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A TELEVANGELIST IN THE WHITE HOUSE

ON NOVEMBER 4, 2020, the day after the presidential election but before news outlets had officially called the race for Joe Biden, a pastor led a prayer service at her Florida church. Pastor Paula White rhythmically intoned prayers, imploring heaven to give Trump victory. She interspersed these prayers with speaking in tongues, a practice in which a charismatic believer utters ecstatic sounds that participants believe to be a heavenly language. White said, among other things:

I hear a sound of abundance of rain. I hear a sound of victory. The Lord says, “It is done . . .”

For angels have even been dispatched from Africa right now. . . . They’re coming here. They’re coming here in the name of Jesus from South America. . . .

Angelic reinforcements, angelic reinforcements. For I hear the sound of victory. . . .

We break and divide every demonic confederacy against the election, against America, against who you [God] have declared to be in the White House.

Short clips from that infamous service would soon sweep across YouTube, social media, and news broadcasts. In the intense season surrounding the election, these clips were mocked mercilessly and held up as exhibit A to prove that Trump-supporting Christians had come unhinged.

White’s words generated contempt for several reasons. First, for most Americans and, indeed, for most Christians, speaking in tongues, though written about in the Bible, is a foreign experience. Many assume speaking in tongues to be on the fringes of Christian expression or spirituality.

Second, beyond the fact that most people don’t share White’s worldview—about angels who can transfer intercontinentally by request—many critics detected something invidiously racist about her

prayers. Asking for angels from Africa and South America to come and bolster a white American president—one whose administration had often made common cause with white nationalists—sounded all the wrong notes.

Third, many Christians are uncomfortable—theologically and culturally—with women preaching. So White’s rhythmic and ecstatic delivery that day got filtered through latent misogyny and disdain for women religious leaders.

And the fourth reason she was so roundly criticized was, at the time that she prayed this, Paula White was a White House employee. She was the central spiritual adviser to President Trump. So these words were not emanating from some obscure pastor in a tiny church in the middle of nowhere. They were spoken by one of the most prominent Christian leaders in the country.

While this chapter focuses on Paula White, it is equally about the distinct Independent Charismatic Christian subculture in which she has grown up—a subculture that she, above all others, dragged from the margins into the mainstream of conservative American Christianity. No matter how you evaluate her sincerity or her character, White has served as the first female primary spiritual adviser to a US president, the first female clergy member to pray at a presidential inauguration, and the first pastor to officially preside over an American insurrection. But we’ll get to that.

Paula White is the fulcrum on which an epochal shift in American religious politics tilted. Yet she inhabits a style of Christianity that is still opaque to many Americans. So learning about her life and ministry will familiarize you with that world, its history, its social dynamics, its celebrity culture, and how that celebrity culture got wrapped around Donald Trump and changed the political dispositions of millions of American Christian voters.

On our way to understanding Paula White’s world, though, let’s look at a conceptual model for understanding American Christianity, one that might help us keep straight where all the vivid characters of this book fit.

The Four Quadrants

The typical buckets into which we sort American Christians—evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, Historically Black Protestant, Catholic, and others—aren’t so helpful for thinking about the leaders and followers who are at the heart of this book. Pentecostal and charismatic networks and streams simply cut across all these boundary markers. I propose we look at the landscape of American

Christianity as four quadrants, determined by the answers to two questions: Does the individual Christian or community belong to a *denomination*? And is the Christian or community *charismatic*? Let me explain.

Denominations evolved to manage Protestant sectarianism. One of the core features of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century was a renewed focus on reading and interpreting the Bible. But the early “Protestants”—they didn’t all call themselves that—discovered that an “anyone can interpret the Bible for themselves” approach quickly gives way to an “everyone will interpret the Bible differently” reality. So the Protestant movements were highly schismatic from the start, disagreeing over matters of interpretation on topics sublime and mundane. They fought over how the church should be governed, what was happening theologically in the Lord’s Supper, whether people should be baptized as infants or adults, and on and on. As these different versions of Protestantism crossed the Atlantic into the American colonies, the bureaucratic institutions we know as denominations emerged, as practical modern governance structures, to manage and contain this factionalism. *Protestant* became the umbrella term, with different Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, and others enshrining their differences through denominations.

