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AND MATTHEW SOERENS**

# **INALIENABLE**

**HOW MARGINALIZED KINGDOM  
VOICES CAN HELP SAVE THE  
AMERICAN CHURCH**



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Taken from *Inalienable* by Eric Costanzo, Daniel Yang, and Matthew Soerens.

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# WHY THE AMERICAN CHURCH NEEDS SAVING

*What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world,  
yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone  
give in exchange for their soul?*

MATTHEW 16:26

**“IT WAS LIKE A FIRE ALARM** going off in the church,” reflects Beth Moore, whose Bible studies have influenced tens of millions of Christians. “I’ve never been naive enough to think that evangelicalism didn’t have its problems, but I believed we were a gospel people, that the gospel of Jesus Christ was first and foremost to us.” Instead, she says, recent years have seen the “gospel witness of the church” unravel, as many evangelical Christians in the United States have silently tolerated or openly embraced nationalism, sexism, and racism, “compromising our values for power.”<sup>1</sup>

Moore is certainly not alone in her soul searching. Many are questioning whether the evangelical commitment to the authority of the Bible as the inspired Word of God has momentarily become—or perhaps has long been—secondary to the pursuit of political power and control. Many outside the church have assumed this for some time, resulting in a significant loss of credibility for the

American church. We've reached the point that just 9 percent of non-Christians have a positive opinion of evangelicals<sup>2</sup>—and, though evangelicals represent only a minority of all American Christians, the conflation of “evangelicalism” with “Christianity” in the minds of many non-Christians has meant that the broader church is viewed with skepticism. In other words, it feels like the American church is often repelling people from, rather than drawing them to, Jesus.

For Moore, the “fire alarm” began sounding in 2016 as her fellow evangelicals seemed indifferent to the admissions of sexual immorality by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump—and followed up soon after with their wholehearted endorsement and unwavering embrace even with no sign of his repentance.

For others, it has been the public fall of once-prominent pastors and ministry leaders caught in sins of hypocrisy and even harmful crimes.

For still others, it has been churches and denominations divided over obscure academic theories of systemic racism—while turning a deaf ear to the experiences of Black brothers and sisters, and seemingly being unbothered by their quiet exodus from their fellowships.

Or it has been revelations of sexual abuse within churches, denominations, and Christian ministries and subsequent coverups and shaming of victims, often rationalized by the belief that these institutions were too big—and doing too much good for God—to fail.

Or images of the Christian flag and “Jesus Saves” signs being waved during an insurrection at the US Capitol that included calls to hang the vice president of the United States, the assault of law enforcement officers, and prayers from self-described “patriots . . . that love Christ” who unlawfully invaded the Senate floor.<sup>3</sup>

Or Christians' susceptibility to and culpability in internet-fueled conspiracy theories that initially downplayed and then exacerbated a global health crisis, putting their own lives and those of their neighbors at risk.

We could go on. It feels like we're in a tailspin, like we may have forfeited our soul.

At the root, we believe, are both a theological and a heart problem. Many in the American church have replaced worship of God with idolatrous pursuits of wealth and power, at the cost of our integrity. White evangelicals have become known for ethnocentrism and for stoking fear of those who are different from them. The American church has developed a reputation for being driven by control, comfort, and security, as opposed to being known by love for one another, as Jesus instructed (Jn 13:35). Our political motivations and nationalistic tendencies have created a syncretism that blurs the lines between true discipleship and mere partisanship. As a result, many have come to see the American Christian emphasis on “family values” as nothing more than words, especially when our leaders and churches flagrantly fail to practice what they preach.

