ underdeveloped racial identity.”<sup>102</sup> White is assumed, white is the standard, and nothing in their environment is challenging this. Through their analysis, it is clear that white iconographic representations of Jesus are not just murals on the side of buildings. Whiteness and Jesus are inextricably connected in the classroom as well.

And the mural is not the only racially contentious issue at Biola. In February 2020, Biola’s student newspaper reported that at least one poster celebrating Black History Month in a dorm stairwell was defaced with a racial slur. Biola’s Black student population at the time was 2.3 percent.<sup>103</sup> According to an article about the Trump administration’s Education Department directive for higher education institutions to cut race-specific and diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, Biola was “reviewing how this letter’s requirements will affect the institution...” However, as of February 2025, Biola has closed its Division of Diversity and Inclusion.<sup>104</sup> It is unclear whether Biola cut its program in response to the directive or if it was cut beforehand. As of 2023, Biola’s student population is 41 percent white, 21 percent Hispanic/Latino, 16 percent Asian, 8 percent two or more races, and 4 percent Black or African American.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Jason J. Cha and Alexander Jun, “Whiteness as Witness: Reconceptualizing Diversity in Christian Higher Education,” transcript of speech delivered at Nineteenth Annual Conversation on the Liberal Arts, Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California, February 27-29, 2020. 5 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/j.ctv310vph8>.

<sup>103</sup> Ashley Grams and Lacey Patrick, “Racist Vandalism Marks Black History Month,” *Chimes Newspaper*, February 21, 2020, <https://chimesnewspaper.com/47519/showcase/racist-vandalism-marks-black-history-month/>.

<sup>104</sup> Adolfo Guzman-Lopez, “The Trump Administration Wants Colleges to End DEI Programs. But What Do Those Programs Do?,” *LAist*, February 24, 2025, <https://laist.com/news/education/trump-administration-dei-diversity-equity-inclusion-colleges-universities>.

<sup>105</sup> Data USA, “Data USA: Biola University,” accessed July 20, 2025, [https://datausa.io/profile/university/biola-university#enrollment\\_race](https://datausa.io/profile/university/biola-university#enrollment_race).

Liberty University is the nation's second-largest Christian college, with a total enrollment of over 124,000 students in both their online and on-campus programs.<sup>106</sup> Their founder, Jerry Falwell Sr., was a segregationist who opposed the Civil Rights Movement and was a key figure in the development of a coalition of white evangelicals forming the politically active Moral Majority. Falwell's Moral Majority was brazenly "pro-life, pro-family, pro-Israel, and favored a strong national defense."<sup>107</sup> Liberty has hosted Trump on multiple occasions, but at a chapel service in 2015, then-president Jerry Falwell Jr., who took the reins of the university after his father, made comments about a mass shooting that had occurred a few days prior. "If some of those people in that community center had had what I've got in my back pocket right now..." The audience erupted in laughter and loud cheering. "Is it illegal to pull it out? I don't know...I've always thought if more good people had concealed carry permits, then we could end those Muslims before they walked in." Falwell encouraged the students to get their permits and emphasized that Liberty "offers a free course." He continued, "Let's teach them a lesson if they ever show up here."<sup>108</sup>

While he referenced a shooting carried out by two Muslim individuals, statistically, white men have carried out significantly more mass shootings in the United States than any other demographic.<sup>109</sup> Falwell's choice to use such inflammatory and targeted language was intentional, and sets the tone for Islamophobic rhetoric and violence at Liberty. He resigned in 2020 after a sex scandal.

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<sup>106</sup> Liberty University Office of Communications & Public Engagement, "Liberty University announces record enrollment: Over 16,000 on campus, 124,000 online," Press release, September 23, 2024, <https://www.liberty.edu/news/2024/09/23/liberty-university-announces-record-enrollment-over-16000-on-campus-124000-online/>.

<sup>107</sup> Liberty University, "Dr. Jerry Falwell – Biography," accessed July 24, 2025, <https://www.liberty.edu/about/founder-jerry-falwell-senior/>.

<sup>108</sup> "University President to Students: Arm Yourselves," December 5, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHmwD2VElyE>.

<sup>109</sup> Statista, "Number of Mass Shootings in the United States Between 1982 and September 2024, by Shooter's Race or Ethnicity," 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/476456/mass-shootings-in-the-us-by-shooter-s-race/>.