The term *charismatic* comes from a biblical idea contained in the writings in the New Testament that depict an early Christian church filled with supernatural manifestations and divine interventions. The Greek word *charisma* (plural *charismata*), which could literally be translated as “gifts” or “graces,” was used among the early Christians to describe these extraordinary endowments from God, given to the church through the Holy Spirit. There are different lists of these *charismata* in the Bible, ranging from speaking in tongues, prophecy, miracles, and healings, on the flashy side, to more prosaic gifts like administration, teaching, and mercy. For most of Christian history, most believers assumed that the more supernatural of these gifts either had been a special dispensation in the era of the early church or else were exceedingly rare. This assumption was thrown into question during the twentieth century, when multiple charismatic movements, starting with Pentecostalism, blossomed, premised on the idea that these dormant supernatural dimensions of Christianity were reappearing.

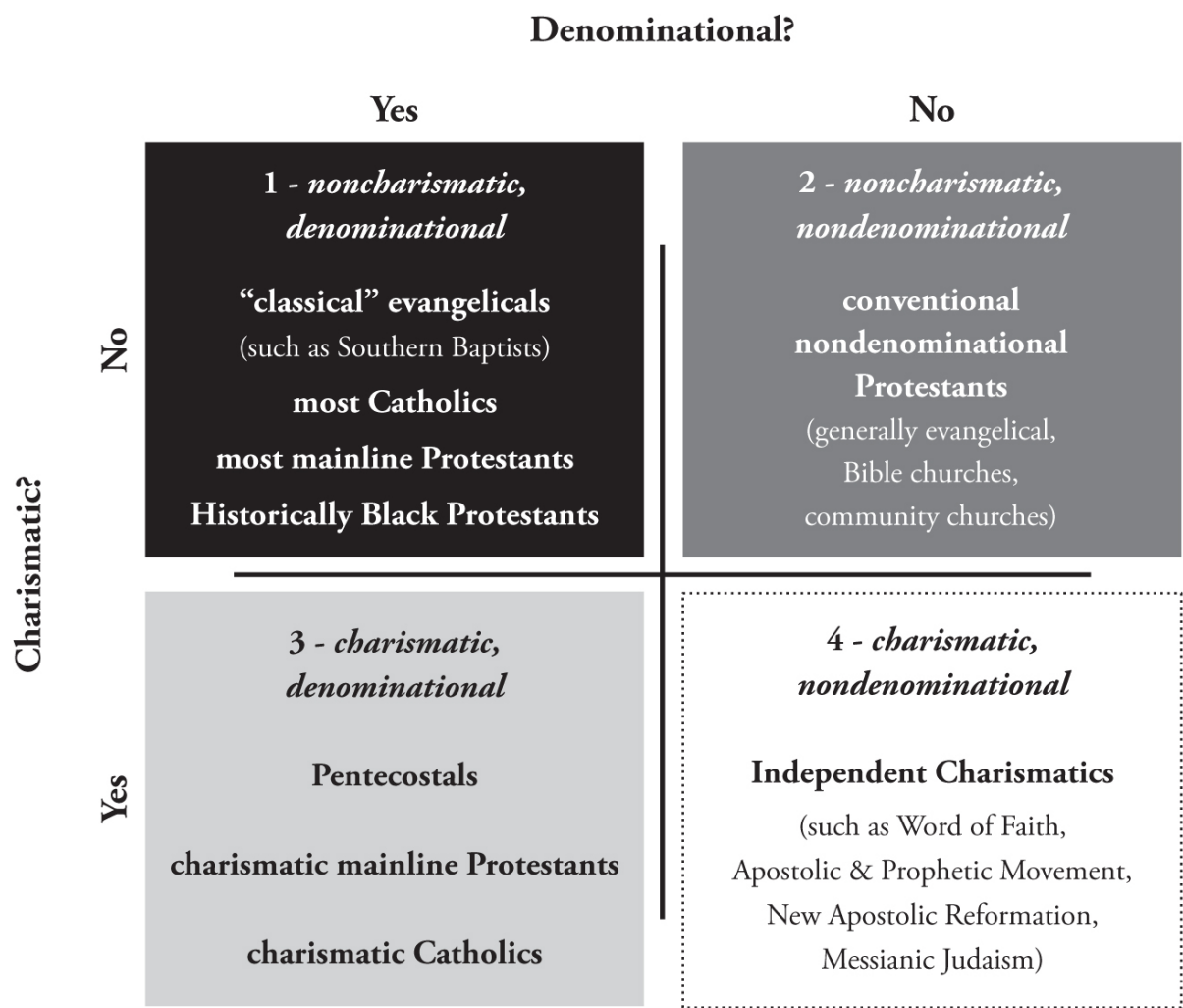


Fig. 1.1 A four-quadrant model of American Christianity.

So we can map these two questions onto a two-axis grid to come up with four quadrants of American Christianity.