To be clear, however, this is not another book about Donald Trump, nor is it about Jerry Falwell Jr., Ravi Zacharias, Mark Driscoll, or others on a long list of high-profile Christians whose abusive leadership or hypocrisy has been exposed in recent years. It's also not the story of how we got into this mess. In their books that have become bestsellers, historians such as Jemar Tisby and Kristin Kobes Du Mez have already carefully documented the history of how American Christianity (and particularly White evangelicalism) has been complicit with racism, sexism, and nationalism—essentially White patriarchy masquerading as family values.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, this book seeks to answer questions such as, *Where do we go from here? Can and should the American church be saved? Can American evangelicals revive our public witness, and how?*

While we're uninterested in simply resuscitating a damaged religious brand, we believe—because we have seen it—that God is still at work in the American church, and we want to be a part of restoring her gospel witness. To do so, we're going to need to learn to listen to voices that have historically been at the margins of American Christianity.

## PERCEPTION AND REALITY

Many within our evangelical world consider an increasingly negative reputation among those outside the church as proof that we are doing something *right*, earning the world's scorn that Jesus promised his followers (Jn 15:18; 1 Jn 3:13). Though there is a real sense in which the church should not be driven by popular opinion, we are also called to earn the respect of those who may never embrace our convictions. Moreover, they should be unable to ignore our "good deeds," which ultimately glorify God (Mt 5:16; 1 Pet 2:12). If reputation is indeed part of gospel witness, our witness is in tatters.

When the people of Israel claimed to bear God's name while simultaneously pursuing idols, God warned through the prophet Ezekiel, "[You have] profaned my holy name" (Ezek 36:20). This is a charge that should chasten us. The reality is that evangelicals are most often despised not because we are Christians, but because of distinctly *unchristian* attitudes and behaviors. As Russell Moore notes, "The culture often does not reject us because they don't believe the church's doctrinal and moral teachings, but because they have evidence that the church doesn't believe its own doctrinal and moral teachings."<sup>5</sup>

If we are actually committed to the work of God's kingdom, the commissions of Christ, the example of the New Testament church, and a biblical social ethic, we should be driven to care deeply for how others perceive our attitudes and actions. We should be known for our love, compassion, humility, and countercultural blessing of our opponents, earning worldly scorn *only* for doing what is right, never for what is wrong (1 Pet 3:8-9, 16-17). When we preach an anemic gospel while blatantly dismissing parts of the biblical witness that do not line up with our personal or partisan interests, we don't just appear to lack self-awareness, but "God's name is blasphemed" among those outside our faith (Rom 2:24).

We are to do what the apostles and the ancient church modeled: "Be wise in the ways you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity" (Col 4:5). We are also to live lives that evoke

questions from those on the outside about what fuels our unique hope—because we revere Jesus Christ as Lord (1 Pet 3:15). Right now, however, our public witness is not evoking questions from outsiders about our hope—fewer than one in ten non-Christians describe evangelicals as “hopeful”<sup>6</sup>—but rather about how we have come to compromise our stated convictions in so many ways. As the church emulates Christ, we are called to give ourselves “for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51)—but, as Glenn Packiam laments, “It’s hard to be given when the world wants nothing we’re giving.”<sup>7</sup>

### THE SINKING SHIP

Though many American evangelicals fear a looming persecution that might seek to silence the Christian voice in the public square, the reality is we are on the verge of forfeiting it ourselves. Many within our churches are leaving behind the evangelical label—and sometimes Christianity altogether. According to Barna, “The share of practicing Christians has nearly dropped in half since 2000.”<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, the last decade has seen more young adults leave organized religion than any time before.<sup>9</sup> By 2020, less than half of Americans said they were members of any church or other house of worship, down from 70 percent as recently as 1999.<sup>10</sup> For a time, evangelicalism was one of the few Christian traditions that had not yet faced steep decline in membership. That no longer seems to be the case.<sup>11</sup> Simply put, while many American evangelicals were focused on gaining influence in a few successive political cycles, we may have lost an entire generation, with ripple effects for Christians of other traditions.

Beyond the statistics, though, this is personal for each of us, as we imagine it is for most reading this. We know and love people who have made the decision in recent years to walk away from the Christian faith. Each story is distinct, but many fit the profile of those who became disenchanted by public hypocrisy and failures in the American church, began to deconstruct the faith they had inherited from others, and ultimately decided it was not worth rebuilding. We’re saddened, not because American Christianity is

declining in numbers or public influence, but because we still genuinely believe these friends are missing out on the most profound hope possible: Christ and his coming kingdom.