Wheaton College, established in 1860, is regarded as the “Harvard of Christian colleges” for its academic rigor.<sup>110</sup> In December 2015, tenured faculty member Larycia Hawkins, a Black woman, posted on Facebook that she would wear a hijab in solidarity with Muslim women for the week of Advent. Islamophobic rhetoric from Christians was escalating in light of the mass shooting committed by two Muslim individuals mentioned above, so Hawkins aimed to don a head covering in “embodied solidarity” with Muslim women in particular. According to the trailer for a film released about the incident, her now inaccessible Facebook post read in part, “I stand in solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God.”<sup>111</sup> She immediately received a firestorm of backlash, with Franklin Graham among those putting pressure on Wheaton to take action. According to the school’s president, the school placed her on leave not because of her choice to wear a head covering, but because what she said had apparently violated the college’s Statement of Faith.<sup>112</sup>

In the fall semester of 2023, Wheaton released a groundbreaking “Historical Race Task Force Report” that covers the school’s history with race. Wheaton proudly extolled their abolitionist history as it pertained to slavery, but debunked the popular myth that they were a stop on the Underground Railroad. They describe on-campus anti-Black racism in the form of students regularly performing in blackface and frequent “jokes” about Black people in the student newspaper in the early 20th century.<sup>113</sup> Interracial relationships were permitted on paper but were discouraged and discriminated against in practice for most of the college’s history.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Wheaton College, “The Harvard of Christian Schools?,” *The Wheaton Record*, October 10, 2015, <https://thewheatonrecord.com/2015/10/10/the-harvard-of-christian-schools/>.

<sup>111</sup> “Same God: Official Trailer,” December 4, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8S5oknWnlKM>.

<sup>112</sup> Ed Payne, “Christian College Begins Process to Remove Professor Who Wore a Hijab,” *CNN*, January 6, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/05/us/wheaton-college-professor-hijab>.

<sup>113</sup> Wheaton, “Historical Review,” 13.

<sup>114</sup> Wheaton, “Historical Review,” 61-62.

Wheaton's percentage of non-white students never broke 3 percent in the 1970s, climbed to just under 6 percent in the 1980s, and plateaued at about 9 percent in the 1990s.<sup>115</sup> At 122 pages, the report is a detailed and laudable step towards greater transparency in Christian higher education. However, the report stops at the year 2000. This completely neglects over twenty years of racial incidents like the Hawkins firing in 2015, the rise of Donald Trump, a global Black Lives Matter resurgence in 2020, and responses to the January 6th U.S. Capitol insurrection in 2021. The College's student newspaper noted student reactions to the report, which was sent out to the student body via email. "It's very isolating, especially as a Black person on campus... There's just 67 of us," one Black freshman reportedly said.<sup>116</sup>

In St. Paul, Minnesota, Bethel University's student newspaper published a collection of personal stories from Black, Indigenous, and other students of color about racism they experienced at the university.<sup>117</sup> The piece was released in 2021 and was a culmination of months of racial tension following the killing of George Floyd. Most students spoke of depleting mental health and exhaustion from teaching others about systemic racism, enduring constant microaggressions, the pressure of being the only non-white person in a space, and feeling as though they were "forced to fit into a white box." Bethel is 70 percent white.<sup>118</sup> The requirement to submit to white Christian hegemony is a recurring narrative for Christian higher education institutions.

This is only the very tip of the iceberg—these stories could fill their own book. Still, as the above demonstrates, issues of race are not isolated to one particular white evangelical institution, region of the country, or even time, but they are all symptoms of the same problem.

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<sup>115</sup> Wheaton, "Historical Review," 83, 93, 102.

<sup>116</sup> Anna Mares, "'Wheaton College Will Never Be the Same as It Was Before,'" *The Wheaton Record*, October 6, 2023, <https://thewheatonrecord.com/2023/10/06/wheaton-college-will-never-be-the-same-as-it-was-before/>.

<sup>117</sup> Alice Hong, "'Forced Into a White Box,'" *The Clarion*, May 18, 2021, <https://thebuclarion.com/36260/opinion/forced-into-a-white-box/>.

<sup>118</sup> Data USA, "Data USA: Bethel University," accessed July 25, 2025, <https://datausa.io/profile/university/bethel-university>.

This chapter covered discourse surrounding a mural of white Jesus, then zoomed out to take a bird's-eye view of racialized incidents at select Christian higher education institutions. Next, we will examine how the world beyond the campus is impacted by white evangelical racism, and by extension, white Jesus.

