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## INTRODUCTION

# J. Edgar Hoover's Stained Glass Window

On Sunday morning, June 26, 1966, the Capitol Hill Methodist Church dedicated a magnificent thirty-three-foot-tall stained glass window to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. It was the congregation's second worship service in their new million-dollar church (an expenditure of about \$17 million today). The prominent 1,200-member all-white congregation, located just five blocks from the US Capitol, purposely built the new church "precisely on the spot of the birthplace of Mr. Hoover." The church was erected as an evangelical shrine to J. Edgar Hoover, and the glorious window was consecrated: "THE J. EDGAR HOOVER WINDOW."<sup>1</sup>

With J. Edgar Hoover seated in the front pew, Protestants of all stripes praised him as a Christian champion. Hoover's pastor, Reverend Dr. Edward L. R. Elson, spoke for the masses of white evangelicals. The Presbyterian clergyman was a founding contributor to *Christianity Today*—the literary mouthpiece of modern white evangelicalism. He told the congregation that naming the window after Hoover "was eminently merited and highly appropriate." The pastor of the Methodist church, Reverend Edward Lewis, preached the sermon. The shepherd of the largest white Protestant church in Washington, DC, chose the divine calling of Samuel as his biblical text. His sermon drew a parallel between Samuel and Hoover. Samuel answered God's call to turn Israel away from sin and idolatry, and toward God. J. Edgar Hoover had done likewise: he heeded God's call to turn America away from subversion and back to

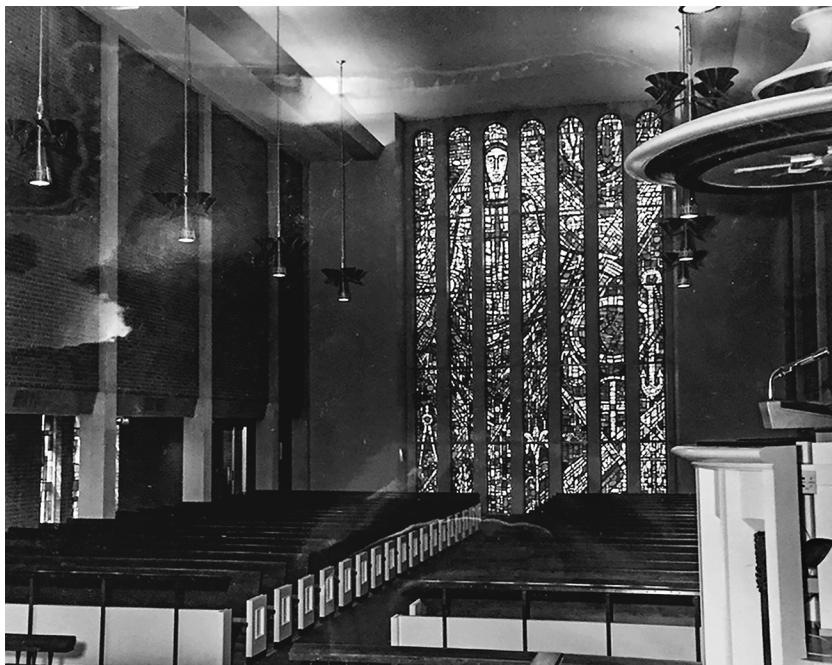


FIGURE 1. A view from the pulpit. *Source:* Photographic History of the J. Edgar Hoover Window—J. Edgar Hoover Estate Collection of the National Law Enforcement Museum, Accession number 2010.11.