The first quadrant (**noncharismatic, denominational**) includes how most American Christians from the nineteenth century to the present would think of themselves: comfortably identifying with a denomination—or with the Roman Catholic Church, although my Catholic friends sometimes bristle at having the Protestant concept of a “denomination” applied to them. Among American Christians, this first quadrant is by far the largest. Mainline Protestants are by definition denominational because to be mainline, historically, was to belong to one of the mainline denominations: Presbyterian Church (USA), Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ, and so on. This quadrant is also where many Historically Black Protestants are. And this is where I would put what I’m calling “classical” evangelicals: evangelicals who align with a denomination, such as the Southern Baptists, and who might be open to some charismatic expressions or practices but do not see them as an essential part of faith and practice.

The second quadrant (**noncharismatic, nondenominational**) represents a deep-rooted countervailing tendency in American Christianity. Shortly after the American Revolution, some

American Christians began looking askance at denominational structures. When they read the Bible, they didn't see anything like denominations bureaucratically managing congregations and shoring up theological divisions. Instead, they embraced a restorationist model, intended to recover the authentic heart of the early Christian church, and they jettisoned denominational distinctions in favor of independent communities that could read the Bible for themselves and govern themselves. People who belong to these communities typically identify as evangelical. Today many Christians are gravitating toward this nondenominational approach, and many congregations are choosing to disaffiliate from their denominations. A 2020 survey of congregations found that, for the first time in the history of the survey, nondenominational congregations outpaced the largest Protestant denomination (Southern Baptists). More than twenty-one million Americans identified as nondenominational Christians; that's 6.4 percent of the entire US population.¹ That survey didn't delineate which of those nondenominational churches were charismatic, so those twenty-one million people would be spread between the second and fourth quadrants, making these two the smallest quadrants.

The leader who most typifies this second quadrant in my mind is John MacArthur. MacArthur is famous for an austere theology, a willingness to denounce anyone who disagrees with him—especially charismatics—and leadership of a Christian college and seminary, his own little nondenominational fiefdom.

The third quadrant (charismatic, denominational) encompasses a range of Christians who blend denominational belonging and charismatic expressions. Most prominent in this quadrant are the Pentecostals, participants in a charismatic revival movement that broke out in the early twentieth century. The Pentecostals famously reinvigorated the practice of speaking in tongues in the modern world, but they were also interested in other *charismata* like prophecy and healing. Fairly early on in Pentecostalism, the movement leaders—who, like other Protestants, were prone to schism and disagreements—appropriated the denominational model. Today most people who'd call themselves Pentecostals in the United States belong to one of the Pentecostal denominations: the Assemblies of God, the Foursquare Church, and the Church of God in Christ, among others.

Pentecostalism was racially diverse from the start, but the early Pentecostal interracial solidarity dissolved into division and strife, so most American Pentecostal denominations today are coded as either primarily Black or white. In the mid-twentieth century, the energy and dynamism of this Pentecostal style of worship and prayer spread outside of the Pentecostal denominations into mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations. This shift was called the Charismatic Renewal at the time, and still today, you can find small pockets of mainline churches that are spiritually charismatic. Moreover, a huge swath of global Catholicism today is charismatic, with an estimated 215 million charismatic Catholics, mostly

clustered in the Global South (Africa, Latin America, and Asia).² US Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett was raised in a charismatic Catholic community.

The fourth quadrant (charismatic, nondenominational) is where this book largely takes place. These are the so-called Independent Charismatics—sometimes labeled “neocharismatics” or “neo-Pentecostals”—who enthusiastically embrace and pursue the supernatural expressions of Christianity while also rejecting the bureaucracy and constraints of denominations. This is the amorphous, tumultuous Wild West of the modern church. Fast-paced and energetic, it is ethnically diverse and globally connected. It is also the fastest-growing segment of Christianity in America.³ Up until very recently, these Independent Charismatics, to the degree that anyone thought of them at all, were considered marginal, ostentatious, and kooky—until, that is, Paula White and the other leaders we’ll meet in this book took the Independent Charismatics mainstream.

This four-quadrant model illustrates how complicated American evangelicals are. A casual news consumer, particularly one with no personal experience of evangelicalism, might be tempted to think that evangelicals are a homogeneous group of conservative white Christians who all vote the same way and worship the same way. It’s true that there are some common features among evangelicals: most share a love of direct Bible interpretation, an impulse to evangelize nonbelievers, certain theological emphases, and a generally conservative political outlook.