As we watch more believers abandoning their faith and those not within the fold seeming less likely than ever to consider it, we are compelled to act. And we are convinced the most substantial threats to American Christianity are not those from the outside but from within. A story told by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai nearly fifteen hundred years ago illustrates this well:

Men were on a ship. One of them took a drill and started drilling underneath him. The others said to him: What are [you] sitting and doing?! He replied: What do you care[?] Is this not underneath my area that I am drilling?! They said to him: But the water will rise and flood us all on this ship.<sup>12</sup>

The ship that is American Christianity is filling up with water, in many cases as a result of holes we've drilled ourselves. The wounds which continue to weaken our effectiveness are self-inflicted and yet all too visible; nevertheless, many deny the existence of the very attitudes and actions for which we collectively need to repent. The solution, we believe, is to return to the inalienable truths revealed to us in Scripture.

## RETURNING TO WHAT IS INALIENABLE

That which is *inalienable* is essential and undeniable. That word resonates for some Americans because of its role in the Declaration of Independence, where it is used to describe the rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>13</sup> That commitment was, at best, what Martin Luther King Jr. described as a “promissory note” to be claimed by future generations of Americans, since it clearly was not applied by the founders to *all* men (to say nothing of all women) at the time of the nation’s founding.<sup>14</sup>

Our goal is not to examine what’s admirable or not in the foundation of our nation, but rather the core, inalienable truths about God that we must recover if the American church is to save our



sinking ship: his kingdom, image, word, and mission. These truths are at the very center of the biblical narrative.

Drawn from the Latin word *alius*, meaning “other,” to call something inalienable means that *there is no other*: what is inalienable has been established by God and therefore cannot be removed or abolished. For example, there is no other God (Ex 20:3) and thus we must reject idolatry—whether of our nation, our security, or our privileged position in society. Additionally, in God’s kingdom, while the beauty of culture and ethnicity remain, there is no “other”—neither Jew nor Gentile; male nor female; citizen nor immigrant; White nor Black, Latina/o, Arab, Asian, nor Indigenous. Instead we “are all one in Christ Jesus” and of equal worth and importance (Gal 3:28). Scripture is clear that “God does not show favoritism” (Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11; Gal 2:6) and that faithful discipleship requires us to emulate our Lord.

We’ve written this book because we believe American Christians are at a critical crossroad, and the very soul of the American church is at stake. Jesus Christ promised that his church will endure until he returns again (Mt 16:18). He did not make that promise to the American church, however. If we are to stem this tide of decline and decay, it will take all of us—and it will take humility to listen to voices of the church beyond the White American evangelical stream of the faith which has long assumed leadership.

## **LEARNING FROM THE GLOBAL CHURCH AND THE MARGINS OF THE AMERICAN CHURCH**

To the extent they think of them at all, American Christians have far too often made the mistake of viewing Christians from other parts of the world as our “little brothers and sisters,”<sup>15</sup> as if they are less equipped by the Holy Spirit because they have fewer resources and smaller theological libraries. On the contrary, we believe the global church to be among God’s greatest and timeliest gifts to the American church, particularly in this season.

In the course of writing this book, we reached out to a number of church leaders in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe whom

we've met through our work and travels, asking for their candid perspectives on the state of the American church. One of those conversations was with Pastor Luis Luna of Honduras, who describes what many global Christians feel the more they engage with American evangelicals:

There is that “go and get it done” mentality that we understand is part of the American entrepreneurial spirit and, in a sense, very much part of the American church. It feels like, “Since we have the money, we have the funds, we have the resources, and we have the structure . . . let’s just go and fix these people’s problems and then get out of here.”<sup>16</sup>

Instead of this approach, throughout this book we have worked to elevate the voices of global Christians who speak prophetically through the Holy Spirit from their own biblical and cultural experiences. Though many of them have yet to be given the chance to significantly influence American evangelical thinking, we have sought out their voices of discipleship by design. We have also worked to lift up the perspectives of American Christians of color, many of whom come from communities which have been marginalized throughout American history. We are convinced that their readings of the Bible, which often come from different social locations than those of most American Christians, provide wisdom and will be a part of the corrective process that reveals our blind spots.