God. The congregation received the sermon by offering thanks for Hoover's service, followed by a plea that he would be the first among many white male Christian defenders. "We honor today . . . a man of Christian stature and national leadership," they prayed, "we offer our thanks to thee for such men as J. Edgar Hoover and pray that more like men will be forthcoming in our nation."<sup>2</sup>

Methodist Bishop Wilbur E. Hammaker offered the prayer of dedication. After he confessed to being "an unashamed hero worshipper" of Hoover, the virulent anti-communist elder blessed the window. "In the name of the Father, Almighty God, I dedicate the 'J. Edgar Hoover Window' at the Capitol Hill Methodist Church in the shadow of the nation's capitol proclaiming to the throngs that will see it that Christian virtues produce great statesmanship." A large tablet was blessed and fixed on the interior and exterior of the window for all to see: "THE J. EDGAR



FIGURE 2. A view from outside. *Source:* Photographic History of the J. Edgar Hoover Window—J. Edgar Hoover Estate Collection of the National Law Enforcement Museum, Accession number 2010.11.

HOOVER WINDOW: Statesmanship Through the Christian Virtues. Dedicated on June 26, 1966 to J. Edgar Hoover Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation who was born on this site January 1, 1895.”<sup>3</sup>

The service culminated with a congregational prayer of nationalism. The faithful beseeched God for salvation not by supernatural means, but through Hoover and his federal agency. “We are grateful for the consistent work of the Federal Bureau of Investigation under his leadership,” they prayed in unison, “through their direction, make of us citizens who honor God.”<sup>4</sup>



Why did white evangelicals look to J. Edgar Hoover to lead them to salvation when the FBI director was not a “born-again” Christian? Why did they crown him their political champion when court cases such as *Coplon v. United States, 1950*, revealed the FBI director regularly ordered his agents to conduct unlawful break-ins and unconstitutional surveillance, and to lie about it under oath? Why was Hoover deemed the aspirational model of white Christian manhood and the foremost protector of family values when he never married, but for more than three decades enjoyed a domestic partnership with the FBI’s second in charge, Special Agent Clyde Tolson? And, perhaps most important, what does this glorification of J. Edgar Hoover tell us about the FBI and modern white evangelicalism?

*The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover* answers these questions. It explains why white evangelicals—from the pulpit to the pew, from the local church to the international parachurch—honored FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover as an anointed leader. Specifically, the book chronicles how Hoover built up the FBI as a white Christian force that partnered with white evangelicals to aid and abet the rise of white Christian nationalism.

This story is not a rumination of an evangelical outsider. I was saved in the evangelical tradition and educated in its white institutions. This is not a narrative of decline, in which a once pure faith was hijacked by disingenuous political operatives beginning in the 1970s. Rather, it is a history of the modern origins of white evangelical moral and political norms. What follows, then, is not a history of the white evangelical fringe, nor an accounting of white evangelical exceptions. It is a story that details how foundational figures and entities of mainstream white evangelicalism and the everyday faithful willingly partnered with J. Edgar Hoover and the extralegal practices of his FBI to bring America back to their God.



White Christian nationalism—the impulse to make whiteness and conservative Christianity the foundation and guidepost of American governance and culture—has received renewed attention in public

discourse of late. Histories of its development in postwar America have rightly centered on the influence of white evangelical Christianity. Studies have identified clergy, politicians, captains of industry, Hollywood, the military, and suburbanization as driving forces of white Christian nationalism. White evangelicals confronted the New Deal, the Cold War, and the Civil Rights Movement by merging their Jesus with American notions of whiteness, virulent anti-communism, capitalism, hypermasculinity, and political conservatism.<sup>5</sup>

The FBI was a major part of this landscape, yet it has been overlooked. President Franklin Roosevelt issued a series of presidential directives in the 1930s which morphed Hoover's FBI from a small outfit investigating interstate crimes, to the nation's largest domestic intelligence agency. As the bulwark of national security, the bureau was conspicuous in American anti-communism. Hoover and his all-white male Christian force of special agents served as the producers, directors, and stars of the ideological drama that was the Cold War. Hoover and his FBI set the table upon which white evangelicals feasted. The FBI also served as the clearinghouse of national belonging, defending the status quo, and regulating who should participate in the democratic process. Hoover's white Christian nationalist worldview determined legitimate statecraft from subversion, and godliness from atheism.