But if you look at the diagram, you’ll see that there are people who call themselves evangelical in each of these four quadrants, yet they represent very different flavors of evangelicalism. *Evangelical* in the United States is a coalitional umbrella term, describing a heterogeneous mix of denominational and nondenominational churches and charismatic and noncharismatic spiritualities.

First-quadrant evangelicals inhabit denominations and will frequently identify as much with their denomination—“I’m a Southern Baptist,” or “I go to a PCA (Presbyterian Church of America) church”—as they do with the title “evangelical.” Second-quadrant evangelicals, who aren’t interested in either charismaticism or denominations, will often say, “I’m just a Christian,” or “I’m nondenominational,” signaling that they don’t want to play the first-quadrant identity-parsing game. Third-quadrant evangelicals, though they’re often labeled “Pentecostals,” usually are also keen to identify as evangelicals, although noncharismatic evangelicals have tended to treat tongue-speaking Pentecostals like weird cousins you pretend not to know. A recent study by sociologist Ryan Burge showed that the Pentecostals were more likely than any other denominational Protestants to identify as “evangelical or born-again,” with 94 percent of Assemblies of God members and 91 percent of other Pentecostals saying they are evangelical.⁴

Fourth-quadrant evangelicals, the focus of this book, might share a lot of theology and political persuasions with other evangelicals, but they often experience a sense of alienation from their fellow evangelicals, particularly the first- and second-quadrant types. They feel a strong charismatic kinship with Pentecostals, even if they ultimately reject the denominational elements of American Pentecostalism.

Put simply, as important as knowing that someone is classified as an evangelical is understanding *what sort of evangelical they are*. We return now to the story of Paula White, but as you read the remainder of this book, this conceptual model will help you understand the oft-diverging impulses and identities within evangelicalism.

Paula White’s Origins: “Messed-up Mississippi Girl”

Paula White’s early life was marked by devastating trauma and suffering. She was born Paula Michelle Furr in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1966. Her doting father and entrepreneurial mother owned two toy and craft stores, and Paula and her older half brother—a son her mother had with a high school sweetheart—felt the security to grow and enjoy life. Paula was an outgoing, precocious child. “She was born breech and she hasn’t slowed down since,” her mother reflected in one interview. “She interacted with everyone she came across. . . . She was very tenacious in whatever she decided to do.”⁵

But her father had a gambling problem, began drinking heavily, and struggled to hold down a job, until finally her mother took the two kids to Memphis when Paula was five. Paula’s father followed them to Memphis and showed up at their door one stormy night, frantic, drunk, and demanding that he take Paula with him or he’d kill himself. He got violent, shoving her mother into a wall, and her mother called the police, who took him to the station to sober up. Inexplicably, the police released him early, and Paula’s father died while driving back to Tupelo later that same night when his car went into a sharp curve and crashed into an embankment.⁶ Everyone, including Paula, assumed it was suicide, just as he’d threatened.

Her tragedies and traumas compounded in the wake of her father’s death. In her grief, her mother began drinking heavily, and young Paula was often the one having to clean up her mother’s messes and get her into bed. Starting in the first grade, Paula was repeatedly molested by a babysitter and the babysitter’s boyfriend. She describes being “sexually and physically abused numerous times in horrific ways” by caregivers, relatives, and neighbors before she turned thirteen.⁷

Her mother married again to a military man who would eventually become a two-star admiral in the navy, so the family moved around a lot. Unlike many of her carefree friends in high school, Paula never

got into partying or drinking because she didn't want to lose control the way her parents had. But she developed bulimia, which contributed to a deep depression. She describes herself at eighteen as "an old soul," blind to all but "the hopeless carnage of today."⁸

As a desperate, serially abused teenager with an eating disorder, Paula met and fell in love with Dean Knight, the charming lead singer in a local band in Maryland, where Paula's family was living. It was Dean's uncle, who lived out of state but was visiting one day, who first shared the gospel with Paula. After explaining concepts like Jesus and sin and salvation, Dean's uncle prayed a very charismatic prayer over her: "Please, Lord, let Paula know she's not a victim of the things that have happened to her, that she's not to blame. . . . Deliver her from the demonic torment of her past. Lord, fill her now. Wash her in Your precious Holy Spirit. Show her who you are."⁹ This encounter was a transformative experience, and Paula describes feeling as though years of burdens, pain, sin, and depression were being lifted.

Then, unexpectedly, Dean and Paula conceived a child out of wedlock. Immediately Dean proposed, and they married hastily. The son they had together, Brad Knight, is Paula's only biological child.