### Chapter Three: White Jesus Beyond the University

As has been established throughout this research thus far, Christian colleges are sites that ferment white evangelical racism within their campus communities. However, the theology of white Jesus extends beyond their walls. Though the following accounts are not exhaustive, they do provide insight into just how intertwined these institutions are with the Republican Party and white Christian nationalism. One of the most prominent examples of this is the Bob Jones University fight against integration. Founded in 1927 by segregationist and evangelist Bob Jones, the school excluded Black people from admissions until 1971 after the Supreme Court threatened to revoke its tax-exempt status. Citing *Brown v. Board of Education*, the court ordered the school to integrate, but it only admitted Black students who were married to other Black people. Interracial relationships were banned until the year 2000. Bob Jones believed that segregation was a biblical mandate, which they recanted and apologized for in 2008.<sup>119</sup> While there is no mention of this history on their website, a running footer on their homepage states that “the University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, age, sex, national or ethnic origin, protected disability or veteran status.”<sup>120</sup> The battle in the courts about integration helped to spur a movement far beyond the reaches of the university. Evangelical leaders including Paul Weyrich (co-founder of The Heritage Foundation,<sup>121</sup> which is now the author of Project 2025<sup>122</sup>), Jerry Falwell Sr. (founder of Liberty University), and Tim LaHaye (Bob Jones alumnus and co-author of the *Left Behind* series<sup>123</sup>) capitalized on the anti-integration sentiments fomented in white

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<sup>119</sup> Bob Jones University, “Statement About Race at BJU,” Press release, 2008, <https://www.bju.edu/about/what-we-believe/race-statement.php>.

<sup>120</sup> Bob Jones University, “Bob Jones University - Home,” accessed July 24, 2025, <https://www.bju.edu/>.

<sup>121</sup> NPR, “Paul Weyrich, Empowering the Right,” NPR, December 19, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/98505916>.

<sup>122</sup> Spencer Chretien, “Project 2025,” The Heritage Foundation, January 31, 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/conservatism/commentary/project-2025>.

<sup>123</sup> Robert D. McFadden, “Tim LaHaye Dies at 90; Fundamental Leader’s Grisly Novels Sold Millions,” *The New York Times*, July 25, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/26/books/tim-lahave-a-christian-fundamentalist-leader-dies-at-90.html? r=0>.



evangelicals from this public legal battle to form a coalition of white Christians that ultimately built the Religious Right and elected Ronald Reagan in 1980.

Nevertheless, the primary way that Christian higher education institutions reproduce their theology and agendas is through their alumni. Christian schools like to “keep in the family,” and transience among the Christian college network is standard for students, faculty, and staff alike. Some of the biggest names in white evangelicalism have come from Christian colleges, such as Billy Graham, Bill Gothard, and John Piper from Wheaton College, co-author of the *Left Behind* series Jerry B. Jenkins from Moody Bible Institute, and megachurch pastor Joel Osteen from Oral Roberts University.

Trinity Theological Seminary in particular has produced evangelical cultural gold mines. Trinity is affiliated with the conservative Evangelical Free Church of America, and Trinity professor D.A. Carson founded the ministry network *The Gospel Coalition* alongside evangelical great Timothy Keller. TGC promotes conservative theological stances on gender and sexuality in line with their denominational affiliation.<sup>124</sup> The evangelical stalwart *Christianity Today* was founded by Billy Graham in 1956 and “rescued,” in the magazine’s own words, by Trinity alumnus Kenneth Kantzer when he became an editor in the 70s.<sup>125</sup> CT is arguably the most influential Christian media outlet, and its current editor in chief, Russell Moore, is the former dean of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.<sup>126</sup>

Christian college alumni have also made their way into public office, with notable appointments in the Republican Party. Biola celebrated an alumnus working in Trump’s government. Just after the election in November 2024, the *San Bernardino Sun* reported that

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<sup>124</sup> The Gospel Coalition, “Foundation Documents: Confessional Statement,” accessed July 2, 2025, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/about/foundation-documents/#confessional-statement>.

<sup>125</sup> David Neff, “The Editor Who Helped Save Christianity Today,” *Christianity Today*, August 5, 2002, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2002/08/editor-who-helped-save-christianity-today-3/>.

<sup>126</sup> Russell Moore, “Bio,” Russell Moore, accessed July 2, 2025, <https://www.russellmoore.com/about/>.