Narrow definitions of evangelicalism have hindered us from perceiving Hoover's evangelical significance. Scholars and journalists have largely relied on professionally defined theological commitments—ultimate biblical authority, Christ atonement, conversion, prayer, evangelism, social reform, and church membership—to determine who is in the white evangelical camp.<sup>6</sup> However, salvation is a cosmic matter for white evangelicals, far too important to leave exclusively in the hands of theological and professional elites. White evangelical faith has never lived by theology alone, but by the very practices of the faithful. It is a lived faith, a religious identity that is constructed and maintained in daily practices—consumption habits, voting, political affiliations—that take place outside of official evangelical institutions. And the lived experience of postwar white evangelicalism has been marked by steadfast commitments to white Christian nationalism: a worldview and cultural



framework centered on the fusion of American civic life and a particular Christian identity. This all-encompassing faith assumes the naturalness and righteousness of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchal authority, heteronormativity, gender difference, and militarism.<sup>7</sup> These evangelical commitments made J. Edgar Hoover a white evangelical not by virtue of being born-again, nor by church membership or name, but by something far more important: his fight for a white Christian nationalist nation. As the editors of *Christianity Today* joyfully announced in 1962, J. Edgar Hoover was not only a part of the message of white evangelicalism, he was also part of its “mission.”<sup>8</sup>

Hoover was an important part of the evangelical errand. He did not simply ride the wave of Cold War evangelicalism; he helped to create it. He fused together virulent anti-communism with what would become the other political hallmarks of the movement: anti-statist statism, Christian traditionalism, subplot epistemology, and individual liberty. Hoover’s career embodied anti-statist statism. He bemoaned the rise of the New Deal liberal state, yet he owed his increasing power to the very same enlarged federal apparatus. He welcomed government involvement in American life when it enforced his traditional Christian notions of sexuality, gender, and race, yet he decried the tentacles of “big government” when state reforms ran counter to his beliefs (i.e., racial integration, school busing, voting protections). His subplot epistemology saw an existential crisis behind every political difference. Hoover did not view actions, ideas, or policies that countered his Christian worldview as simply differing opinions. Rather, Hoover saw such differences as subplots to a grand cosmic conspiracy to destroy the nation. Therefore, his commitment to individual liberty hinged upon virtue. Liberty was not licentiousness, but an ordered freedom in which government helped to cultivate virtuous individual souls. Virtue stood guard, protecting liberty. Statecraft had to be soulcraft. Hoover’s faith served as the foundation of it all: a white Christian nationalism that wedded conservative Christianity and American statecraft. The nation, he once told an NBC audience, had to have “faith to be free.” When postwar white evangelical conservatives heard the gospel of Hoover, they believed they heard the gospel truth.<sup>9</sup>



Studies of the FBI have also been slow to pinpoint this gospel. Scholars of the Bureau rarely consider the director's faith, let alone its influence upon the Bureau and the nation. Yet, during Hoover's lifetime, his faith and storied religious partnerships were central to how Americans understood him and his Bureau. Histories of the FBI have chronicled the FBI's surveillance of clergy and its antagonism toward faith communities. This book narrates the Bureau's embrace and promotion of faith. Previous histories have identified which religious folk Hoover deemed subversive—Dorothy Day, Father Berrigan, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X. Now it is time to focus on which clergy the FBI Boss branded as partners. The Bureau had many enemies, but it also had plenty of friends. History has shown us how the Bureau attempted to silence its enemies, hindering democratic debate, and ultimately push American politics toward an authoritarian far right. *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover* offers a new story, detailing how the religious commitments of Hoover and his FBI also ushered our nation's politics toward the *religious* right.<sup>10</sup>