In addition to the voices of Christians from beyond the United States and from historically marginalized communities within, we have also purposefully sought out the voices of women. Whether intentionally or not, most of us are formed primarily by male perspectives on matters of faith. Though women make up the majority (about 55 percent) of US Christians,<sup>17</sup> they have long been on the margins of influence in terms of how Americans think about our faith. Just one-quarter of students in evangelical seminaries in the United States, and an even smaller share of the faculty, are female.<sup>18</sup> We would be enriched if we instead followed the model of Jesus, who, as Jo Saxton demonstrates from the Gospel narratives “saw

women, their worth and their value, even when they were unseen by others.”<sup>19</sup>

For many of us who are male and who grew up in the White-majority, dominant culture of the United States, it will take humility to look beyond the voices most like our own that have traditionally been the only ones we allow to inform us. We’re convinced that the American church desperately needs to heed these fresh voices.

## **DEEPENING OUR ROOTS WITH THE HISTORIC CHURCH**

There’s one more set of voices we must listen to as we seek to recover the inalienable foundations of our faith: the dead. Throughout this book, we’ve sought to amplify the historic church—the voices, stories, and practices of Christians from the past who are often overlooked by contemporary American Christians.

There’s a wealth of wisdom to be gained from the careful thinking of Christians of centuries past. Looking to the historic church is a way to, as G. K. Chesterton said, refuse “to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.”<sup>20</sup>

It is common these days to hear pastors, church planters, and other Christian leaders describe their goal of having a “New Testament church,” as if there were a solitary, prescriptive model. With so much distance between our time and culture and those of the first Christians, it is perhaps naive nostalgia to think ancient Christians did it better than we do today. Nevertheless, the witness and wisdom of the church throughout history provides us with a consistent reminder that there has always been a collective longing for a purer and more basic form of the church, and this longing has at times been a part of bringing renewal to prevailing models.

From the book of Acts forward, there has not been one generation of Christ’s church that has not seen a movement of God’s Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, most American Christians have very little knowledge of the roots of their own church traditions, much less that of any other Christian expressions. Evangelicals in particular often need to be reminded that the church existed for a

millennium and a half before the Protestant Reformation, as even some seminaries no longer require pre-Reformation studies of church history.

For most of us, successfully honoring and learning from the history of the church will mean being willing to dig deeper into our backstory than we have before. As Roberta Green Ahmanson writes, “As long as I can remember, I have been looking for footprints left by Christians who lived before me.”<sup>21</sup> This practice has enriched our own theological endeavors, and we believe it will enrich yours as well.

Deeper roots and a wider appreciation for diverse Christian expressions will only serve to further solidify our understanding of and commitment to the core truths about God’s kingdom and Christ’s work through his church.

### **WHO WE ARE: AMERICAN, MALE, AND EVANGELICAL**

Before embarking on this journey together, we want to introduce ourselves. In addition to all being US-born males, we are a pastor, a missiologist, and a parachurch ministry leader, respectively. Each of us has also been educated by evangelical institutions, which we acknowledge gives us a particular, limited perspective on some important themes.

Even more, we are a trio of friends who all care deeply about, and are not ready to give up on, the American church. We want to stop the drilling on the ship and follow God’s direction to begin patching some holes—and in some cases replacing entire rotten planks. We have little to offer if we are no longer on board. As James K. A. Smith observes, “You cannot be a prophet on your way out the door. You cannot shake the evangelical dust off your feet and then hope that your criticisms lobbed from elsewhere will somehow *change* things.”<sup>22</sup>

Though we’ve mostly written this book in the first-person plural, we each bring distinct experiences and perspectives. Occasionally, then, as in the following paragraphs, we will break into our singular voices.