1986 Biola alumnus John Thune was appointed as the Republican majority leader of the U.S. Senate, replacing Mitch McConnell. The *Sun* quotes Biola's president, Barry Corey, as saying, "We're elated. We're very proud of John Thune and feel like we had some part in his journey to his now being the Senate majority leader." The *Sun* continues, "Corey said the man charged with shepherding President-elect Donald Trump's agenda through Congress is an ideal alumnus."<sup>127</sup>

In February 2025, Wheaton posted a celebratory announcement on Facebook stating that their 1998 alumnus, Russell Vought, who is also a co-author of Project 2025,<sup>128</sup> was confirmed as the director of the United States Office of Management and Budget. The post was later removed due to outrage expressed by liberal-leaning alumni, and its removal sparked even further outrage by those who felt Wheaton capitulated to "the mob of the left."<sup>129</sup> The evangelist Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham and conservative leader of the evangelical organization Samaritan's Purse, said in a Facebook post, "Shame on them for backing down and having no backbone. I wish the leadership of this Christian school would stand firm with what is right and not be intimidated or moved by the winds of wokeness."<sup>130</sup> On X, formerly known as Twitter, Vought responded to the post's removal by simply saying, "SAD!"<sup>131</sup>

The Assemblies of God-affiliated Southeastern University in Florida is rumored to have close financial ties with Governor Ron DeSantis,<sup>132</sup> and an alumnus (who is also the son of the university's president) interned as a "press assistant" under Trump during his first presidential

<sup>127</sup> Anissa Rivera, "At Biola University, John Thune Was 'Easy to Like.' Now He's Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate," *The San Bernardino Sun*, November 13, 2024,

<https://www.sbsun.com/2024/11/13/biola-university-celebrates-sen-john-thunes-rise-to-senate-majority-leader-heres-why/>.

<sup>128</sup> League of Conservation Voters, "Russell Vought Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Nominee," accessed July 2, 2025, <https://www.lcv.org/bio/russell-vought/>.

<sup>129</sup> Jon Brown, "Wheaton College Rebuked for Removing Post Congratulating Alum in Trump Admin: 'Caving to the Mob,'" *The Christian Post*, February 11, 2025,

<https://www.christianpost.com/news/wheaton-college-rebuked-for-removing-russ-vought-post.html>.

<sup>130</sup> Franklin Graham, "A Wheaton College alumnus....," *Facebook*, February 10, 2025,

[https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=1189760245852901&id=100044568093541](https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1189760245852901&id=100044568093541).

<sup>131</sup> Russ Vought, "SAD!," X, February 8, 2025, <https://x.com/russvought/status/1888276004235260084>.

<sup>132</sup> Connor Jacobson, "Polk County Projects Funded in Florida's \$116.5 Billion State Budget," *Lakeland Today*, June 12, 2024, [https://laltoday.6amcity.com/city/polk-county-projects-funded-florida-state-budget?utm\\_term=laltoday&utm\\_campaign=daily-newsletter&utm\\_medium=newsletter&utm\\_source=laltoday&utm\\_content=laltoday](https://laltoday.6amcity.com/city/polk-county-projects-funded-florida-state-budget?utm_term=laltoday&utm_campaign=daily-newsletter&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_source=laltoday&utm_content=laltoday).

term. Davis Ingle joined Trump's team in 2019, and according to the university's 2023 alumni magazine, "he had the opportunity to accompany the president on over 50 trips aboard Air Force One and on even more trips in the presidential motorcade."<sup>133</sup>

While these institutions have celebrated their tangential affiliations with Trump, few have ventured as far as to actually host him on their campus like Liberty University has. Trump received Falwell's formal endorsement in 2016, and Trump gave a commencement address to "about 50,000" people at Liberty's graduation ceremony in May 2017.<sup>134</sup> In his speech, he declared,

Whether you're called to be a missionary overseas, to shepherd a church, or to be a leader in your community, you are the living witness of the gospel message of faith, hope, and love. And I must tell you that I am so proud as our president to have helped you along over the past short period of time. I said I was going to do it, and Jerry [Falwell], I did it.<sup>135</sup>

In the years that followed before Falwell's scandalous departure in 2020, Falwell funneled university funds into Republican and pro-Trump initiatives, including a "think tank" co-founded with conservative pundit Charlie Kirk. According to Politico, the group "purchased campaign-season ads on Facebook, at least \$50,000's worth of which were designated by the network as political ads, that promoted Trump and other Republican candidates by name."<sup>136</sup>

Another Christian college that hosted Trump was Dordt University in Sioux Center, Iowa, which held a campaign event for him in January 2016. It was in this speech that he claimed, "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose any voters."