Paula and Dean joined the Damascus Church of God, a Pentecostal congregation where Dean had been raised. She remembers how striking it was to see people speaking in tongues and doing a Jericho march, an occasional Pentecostal-charismatic practice of marching around the church praying, singing, and shouting for God's deliverance. All of this was new for Paula, and she found it raw and exciting and liberating. She decided, "*This is me.*"¹⁰

She threw herself into church life, volunteering to teach Sunday school and joining in trips to feed the homeless in nearby Washington, DC. When the church janitor quit, she volunteered to clean the church, eager to contribute in whatever way she could. She began to attend Bible school at the denomination's National Church of God in the nearby Washington, DC, suburbs.¹¹ There at the Damascus Church of God, as she became increasingly involved, she met a man who would alter the trajectory of her life: Randy White, a fifth-generation Pentecostal preacher.

This part of Paula's life story is complicated and contested, but it's also the inception of her career in Christian leadership. The version Paula and Randy would tell was that Paula was already separated from Dean and on the way to being divorced before she became involved with Randy, who was also separated from his wife and on the cusp of divorce. The Church of God denomination frowned on clergy being divorced, and Randy had stepped away from ministry to work at the US State Department. They started dating in 1989 for just a few months, married after their divorces were finalized, and moved to Tampa, Florida, in 1991. There they founded a new church.¹²

The story some of White's friends and fellow church members from that time tell is quite different. They say that Randy, eight years Paula's elder, was firmly in place as the associate pastor, with his father

serving as the lead pastor, when they “became romantically involved” in 1987.¹³ News of their relationship leaked out in the small church community, and one church member even publicly called out Pastor Randy and Paula’s affair in the middle of a church service. This, friends say, led to Randy and Paula moving to a nearby town together, divorcing their spouses in 1989, and marrying each other in 1990. When challenged by reporters with this alternate version of her marriage’s origins in 2008, Paula responded, “We cannot control the way our story is or has been reported, nor can we control gossip, innuendo, or other people’s memories of events twenty years ago.”¹⁴

What is clear is that her marriage to Randy White not only initiated a lasting surname change for Paula but also launched her into a career in charismatic ministry. It would become evident later that while Randy had the pastoral training and pedigree, Paula had the talent and driving ambition. With their move to Tampa, Florida, they were moving states—and, within our working model of American Christianity, we could also say they were switching quadrants. Randy had grown up within, and Paula had come to faith in, denominational Pentecostalism. But then they discovered firsthand how the strictures and accountability of denominationalism carried a real sting, with higher-ups frowning on Randy’s divorce and pushing back on their remarriage. Denominations have rules and bylaws, standards, and disciplinary procedures for wayward clergy.

When they went on to found a new church in Tampa, they decided to have it be both charismatic and nondenominational. They were migrating into the fourth quadrant. They wrote on their new church’s website, “Determined to make a difference, together both Randy and Paula rid themselves of denominational restraints and in 1991 with 5 founding members they launched a ministry of ‘Evangelism and Restoration’ known as South Tampa Christian Center.”¹⁵

Paula White is certainly a singular figure, but her career is not without precedent. Let’s pause the narrative of White’s life for a moment and consider the life of another woman, one whose work still reverberates throughout the world of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity.

Echoes of Aimee Semple McPherson

Part of the reason that Paula White, as a woman, could become a minister in the first place, let alone rise to the heights of religious leadership in the United States, was that she entered Christianity through Pentecostalism. Most evangelical churches in the first and second quadrants—that is, noncharismatic churches—still do not ordain women or allow them to serve in pastoral leadership roles. Mainline Protestant denominations have been ordaining women since the 1940s or 1950s, but Pentecostals were ordaining and elevating women in ministry forty years before that. Indeed, in classical Pentecostal

history, the first person to speak in tongues in the modern era was a woman, Agnes Ozman, on January 1, 1901.

But the iconic Pentecostal woman who laid the track for Paula White is Aimee Semple McPherson. McPherson did for Pentecostalism in the early twentieth century what Paula White would do for Independent Charismaticism in the twenty-first: usher a fringe spirituality into the mainstream. McPherson wrote the script for how a talented woman wielding charismatic celebrity and media savvy could electrify America.

Raised in Ontario, Canada, Sister Aimee, as her devoted followers called her, caught the Pentecostal fire in 1907, at the age of seventeen, when an Irish Pentecostal preacher named Robert Semple came to town sermonizing about revival and being filled with the Spirit. Aimee was taken with both the message and the messenger, and after being baptized in the Spirit at the gathering, she married Robert Semple in 1908. Early Pentecostalism was fixated on spreading the Holy Spirit outpouring through overseas missions, and the young couple embarked for China as missionaries two years after they married, only to encounter tragedy. They both contracted malaria there, and Robert died.