**Eric.** I'm blessed to pastor a great church in which the people care deeply about the gospel, our community, and the vulnerable around the world. If that were not true, I might have dropped the evangelical label by now. That would be a major identity shift for me, since I have spent my entire confessional Christian life, from the age of twelve until now, as an evangelical and specifically as part of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). I was baptized and married in an SBC church, all my degrees are from SBC schools, and every vocational ministry position I've ever held has been in an SBC institution or church.

Like many others, however, I've grown frustrated in recent decades watching the word *evangelical* be hijacked by those who would use it only for self-serving purposes, or for those of their tribe or preferred political party. In the last few years in particular, I've also grieved when some of my denomination's best pastors and leaders have exited, feeling misrepresented and unsupported—including many you will find quoted in this book.

All that being said, I am forever grateful for the ways in which God has used my evangelical background and community to help shape me as a follower of Christ. Many faithful men and women have invested in me, and both my academic and church experiences have allowed me to engage in biblical studies and relationships with other Christians from every walk of life and from almost every corner of the earth. My contributions to this book are an outflow of the work Christ has been doing in my life in the last few years to sharpen my focus on prioritizing his good news, his kingdom, and his care for the vulnerable. I remain in the evangelical world for the foreseeable future, and I pray that God will continue to use my family to proclaim Christ as a light to those stumbling in darkness and a refreshment to souls who are weary.

To the pastors reading this book: I get how hard it is to shepherd people these days. We see clearly that if we fail to reach the generations coming behind us who are all but disconnected from the church as it is, our congregations will not survive. At the same time, many of the issues those young people want us to address—such as

racism, wealth, poverty, and social justice—are lightning rods for many of our current congregants. Generational and political divides also seem sharper than ever, and no matter how we engage such things we are likely to hear critical comments or receive scathing emails from those who represent one side or another. The global Covid-19 pandemic we've faced has not helped things, of course, as we feel like we must be prepared to pivot in a new direction at a moment's notice. It's a hard time to pastor a church, but I also believe it's an essential time for pastors not to give up. This is our moment to lead better than we ever have in full surrender to Christ and for the glory of his kingdom.

*Daniel.* Although I'm contributing to this book as a missiologist and church planter, I'll disclose that my underlying motivation for writing is deeply personal. As a Hmong American, my heritage is much different from Eric's and Matt's. In 1979, my family arrived in the United States as refugee immigrants from Laos by way of Thailand. I was born just a few months after my parents landed two hours west of Chicago in East Moline, Illinois. At the risk of being crude, I often tell people I was conceived in a Thailand refugee camp and born in an Illinois cornfield!

Not long after I was born—and after nearly forty years of animism and practicing Hmong folk religion—my parents became Christians through a small Lutheran church that helped sponsor and resettle them. Some might say God sent refugees like us to the United States so that Americans could reach us with the gospel. Others might say we were socialized into a version of American civil religion. I'm starting to wonder if God sent some refugees like us to shake up American civil religion, and to reach Americans with the gospel.

As of the writing of this book, I'm forty-one years old, around the same age my father was when he became a Christian. However, different from him, I had a somewhat typical American church upbringing, which included attending worship services every Sunday, midweek prayer, youth groups, and summer camps. But fifteen years ago, I began exploring how to make sense of—and perhaps

even theologize—the existential gap between my parent’s early refugee experience as non-Christians and my full immersion into American evangelicalism. I can see with a little more distinction now, compared to when I was younger, that we were socialized into something more complex than what Jesus’ disciples started as a Messianic movement in the first century. And while I’m careful not to conflate American nationalism with evangelical Christianity, I am very empathetic toward those who in our day genuinely have a difficult time seeing the distinction.

For some young former Christians, the reputation of American evangelicalism became their excuse for leaving the church. Some never-will-be Christians have reasoned that American evangelicalism is why people should avoid Christianity altogether. This makes me believe even more that marginal communities, the global church, and the ancient church are prophetic reminders to Americans of what biblical Christianity actually stands for. And although I very much identify as an evangelical and an American, I also feel like I am potentially contributing to the problems of American evangelicalism if I hide or downplay my heritage and my family’s immigrant narrative. Because there’s always that chance that God didn’t send us here just to be reached by Americans. It may be that there is a lot of shaking up and reaching out that people like me have to do as well.