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<sup>133</sup> Southeastern Alumni and Friends Magazine, "Davis Ingle: The Path to the White House," *Issuu*, season-02 2023, [https://issuu.com/southeastern/docs/2023\\_summer\\_seu\\_alumni\\_magazine\\_web/s/28769421](https://issuu.com/southeastern/docs/2023_summer_seu_alumni_magazine_web/s/28769421).

<sup>134</sup> Liberty University, "President Trump Makes His First Commencement Speech to Liberty Grads," *Liberty University News Service*, May 13, 2017, <https://www.liberty.edu/news/2017/05/13/president-trump-makes-his-first-commencement-speech-to-liberty-grads/>.

<sup>135</sup> "President Donald Trump's Liberty University Commencement Speech (Full) | The New York Times," May 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irKv3v8M8i4>.

<sup>136</sup> Maggie Severns, "In Final Years at Liberty, Falwell Spent Millions on pro-Trump Causes," *Politico*, December 14, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/12/14/jerry-falwell-trump-liberty-university-444661>.

After calling himself “a true believer,” Trump claimed that “Christianity is under tremendous siege” and that despite the numeric advantage that Christians have in the U.S., “we don’t exert the power that we should have.” To cheers from the audience, he promised that if elected, “Christianity will have plenty of power ... because if I’m there, you’re going to have plenty of power. You won’t need anybody else. You’re going to have someone representing you very, very well.”<sup>137</sup>

### ***Theology and Power***

While every single Christian college or university in the nation may not be manufacturing the next Mitch McConnell, there is an undeniable pattern of white evangelical racism and right-wing political complicity inside of and being produced by Christian higher education institutions. And given the share of majority white Christian young people attending and graduating from these institutions, they are, in fact, responsible for building the next generation of white evangelicals.

Conservatism and white Christian nationalism may not always be explicitly taught in the classroom, but material from evangelical leaders who hold those political beliefs often is. One such leader with undeniable reach and influence is theologian and professor Wayne Grudem, who has authored over 20 books and 100 academic articles, including the bestselling *Systematic Theology*, and taught thousands of students over 47 years at Phoenix Seminary, Bethel University, and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.<sup>138</sup> His books have been used in Christian schools across the nation as a foundational learning block for evangelical theology.

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<sup>137</sup> “FULL Donald Trump Campaign Event in Sioux City, IA at Dordt College Jan 23rd 2016,” January 27, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATuWvLYwdEY>.

<sup>138</sup> Bethany Starin, “Wayne Grudem to End Teaching Career,” *Ministry Watch*, May 1, 2024, <https://ministrywatch.com/wayne-grudem-to-end-teaching-career/>.

In 2016, Grudem came under fire for endorsing Trump's presidency even after the *Access Hollywood* tape was released that included Trump bragging about sexually assaulting women.<sup>139</sup> He condemned that behavior, but believed that his policy trumped his personality (pun intended). Grudem's support has remained true, as he published an op-ed in October 2024 titled, "20 Reasons to Vote for Republicans—and Especially for Donald Trump." In this instance, Grudem is using his breadth of influence and spiritual authority to convince his vast audience to support Trump. Grudem supports building the border wall, helping "Israel win its war" against Hamas, making "our military once again the strongest on earth," and the full gamut of far-right politics.<sup>140</sup>

Evangelical theologian and recently deceased Grace Community Church pastor John MacArthur attended Bob Jones University and graduated from Biola University's Talbot School of Theology, and has carved out a small piece of Southern California to build his conservative empire. He founded The Master's Seminary in 1986 at Grace Community Church, which was intended to be an extension of Biola's Talbot School of Theology.<sup>141</sup> His media ministry, *Grace to You*, is a frequent teaching series on Moody Radio,<sup>142</sup> one of the oldest Christian radio stations in the nation (affiliated with Moody Bible Institute).<sup>143</sup> GCC has come under repeated fire for covering up accusations of abuse, encouraging domestic violence survivors to stay in their abusive relationships,<sup>144</sup> and publicly shaming survivors who do leave.<sup>145</sup> The church openly

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<sup>139</sup> Jonathan Merritt, "Wayne Grudem, Donald Trump and Admitting When You're Not an Expert," *Religion News Service*, July 30, 2016, <https://religionnews.com/2016/07/30/wayne-grudem-donald-trump-politics/>.

