



Darren E. Grem. *The Blessings of Business: How Corporations Shaped Conservative Christianity.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xiii + 282 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-992797-5.

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Commissioned by Jay Richardson (Assistant Professor of History at William Carey University)

Darren Grem, an assistant professor of history and southern studies at the University of Mississippi, has produced a welcome addition to the history of conservative evangelicalism in the United States, particularly its ties to corporate leaders and methods from the 1920s to the 1990s. While various scholars have noted that evangelical conservatives received funding from and forged networks with big businessmen, perhaps none have stated the case as forthrightly as Grem, who argues that the process of collaboration with capitalism shaped the very soul of evangelicalism in America.

The book divides cleanly into two parts: “How Big Businessmen Shaped Conservative Evangelicalism” and “How Conservative Evangelicalism Shaped Big Business.” The first part covers how big businessmen helped conservative evangelicals recast their religious authority and identity in American culture from the 1920s to 1960s. Herbert J. Taylor, a fundamentalist in belief, nonetheless applied the business methods of alliance-building, contractual language, and moderation to set the stage for a conservative evangelical revival in America. His main vehicle for this transformation was the Four-Way Test, an ethical code for businessmen that appealed as much to his liberal Protestant friends in the Rotary as to evangelicals, but one that also reaffirmed the business execu-

tive as the absolute—if hopefully benevolent—authority over his company. Taylor, among other businessmen, helped underwrite the ministry of Billy Graham, who was not only an evangelist but a salesman par excellence for the new evangelicalism, as its most famous and respectable public voice. Meanwhile, R. G. LeTourneau, a bulldozer designer made rich by government contracts, launched hybrid economic and missionary ventures in Liberia and Peru that ended in failure, but he helped tie high-tech industries to support for Christian missions in Cold War America. Part 2 of the book turns to how conservative evangelicals became big business in the 1970s and 1980s. Chick-Fil-A’s S. Truett Cathy exemplified the evangelical turn to privatizing their faith, which at once shunned controversy while empowering their kind of identity politics. Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker created Heritage USA, a “Disneyland for the Devout” (p. 162) that exemplified evangelical-culture-as-capitalism, while Zig Ziglar embodied rag-to-riches free-market promise and baptized it with evangelical Christian faith.

Grem continues a recent trend in scholarship that connects conservative evangelicalism to business in the twentieth century. Bethany Moreton in *To Serve God and Wal-Mart* (2010) zooms in on Wal-Mart, an Arkansas-based corporation that linked godly principles with free-market capital-

ism in a postindustrial age of globalization. Darren Dochuk in his prize-winning *Bible Belt to Sunbelt* (2010) explores how plain-folk evangelical migrants from the western South to southern California since the 1930s had built networks with businessmen that supported various educational institutions, media outlets, parachurch groups, and churches that in turn converted countless evangelicals to an updated gospel of limited government. Kevin M. Kruse—who wrote a favorable blurb on Grem’s book—pushes the connection between capitalism and evangelicalism onto more controversial ground in *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented a Christian Nation* (2015).

For scholars of American evangelicalism in the twentieth century, many characters and organizations in Grem’s work will be familiar: Youth for Christ, the Christian Business Men’s Committee, the Young Men’s Christian Association, L. Nelson Bell, the National Association of Evangelicals, J. Howard Pew, R. G. LeTourneau, ServiceMaster, The Navigators, the Christian Business Men’s Committee, and especially Billy Graham. As this very impartial list suggests, Grem directs his attention almost exclusively to wealthy white male elites and so omits the mid-level plain-folk evangelicals that peopled Dochuk’s account in *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt*.

Some of Grem’s most interesting arguments concern the gender, sexual, and racial norms implicit—and at times explicit—in conservative evangelicalism. Grem notes well distinctions within conservative evangelicalism, particularly between more strident and more moderated voices on a variety of issues, but consistently hammers home the white privilege and gendered and sexual norms that always informed evangelical elites. For example, even though Graham opposed segregation as early as 1953 and had Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speak at the opening of his 1957 revival in New York City, Grem reminds the reader that he declined to lobby for any civil rights

legislation and supported a culture that appealed to individual consciences while also giving white male business executives total authority over how to run their own companies. However, many of Grem’s criticisms apply equally well to white male liberal Christians, who as Grem notes largely hailed the Four-Way Test, shared Rotary connections with many evangelical business titans, and abided in both secular and religious worlds dominated by white men. More explicit comparison and contrast of the capitalist ties with white evangelicals, liberal white Protestants, Catholics, and nonwhite Christians would be immensely profitable to scholars of American religion.

Another major asset of the book is its readability. Grem proves his ability as a storyteller by weaving together interesting and at times obscure anecdotes to powerfully advance his point, whether recounting Billy Graham’s public blessing of R. G. LeTourneau’s failed business/missionary venture to Liberia in 1952 or describing a stick-figure cartoon drawn by the editor of *Christianity Today* showing himself bowing before his corporate financier, J. Howard Pew, in a 1965 letter. While a book about corporate leaders and organizations with a seemingly limitless list of acronyms could have been a boring read, Grem does his best to keep the story interesting.

The foremost criteria for a historical book is whether it meets its stated objective. Grem succeeds in meeting all three of his explicit objectives: he shows how corporations shaped conservative Protestant Christianity; exposes the business side of American religion, with its cultural and political ramifications; and places the construction of American religion within the history of corporate capitalism. Provocative, informative, and required reading for all who wonder how conservative evangelicalism became linked at the hip with modern free-market capitalism, Grem’s book shows how many Christians came to reconcile serving both God and mammon.

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