Sister Aimee remarried shortly thereafter, to mild-mannered accountant Harold McPherson in Rhode Island, but Aimee's sense of calling and ambition to spread the kingdom of God led her to preaching at tent revival meetings to thousands of ardent converts. Her success and independence proved a source of real tension. The couple separated in 1918, and their messy divorce was finalized in 1921.

McPherson moved to Los Angeles in 1918 at the end of World War I and on the cusp of the Roaring Twenties. Despite her troubled marital status and her lack of formal ministry credentials, Sister Aimee promoted herself and her trendy version of Pentecostalism there via her entrepreneurial spirit, incalculable charm, organizational fortitude, and preaching panache. Over the decade of the 1920s, Sister Aimee would build her own five-thousand-seat megachurch, called Angelus Temple, where she preached three services on Sundays to packed-out crowds. She built and led her own Bible college, her own radio station, and her own denomination, the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. In the words of McPherson's excellent biographer, Matthew Sutton, "Dazzling religious theatrics and a penchant for publicity made McPherson one of the most famous American personalities of the interwar years. . . . She combined the old-time faith, show biz sensibilities, marketing savvy, and passionate Americanism" to popularize her Pentecostal-style evangelicalism.¹⁶

Like Paula White, McPherson was a controversial and polarizing character in her time. Critics argued that Sister Aimee promoted flash over substance, bringing too much Hollywood show business flair into religion. She was a fashion icon in her time, rubbing shoulders with Hollywood celebrities. Moreover, her very public and messy divorce, as well as rumors of affairs, generated accusations of hypocrisy.

Then, in May 1926, Sister Aimee disappeared. Beachcombers and deep-sea divers at the beach in Santa Monica where she was last seen searched in vain for her body, and after several weeks, her family held a memorial service. Three days after her funeral, Aimee mysteriously turned up in Arizona, with a wild tale of having been kidnapped by a nefarious couple, smuggled into Mexico, and finally escaping her captors to freedom. The press rabidly covered this dramatic saga, making it front-page national news. Los Angeles prosecutors and many in the broader public remained skeptical, and a grand jury was empaneled to investigate whether McPherson had lied and committed perjury. She was put on trial, but prosecutors eventually dropped the case.

Though not overtly partisan, McPherson also threw herself into local and national politics. She opposed both communism and fascism. But she also argued for a robust and charismatic form of Christian nationalism and against the separation of church and state, believing that “only a national revival led by born-again Christians baptized in the Holy Spirit could restore the United States to its privileged position as God’s modern-day holy land.” When Sister Aimee launched a nationwide preaching tour, calling the nation “back to the Faith of Our Fathers,” more than two million people—that’s 2 percent of the entire nation—came out to attend one of the meetings, and millions more listened on the radio.¹⁷

As Aimee Semple McPherson’s career shows, charismatic Christianity could open up incredible opportunities for resourceful female religious leaders. But the celebrity that comes with such leadership is a double-edged sword. Streetwise charismatic leaders must be entrepreneurs, creating their own mythology and history in real time. The qualities that constitute charismatic leadership—an air of mystery and supernatural power and insight—must be sustained over a long period of time, requiring a tightrope walk for anyone bold enough to seize the chance. Pentecostalism, from its earliest origins, was more gut level than cerebral. In essence, if people are showing up not out of some deep confessional loyalty or sense of traditional belonging but to be entertained and offered new experiences, well, that is a beast that must always be fed. Otherwise, it can turn unruly.

Paula White’s Career: A Televangelist Therapist

When Randy and Paula White started South Tampa Christian Center in 1991, the church met in a small storefront that could barely seat fifty people. The couple was so poor and so invested in the church that they reportedly “lived on government cheese and peanut butter” some weeks.¹⁸ But the Whites were full of gumption and willing to experiment. They built a portable stage on the back of a truck and took it all over Tampa’s impoverished housing projects, conducting outdoor services. Their church motto was “We’

re the perfect church for the people who are not.”¹⁹ Their church grew so quickly that, within a few months, they had to move out of their original storefront location to a school cafeteria. By the end of 1991, the church had seven hundred members.²⁰