<sup>140</sup> Wayne Grudem, "20 Reasons to Vote for Republicans-- and Especially for Donald Trump," *Townhall*, October 24, 2024, <https://townhall.com/columnists/waynegrudem/2024/10/27/20-reasons-to-vote-for-republicans-and-especially-for-donald-trump-n2646824>.

<sup>141</sup> The Master's Seminary, "Our Mission," n.d., <https://tms.edu/mission/>.

<sup>142</sup> Moody Radio, "Programs From Moody Radio," n.d., <https://www.moodyradio.org/programs/#teaching>.

<sup>143</sup> Moody Radio, "Who We Are," n.d., <https://www.moodyradio.org/about-who-we-are/>.

<sup>144</sup> Julie Roys, "Former Elder at John MacArthur's Church Confronts 'Awful Patterns' of Endangering Abuse Victims," *The Roys Report*, February 9, 2023, <https://julieroys.com/former-elder-at-john-macarthur-s-church-confronts-awful-patterns-of-endangering-abuse-victims/>.

<sup>145</sup> Dan Foster, "Astor Publicly Shames Woman for Leaving Abusive Husband," *Medium*, June 8, 2023, <https://medium.com/backyard-theology/pastor-publicly-shames-woman-for-leaving-abusive-husband-a62c34c2a2dd>.

defied county guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic and continued to hold unmasked indoor services without social distancing. The Master's Seminary did the same.<sup>146</sup> MacArthur openly expressed support for Trump.<sup>147</sup>

In a stunning interview clip titled "Slavery and True Liberty" published in 2012,<sup>148</sup> MacArthur explained and explicitly defended his theology around slavery, arguing that if done well, it is perfectly acceptable. "It is a little strange that we have such an aversion to slavery because historically there have been abuses," he began.

There have been abuses in marriage, we don't have an aversion to marriage particularly because there have been abuses. There are parents who abuse their children, we don't have an aversion to having children because some parents have been abusive. ... To throw out slavery as a concept simply because there have been abuses, I think, is to miss the point. In any kind of human relationship, there can be abuses. There can also be benefits. For many people, poor people, perhaps people who weren't educated, perhaps people who had no other opportunity, working for a gentle, caring, loving master was the best of all possible worlds. ... So we have to go back and take a more honest look at slavery and understand that God has, in a sense, legitimized it when it's handled correctly. ... Slavery is not objectionable if you have the right master. It's the perfect scenario.

He legitimizes this by emphasizing that with the right master, such as Jesus, he would be more than happy to be a slave.

If you ask me to be a slave, I will simply ask you one question: Who is my master? If you tell me my master loves me with a perfect love from which I can never be separated, if you tell me that my master will pour out all his riches on my behalf and hold nothing back, if you tell me my master knows me and what's best for me, and in every case provide everything that is best for me, if you tell me that my master will use me in the advancement of his own enterprises and that I will share in his reward... I couldn't sign up fast enough to be a slave of that master! ... That's what it means to be a Christian.

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<sup>146</sup> Sarah Einselen, "John MacArthur Admits Prior Church COVID Outbreak, Own Illness," *The Roys Report*, August 30, 2021, <https://julieroys.com/john-macarthur-church-covid-outbreak/>.

<sup>147</sup> Anugrah Kumar, "'Divine Judgment': Pastor John MacArthur on Biden, Trump, Immorality and the Church," *The Christian Post*, July 7, 2024, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/john-macarthur-on-biden-trump-immorality-and-the-church.html>.

<sup>148</sup> "Slavery and True Liberty (John MacArthur)," July 17, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSKj3LQileI>.

MacArthur attended Bob Jones University in the 1950s when the school still believed in a biblical mandate for segregation.<sup>149</sup> The university's founder and namesake even believed that African Americans should be grateful for slavery. With influence like this, MacArthur's theology is unsurprising. His excitement about slavery, while reminiscent of white evangelical narratives that abbreviate American chattel slavery and its effects, is also a result of the marriage between white supremacy and Christianity. The Jesus in James Cone's liberation theology does not romanticize slavery, but sides with the oppressed. White Jesus, conversely, celebrates the hierarchical control that comes with complete obedience and surrender. As seen explicitly in *Birth of a Nation*, white Jesus *blesses* slavery and white supremacy. MacArthur's Jesus does the same, to the point where he passionately calls him "master." This white evangelical narrative is a theology of power and domination that is intimately interwoven with whiteness and other systems of oppression.