The following pages tell the story. Part 1, “Proselytizing Faith,” displays how Hoover—the longest-standing high-level appointee in US government history—made white Christian nationalism the bedrock of the modern national security state. US presidents came and went, as did ruling political paradigms, and crises, but Hoover remained. As FBI director from 1924 until his death in 1972, Hoover was a political constant, paying lip service to the Constitution, but establishing white Christian nationalism as the actual foundation of his FBI. It mattered little who was in office or which party was in control of Congress. Faith helped him determine the nation's enemies and how they should be attacked and defeated. He saw national security in cosmic terms. Nothing was more existential than national security, the very salvation of the nation's soul.<sup>11</sup>

Hoover remade the FBI—the federal agency in charge of the nation's domestic security—in his own image: a squadron of white men who viewed themselves as white Christian soldiers and ministers. They were spiritually and morally formed by the FBI's religious culture, a suite of

religious practices that took on both Catholic and Protestant forms. Hoover's white Christian nationalism eschewed the rampant anti-Catholicism of the day in favor of a unified white Christian order. Maintaining a white Christian nation required that all respectable white Christian men join the struggle, regardless of ecclesiastical commitments or theological differences. As part of their training, FBI special agents pledged to be Christian soldiers and ministers, while also attending FBI spiritual retreats and special worship services run by leading white Catholic and Protestant clergy. The FBI made it very clear: a secure and safe America was a Christian America, one in which white evangelicals and conservative white Catholics worked together to maintain the levers of cultural and political power. The FBI was the nation's defense against the enemy within. And the Bureau's religious culture fashioned the G-men accordingly, shaping them into an army of white male Christian nationalists commissioned to protect, serve, and maintain Christian America. The FBI had a "Christian purpose," Hoover told his troops. Their federal duty was to "*defend and perpetuate* the dignity of the Nation's Christian endowment."<sup>12</sup>

Part 2, "Promoting Faith," explains how Hoover and white evangelicals partnered to authenticate and materially support white Christian nationalism. Both shared the same claims upon the nation-state. They firmly believed America was founded as a Christian nation, and the country would be destroyed the moment it ceased to be. Hoover called it "Americanism," while Billy Graham and other white evangelicals called it "Christian America." It was the same belief: a cultural framework that venerated and advocated for the fusion of white conservative Christianity with American civic life.<sup>13</sup> They viewed one another as valuable partners for their shared crusade. As the majority of mainline white Protestants turned toward liberalism and the social gospel, Hoover saw white evangelicals as a vital means to save the nation and keep the country on the path of Americanism. White evangelicals, in turn, saw Hoover as a warrior, fighting to preserve Christian America. They were soldiers in the same army.

Every war has its propaganda. The FBI and white evangelicals teamed up to promote their shared nationalism through the pages of *Christianity*

*Today*, all at the expense of taxpayers. The messages were a hit. White evangelicals lauded Hoover's words as sacred gospel. In lieu of their own sermons, preachers preached Hoover's epistles verbatim from the pulpit, making Hoover the ghostwriter of countless white evangelical sermons. Other clergy, such as Billy Graham, peppered their sermons with quotes from Hoover. The faithful in the pews loved it. Grassroots religious activists wrote Hoover for copies of his homilies to use in their Bible studies, political action groups, and evangelism efforts.

The strength of his writings and popularity led Hoover to become a lauded evangelical leader. The FBI Boss helped white evangelicals establish social and political authority. The Protestant Establishment—the network of white mainline churches, prominent personages, and elite organizations—exercised considerable social and political authority in the nation's halls of power, and had for hundreds of years. However, as the leader of the FBI, Hoover's presence in the white evangelical world helped to authenticate the newly established religious movement as the rightful custodian of national morality and security. The association with J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI put white evangelicals on the fast track to significant political standing, a status that is alive and well to this day.