In 1997, they changed the church name, ditching the humdrum “Christian Center” for the more universal and iconic “Without Walls International Church.” The name was partly a joke; the church was growing so fast, they couldn’t find a building to accommodate the five thousand weekly attendees. So by that time, they were meeting in a giant air-conditioned tent—literally, a church without walls. It was also remarkably racially diverse, at 30 percent white, 30 percent Latino, and 40 percent Black. Asked about the secret of their success, Paula responded, “When a church begins to get beyond its comfort zone, out of its four walls, it’s going to grow because people are hungry. . . . The reason you’re seeing the moving and growing of the Pentecostals is that there’s a sense of belonging; we’re meeting needs and we’re saying to the community ‘Hey, here’s the Gospel, and it can be relevant to you.’”²¹

As remarkable as the success of the Whites’ Without Walls Church was, it was part of a burgeoning trend: the megachurch movement. Megachurches—defined as Protestant congregations with more than two thousand people consistently attending weekly services—were almost unheard of when Aimee Semple McPherson was building Angelus Temple in the 1920s. But by the 1990s, they were big business. Scott Thumma, a scholar who studies megachurches, estimates that there were maybe ten megachurches in the United States in 1900. By 1980, it was 150. By 1990, it was 310. And by 2005, it was 1,210.²² While megachurch numbers are difficult to compare with each other because of varying ways of counting “members” and “attendees,” the Whites’ Without Walls congregation was, by the early 2000s, regularly making top-ten lists of the largest churches in America. The congregation passed the twenty-thousand-member mark around 2006 when Paula was forty years old.²³

Throughout this period, as her profile grew, Paula White began traveling the country to lead evangelistic services. A huge boost to her career came in the late 1990s when T. D. Jakes, one of the rising star Independent Charismatic Black preachers in the United States, endorsed her ministry and began to mentor her. He invited her to speak at his blockbuster conferences catering to women. With her ministry in Tampa, White had already established a strong power base among Black Pentecostals, and Jakes’s support grew her influence even further. They became so close that White started calling him her “spiritual father.”²⁴ This language of “spiritual father” or “spiritual mother” is very common in Independent Charismatic leadership circles, where, without the structures of denominational leadership hierarchies and seminary training, ambitious leaders defer to familial models of being raised and apprenticed.

In 1998, Paula approached Randy to say she felt God was calling her to begin a television ministry. He agreed to support it, and they discovered there was an early morning time slot available on Black Entertainment Television (BET). So Paula—a petite white woman from Mississippi—signed up to lead a Christian talk show on a cable channel for Black audiences. They cobbled together some rented furniture, a spare room in the church, a single TV camera, and a homemade black backdrop. She joked, “I’m the producer, the talent, the director, and just about everything else that goes into making a television program.”²⁵ This is the beginning of Paula’s independence from Randy.

As with many areas of her career, Paula proved to be phenomenally adept at being a Christian talk show host. Many televangelists’ style of presentation is merely upbeat and promotional: they’re always pitching a new message, a new fundraising drive, a new prophecy, a new lifestyle enhancer. But Paula White discovered the effectiveness of a more therapeutic posture. She could take her own trauma and heartache and poor life decisions and empathetically draw those same deep hurts out of her guests to get them talking. In one of her early shows, a religious leader panelist broke down crying when Paula asked about her father. The film crew’s instinct was to stop shooting, but White signaled to them to continue recording. She recognized the power of emotional vulnerability to surface our common humanity.²⁶

Sociologist Shayne Lee and historian Phillip Luke Sinitiere, who have studied White closely, argue that she represents “a nonconfrontational style of postfeminist leadership.”²⁷ Through her talk show, they claim, White became “the ‘Oprah’ of the evangelical world by tackling the nitty-gritty, day-to-day realities of life and by finessing dialogues with celebrities and experts concerning various facets of self-actualization.”²⁸ Other televangelism executives quickly began to recognize that Paula had a unique appeal, and her show began airing on other networks.

Through T. D. Jakes’s sponsorship, her multiethnic congregation, and her popular show on BET, Paula White became especially famous within Black Pentecostal and charismatic communities. Her preaching style and cadence have clearly been shaped by the call-and-response, musicality, and physicality often associated with Black preaching. As her son, Brad Knight, once summarized, “The black community told her, ‘You’re a white girl who preaches black.’”²⁹

Part of what made Randy and Paula White such a success was that they were preaching something called the *prosperity gospel*, or the *health and wealth gospel*. To be clear, virtually no one goes around saying, “I preach the prosperity gospel,” and you won’t find that phrase in White’s books or her sermons. It’s a polemical label, leveled as an accusation. Indeed, there are many different prosperity gospels, many contributing Christian theologies about wealth, health, and wholeness that get critiqued as teaching prosperity. Most of what gets called *prosperity gospel* today originates from within the Independent Charismatic sector into which Paula and Randy White had migrated in the early 1990s. So before we go

much further in Paula's story, let's consider the social world and ecosystem in which she was operating. This is the historical backdrop for how Paula White—and all the major characters of this book—became so popular and influential.