As this chapter has demonstrated, Christian colleges and universities do not simply contain racism. They have also reproduced it via their alumni and the evangelical strongholds they have created. Trump's ties to white evangelical institutions, which include some high-profile Christian colleges, are a prime example of how white evangelical racism has morphed into white Christian nationalism. The theology of white Jesus buttresses this phenomenon and has paved the way for the rise of Donald Trump's Republican Party to rule with impunity.

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<sup>149</sup> Rick Pidcock, "What Has John MacArthur Actually Said About Race, Slavery and the Curse of Ham?," *Baptist News Global*, June 20, 2022, <https://baptistnews.com/article/what-has-john-macarthur-actually-said-about-race-slavery-and-the-curse-of-ham/>.

## Conclusion: The New King of Kings

Anthea Butler refers to Trump as “King Cyrus” throughout her book *White Evangelical Racism*, which was a very common moniker among white Christians during his first term.<sup>150</sup> Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu even made the comparison after Trump moved the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2018.<sup>151</sup> The biblical King Cyrus was Persian, not Jewish, but still received anointing from the Jewish God, freed the Jews from Babylonian exile, and permitted the free expression of Jewish religious practices in his kingdom. White evangelicals drew parallels to Trump, who believed that despite his many moral failings, he was still anointed by God to save America from its downward spiral. Then, when the White House declared him a king in an X post in February 2025 (trolling or not),<sup>152</sup> he cemented this authoritarian legacy in stone. Now, I argue that Trump has risen beyond the status of an Old Testament king to become the new white evangelical “King of Kings,” their Christ and “anointed one,” God’s representative on Earth.

The only explanation for the apparent hypocritical nature of Christian support for Trump, and conflating Jesus with violence and oppression, is that the figure of white Jesus has shifted. As evidenced by Jesus’ transformations in chapter one, Christians have manipulated images of Christ to suit their needs throughout history. When images of Jesus appeared too feminine and passive, white Christian men commissioned new art to express their desire for strength. In the official description of Warner Sallman’s *Head of Christ*, Warner Press says the art was “Inspired by religious instructors who spoke of Jesus as a rugged and strong man.”<sup>153</sup> It was not enough for

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<sup>150</sup> Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 2.

<sup>151</sup> Daniel Block, “Is Trump Our Cyrus? The Old Testament Case for Yes and No,” *Christianity Today*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2018/10/donald-trump-cyrus-prophecy-old-testament/>.

<sup>152</sup> The White House, “CONGESTION PRICING IS DEAD. Manhattan, and all of New York, is SAVED. LONG LIVE THE KING!” –President Donald J. Trump,” X, February 19, 2025, <https://x.com/WhiteHouse/status/1892295984928993698>.

<sup>153</sup> Warner Press, “Sallman Art: ‘Head of Christ,’” accessed July 20, 2025, <https://www.warnerpress.org/head-of-christ-print.html>.



Jesus to be white anymore. He also had to personify tough masculinity, and according to white Christian nationalists today, gun-toting defense against America's enemies.<sup>154</sup>

Jesus no longer wears long robes and has flowing brown hair—instead, he is a 79-year-old white American man who wears a MAGA cap and resides at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. President Donald Trump has become the anointed king of white evangelicalism, embodying what Jesus never fully could in white evangelical eyes: white supremacy, violent colonial expansion, and patriarchy. However, while their savior has been replaced, their gospel of white supremacy is unchanged. Christian colleges are co-signing this transition, consistently pushing white evangelicalism to remake Jesus in their image. While their Jesus may still be the white and divine son of God, their Christ is also a new man entirely.

From culturally evangelical powerhouses born out of Christian higher education, to alumni appointments in the Trump administration, to explicit endorsements for Trump from white evangelical leaders with ties to Christian higher education, it is clear that many American Christian higher education institutions play a consequential role in the development and reproduction of white evangelical racism and white Christian nationalism. “White Jesus is a projection of White desire,” Bradley Onishi says in *Preparing for War*. “A model of how the United States should be ordered: A White patriarchal savior at the helm, shepherding his flock and guiding them toward their manifest destiny.”<sup>155</sup> White Christian nationalism, therefore, can be interpreted as Manifest Destiny repackaged for the 21st century. The spirit of Trumpism is ushering the nation back toward its origins of Manifest Destiny, built on white Christian hegemony. This power structure is assembled on the shoulders of white Jesus, and some of the

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<sup>154</sup> Religion News Service, “From New Christian Right to Christian Nationalism: 21st Century,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, February 23, 2022, <https://pres-outlook.org/2022/02/from-new-christian-right-to-christian-nationalism-21st-century/>.