**Matthew.** As a child attending a private evangelical elementary school, I began each morning pledging allegiance to the Bible: “God’s holy Word . . . a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”

In many ways, that commitment to the authority of the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God is what has defined my faith and what it has meant to me since my earliest childhood—shaped by my Midwestern, nondenominational “Bible church”; my family; my school; and much of the media my parents permitted in our home—to be a Christian.

As I grew—if, like the apostle Paul, I can “go on boasting” (2 Cor 12:1)—I became something of a Sunday school all-star. I memorized hundreds of Bible verses. I’ve barely missed a daily

“quiet time” since I was introduced to the discipline in elementary school. I was trained to view *every* issue—science, literature, history (“*His story*”), and definitely politics—through a biblical worldview.<sup>23</sup>

Even as a kid, I vaguely remember being warned that there were *other*, not-evangelical churches that employed a “potluck” approach to the Bible, trusting the parts they liked and ignoring the teachings they found old-fashioned, embarrassing, or inconvenient, like the resurrection and the virgin birth.<sup>24</sup> Not us: we stood alone on the Word of God: the B-I-B-L-E, as the popular children’s song refers to it. God said it. We believed it. That settled it.

Later, as a student at an evangelical college, I began to realize that even those who shared a commitment to the authority of Scripture could disagree in good faith on how particular passages should be interpreted and applied. I encountered Mennonites who took Jesus’ words so literally that they believed we should oppose, rather than rally around, the US military incursion into Iraq. I met Presbyterians and Anglicans who looked to entirely different passages to justify baptizing infants than those I used to dismiss the practice as unbiblical. I eventually lived for a season with Nicaraguan Pentecostals whose worship style was so distinct from anything I’d experienced that I wondered if they really belonged in the same religious taxonomy.

I also realized there were Bible verses that, for whatever reason, I’d somehow missed as I read repeatedly through my Bible, and which so far as I can remember were not the subject of sermons I’d heard. This came to a head when I began a career with World Relief focused on serving immigrants.

Until then, I don’t think I’d ever thought of immigration as a biblical issue. But it took little more than a basic word search to realize that the Bible actually has *a lot* to say about immigration. In the Old Testament alone, I found ninety-two references to the Hebrew noun *ger*, an immigrant.<sup>25</sup> Soon, I began to notice that nearly every major character in the Bible was a migrant of some sort, from Abraham to Ruth to Daniel to Jesus himself. Now when I read the Bible, it’s hard *not* to see migration as what missiologist Sam



George calls “a megatheme of the Bible”<sup>26</sup>—and I’ve had to ask what other biblical themes I’ve overlooked.

Having now worked for more than sixteen years with World Relief—which, though a ministry of the National Association of Evangelicals, has recently found itself out of step with the views of most White US evangelicals toward refugees—I’ve often wondered if the label *evangelical* is worth retaining. But I’m convinced that American evangelicalism’s problems—the White evangelical majority’s views of immigrants is just the tip of the iceberg—are actually a symptom of placing too *little* emphasis on the Bible, not too much.

### **WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?**

This book is for Christians who have sensed that the ship of American Christianity is sinking, or at least taking on water, and are wondering what they can do. It has not been written toward those who find the status quo entirely satisfactory, nor for those who feel they already have the answers and have little patience for doubt, mystery, or wonder.

Moreover, this book may not satisfy those whose tendency is to scan a book; look for key names, words, or phrases with which one disagrees; and, upon finding any, immediately dismiss the rest of the book’s content. We have purposely drawn from some sources who are lesser-known or who have come from marginalized communities, as well as some who many American evangelicals have been conditioned to devalue or disregard without having actually engaged with them personally. In other words, we choose not to say to anyone, “You have nothing to teach or offer me.” Our purpose is not to chase more controversy, but rather to stretch us all toward healthy growth in some areas while keeping our feet on solid ground.