If Billy Graham was America's pastor, then J. Edgar Hoover was its bishop, adjudicating the faith and shepherding white evangelicals toward white Christian nationalism. Part 3, "Policing Faith," examines how Hoover and his FBI took jurisdiction over white evangelical identity. White evangelicals overlooked Hoover's very public lawbreaking, lies, and eschewing of evangelical theology and embraced his power and Christian nationalist commitments. They publicly honored the FBI chief as their political and religious standard-bearer, looking to Hoover to police evangelical politics, piety, and belonging. Evangelical churchgoers inundated the FBI with letters seeking Hoover's religious guidance, advice, and blessing on matters of faith and politics. Beseeking a higher authority than their pastor, they asked Hoover to shepherd them toward which Bible they should read, which preacher they should listen to, what church they should attend, and even how to remain faithful. A small, vocal remnant of white evangelicals protested the movement's glorification of Hoover, but their cries were ignored. The majority

remained faithful to the FBI Boss to the very end. They feared for their country. They saw the future through the dark skies of Hoover's tempestuous reign. The white faithful lauded him and his federal agency as the crusaders and adjudicators of the faith.

Clergy followed suit, writing to Hoover to request *his* pastoral guidance on all things religion and politics. These clergy, what I call "Bureau Clergymen," gelled into an evangelical syndicate. They privately and publicly worked with the FBI to create the Christian America in which they jointly believed. Leading white evangelical clerics partnered with the FBI to hire white evangelical college graduates to get them within the halls of power, while also working in the streets and media to discredit and destroy the Civil Rights Movement and one of its most prominent figures: Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. White evangelicals put their trust in Hoover and his FBI to shepherd the nation into the Promised Land, by any means necessary.



The story of J. Edgar Hoover's FBI and white evangelicals has consequences for our present and future. Bringing the gospel of J. Edgar Hoover to the fore is central to understanding the current state of white Christian nationalism and its relationship to white evangelicalism specifically and to the nation more broadly. *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover* details how the mutually beneficial merger between a federal agency focused on national security and a conservative white Christian religious movement helped to transform the landscape of contemporary American religion and politics.

Going through the FBI is the only way to fully grasp the historic relationship between white evangelicals and state power. Without this historical treatment, we lack a full historical explanation of why white evangelicals have readily blessed extralegal practices and embraced political figures that fall far short of the movement's professed theology and morality. The general narratives fall short, charting a downfall from the "respectable" and moral foundation laid by Reverends Billy Graham and Carl F. H. Henry and *Christianity Today*. The decline, they argue, is

marked by evangelical endorsements of politicians such as Donald Trump and the embrace of white supremacist organizations such as the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys, as well as conspiracy theories such as QAnon, and Christian nationalist violence. The cause, they reason, can be found in the nation's demography. A shrinking white population, a decrease in Christian hegemony and church attendance, along with the political gains of racial and ethnic minorities provoked a white backlash. Economic shifts—the decrease in the white middle class and the loss of manufacturing jobs—also shoulder the blame in these narratives. Accordingly, these cultural changes have forced white evangelicals to suddenly loosen their moral and theological standards. The fog of war clouded their moral and theological vision, giving way to the politics of pragmatism in order to bring America back to their God. White evangelicalism, they argue, essentially jumped the tracks.<sup>14</sup>

If we look at white evangelicalism through J. Edgar Hoover's stained glass window, however, the train appears to be running right on time. *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover* shows us that white evangelicals are who they have always been. From the beginning, the founders of modern white evangelicalism preached that American politics needed Christian piety and traditional morality while their political practice was marked by the gospel of amoral pragmatism and abusive power in the name of Jesus. Their gospel labors went beyond partnerships with famous white Protestant clergy or bona fide evangelical elected officials, activists, and businessmen. If we draw back the curtain on the white evangelical attempt to take America "back" for God, we find a partnership with the infamous J. Edgar Hoover, who worked diligently behind the scenes and at the forefront for nearly five decades. Hoover deployed the sophisticated federal war chest, the notorious activities of his FBI, and white evangelicals in the battle for a white Christian America. White evangelicals sanctified his immoral, illegal, unconstitutional, and violent labor as the work of God. And they have followed his lead ever since.

The whole process began on the site of J. Edgar Hoover's stained glass window, back when it was simply the boyhood home of a young Sunday school teacher by the name of John Edgar Hoover.

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