<sup>155</sup> Onishi, *Preparing for War*, 78.

most active participants in this system are white evangelicals from Christian schools. In Trump's May 2017 convocation speech to Liberty University graduates, he concluded:

As long as you remember what you have learned here at Liberty, as long as you have pride in your beliefs, courage in your convictions, and faith in your God, then you will not fail. And as long as America remains true to its values, loyal to its citizens, and devoted to its creator, then our best days are yet to come. I can promise you that.<sup>156</sup>

By stating that God is America's creator, he declares God's providence over America's founding. He also alludes to "America first" ideology by positioning citizens against non-citizens. Trump's meaning here is profound: Liberty has prepared you to be foot soldiers in our battle to bring the soul of America back to its roots, and with God on our side, we will be unstoppable. And thus far, given the trajectory of his presidency and unwavering support from white evangelical institutions, it would appear that he is already delivering on that promise.

### ***Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research***

This paper is not intended to be a full-coverage history of Christianity in America, white evangelicalism, white Jesus, white Christian nationalism, or Christian higher education. Libraries of books have been written about each of these broad topics, and my research could not possibly cover all the available material. This paper is also not intended to paint all white Christians or all of Christian higher education with a broad, accusatory brush. That would be incorrect and academically irresponsible. Students, faculty, staff, and alumni in Christian higher education have pushed for change, fought back against their institutions, and are working tirelessly to make their schools more anti-racist. A multitude of realities exist in these spaces, and this research is a partial analysis of the well-studied phenomenon of white supremacy in American Christianity. This research was limited to a particular subset of American Protestants, so further research could expand to include many topics such as international understandings of white Jesus, white

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<sup>156</sup> "Trump's Liberty Speech."

Catholic contributions to racism and white Christian nationalism, and a more exhaustive survey of resistance from Black Christians, Indigenous Christians, and other Christians of color to the theology of white Jesus. Even further study could more intimately examine the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and other students of color at Christian higher education institutions.

### ***Epilogue: Positionality Statement***

When I visited Biola University for the first time at 18 years old, a tour guide walked my group past the cafeteria and stopped us in front of Bardwell Hall. “Here, you’ll notice that his skin matches the color of the pages of the Bible he’s holding,” our guide explained, gesturing to the mural behind her. “It signifies that Jesus was ‘the Word made flesh.’” I made immediate eye contact with another Black prospective student near me, who was a complete stranger. My awkward shock was mirrored on his face. That was unmistakably a white man on the wall... and he was *massive*.

Every day on the way to class or the cafeteria, there he was, looming over me with a presence that reeked of white supremacy and reflected the difficult experiences of my Black peers and I attending Biola. The Black History Month poster incident mentioned in chapter two occurred in the last month I was on campus before the pandemic, and the Black Student Association (of which I was secretary) held a meeting for Black students to express their feelings about it in a safe space. Some voiced confusion and anger, others cried because they didn’t think a Christian school would be “like this.” Not long after that, I stood alongside others in silent protest at a Student Government Association meeting, where the student body president attempted to eliminate the Diversity and Inclusion coordinator position from the student government.<sup>157</sup> When the school’s majority-Black gospel choir was mocked in anonymous social

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<sup>157</sup> Ashley Grams, Lacey Patrick, and Micah Kim, “BREAKING: Senate Votes Unanimously to Keep Diversity Coordinator Position,” *Chimes Newspaper*, February 27, 2020, <https://chimesnewspaper.com/47639/news/sga-responds-to-controversy-regarding-diversity-coordinator-cut/>.

media posts, I vented about it with my friends and cheered louder for them after performances to show support. And when I wrote opinion pieces about racial justice as an editor for the student newspaper, the university's president fielded complaints from parents and alumni and monitored my work for any hint of mistake. Although I ultimately transferred and graduated from another institution as a result of these experiences, my time at Biola has remained an example to me of white evangelicalism's lengthy history of white Christian hegemony explained in this thesis.

This research was deeply personal for me. I've lived in and learned about white evangelical racism for my whole life, I attended and orbited Protestant Christian institutions, and I grew up in the Evangelical Free Church of America. My positionality to this subject matter strengthens this research and grounds it in lived experience. And while this thesis is in part the culmination of over twenty years of my experience as a Black-biracial woman in white evangelicalism, and a decade of research on religion and race, I also strive to be fair in my assessment and true to the facts. Through this research, I sought to illuminate dark places to help others make sense of our increasingly desperate and trying times. And I hope for brighter days to come.

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