We realize the spectrum of our readers will be wide ranging in the way they relate to American Christianity and to American evangelicalism, in particular. There will likely be some from inside American evangelicalism who think we are overly critical. There

may also be others, both insiders and outsiders, who think we are overly optimistic.

But for those of you who have deep concerns about the future of the American church, we see you, and we're with you, and we pray you will find hope alongside us within these pages.

We also see you pastors and leaders who are wrestling with how to follow Jesus faithfully and to disciple those under your care to do the same. We know you are frustrated by the many external, unchristian influences that seem to have more sway on your congregation's beliefs than you do as their pastor.

We see you church members and attenders who suspect that what you hear on Sunday mornings or from other evangelical voices may have more to do with American values than with the inalienable truths of Christianity.

We see those of you whom the pollsters call the *nones*, who have no formal affiliation to any kind of organized religion, yet still have a lingering and sometimes nagging sense that God wants you to experience community with people of Christian faith. We hope this book will help you to not feel alone.

We see those of you who have felt like outsiders and tourists to Christian environments and the evangelical subculture.

And we also see those of you who no longer find evangelicalism or perhaps Christianity of any variety a safe place to call home for your sense of spirituality, including you *exvangelicals*.<sup>27</sup> We acknowledge your individual experience and applaud your courage to speak up and speak out. We see the holes in the ship that caused so many of you to jump. And we are grieved by your departure and by those who continue to drill more holes. Our goal is not necessarily to persuade you to join or stay on the evangelical ship, but rather to call us all to faithful discipleship.

Whoever and wherever you are, we invite you to join us on this journey to discover and rediscover the inalienable truths of God's kingdom with an open heart and mind.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- ▶ Do you resonate with the description of a fire alarm going off in the church? Was there a particular moment when you felt that something was profoundly amiss in American Christianity?
- ▶ In your assessment, is American Christianity more often rejected by the broader American culture because of doctrinal beliefs or because of a failure by Christians to live up to self-professed convictions?
- ▶ Can you think of an example of a voice from outside America or one that has been marginalized within America that has been formative to your own spiritual journey?
- ▶ As you begin this book, think about your current relationship with the church. If you identify as Christian, would you consider yourself evangelical, mainline Protestant, Catholic, associated with a particular denomination, or non-denominational? If you do not identify as Christian, were you formerly Christian, never Christian, or not entirely sure about your beliefs? If you're reading through this book with others, acknowledging your own current view of the church and your personal history could be helpful to them.

## ACTION STEPS

- ▶ As you read, pay attention to the footnotes and develop your own further reading list with perspectives you find compelling or challenging, particularly from authors from beyond America or from marginalized communities within America.
- ▶ In his personal introduction, Eric talked about his own Christian community within his family and his church. As you begin the journey through this book, identify those key people with whom you feel safe to discuss spiritual things and with whom you can be vulnerable and feel safe. If you cannot identify anyone, ask God to reveal a person(s) in your life who can become that kind of community for you.

- ▶ Daniel mentioned his unique perspective as a Hmong American child of refugees. If you're unfamiliar with the history of the arrival of Hmong people to America, these resources are a good start: Kao Kalia Yang's memoir *The Latecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2008) or *The Hmong People Movement: Part 1, Part 2, and Part 3* (The Alliance, 2005, [www.cmalliance.org/video/watch/20061](http://www.cmalliance.org/video/watch/20061)).
- ▶ Matthew shared how early on he was surprised to find that the Bible speaks frequently to the theme of immigration, which led him to wonder what other biblical blind spots he may have had. If you are not familiar with how the theme of immigration is addressed in the Bible, consider taking up the Evangelical Immigration Table's forty-day "I Was a Stranger" Bible-reading challenge, available at [www.EvangelicalImmigrationTable.com/iwasastranger](http://www.EvangelicalImmigrationTable.com/iwasastranger).

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