Three Revivals That Defined the Independent Charismatic Sector

From the very start of the Pentecostal revivals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some charismatic churches have remained independent, refusing to conform to denominational regulations and oversight. But for most of the twentieth century, these churches were relatively small, disconnected, and marginal.

In the post–World War II era, three important mutations to Pentecostalism realigned this peripheral Independent Charismatic world. All three are what Pentecostals and charismatics call *revivals*: intense, timebound, and geographically localized outbursts of piety and charismatic activity that they understand to be specially ordained manifestations of the Holy Spirit's work.

The first, which came to be called the Healing Revival, broke out in the 1940s and 1950s through a group of itinerant Pentecostal healing evangelists. By the late 1940s, Pentecostalism was due for a revival. The first-generation Pentecostal leaders were dying off—Aimee Semple McPherson died in 1944—and the younger Pentecostals were longing for renewal. Enter William Branham, an esoteric and eccentric preacher. In 1946, Branham was traveling around the Midwest, preaching and reportedly healing the sick and performing other miracles. Branham claimed that an angel traveled with him and healed people through him, and he evidently had supernatural insights, correctly identifying people's illnesses at a glance before, purportedly, healing them.

Though healing evangelists were often caricatured as scheming charlatans by outsiders, within the Pentecostal subculture, news of these healings spread rapidly and magnetized people with longing for similar revival experiences. Soon Branham had many imitators: upstart revivalists who wanted to travel, preach, and perform miracles. Despite the fact that Branham was, in historian C. Douglas Weaver's phrase, the “pacesetter for the revival,” after the widespread movement started, Branham himself was plagued with health issues and accusations of fraud, diminishing his popularity.³⁰ His theology, followed by a small but ardent company of devotees, became more fringy, extreme, misogynistic, and racist, up until his death in 1965.

If Branham was the pacesetter, Gordon Lindsay was the publicist of the revival. A young Assemblies of God pastor, he came alongside Branham in the 1940s to coordinate and broadcast the revivals led by Branham and the other faith healers. As historian David E. Harrell Jr. summarizes the fruit of Lindsay's

efforts, “By the early 1950s scores of healing evangelists filled tents and auditoriums around the country, attracting tens of thousands of people, reporting thousands of healings and other miracles, and collecting millions of dollars in contributions from supporters.”³¹ Lindsay would also go on in the 1970s to found Christ for the Nations Institute (CFNI), an unaccredited Pentecostal-charismatic training institute in Dallas, which will feature significantly in [chapter 7](#). The year 1956 marked the apex of the revival, with nearly fifty of these traveling healing evangelists traversing North America and hundreds of thousands of people attending the meetings.

The most popular of the healing evangelists was Oral Roberts, a Pentecostal Holiness Church preacher. From 1947 to 1968, Roberts led more than three hundred multiday healing crusades and personally laid hands on and prayed for millions of people. But in 1955, Roberts made his most important contribution to Pentecostal-charismatic culture by creating a national weekly television show where he brought his healing message to distant millions who could never attend his meetings. Within two years, Roberts was appearing on enough networks to reach 80 percent of the American television audience.³² He was the first major Pentecostal-charismatic televangelist, and he pioneered the genre of televised charismatic theology and faith application that Paula White would master in the following century. Roberts brought awareness of Pentecostal healing practices to many Americans who would never have darkened the flaps of a revival tent. By 1980, when Gallup conducted a survey of the best-known religious figures in America, they found that 84 percent of the American public knew who Oral Roberts was.³³ In 1965, Roberts founded an eponymous university in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Oral Roberts University is still an anchoring educational institution for Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity in the United States.

One of the itinerant healing evangelists from the 1950s who joined up with Lindsay’s promotional efforts was a preacher named Kenneth Hagin. In 1966, Hagin would set up shop in Tulsa alongside his friend Oral Roberts and begin teaching about what was called the Word of Faith doctrine. He emphasized the need for bold faith, God’s desire to heal and prosper devout Christians, and the need to speak your blessings into reality. These gut-level Word of Faith concepts and ideas proliferated out into the loose Independent Charismatic networks. This decentralized Word of Faith movement is where most of what is today called the *prosperity gospel* originates.

The healing revivalists became so popular, the historian Harrell writes, that their independent ministries “came to rival the Pentecostal denominations in size and world-wide influence.”³⁴ This created obvious tensions between denominational Pentecostalism—then roughly half a century old, with established institutions—and the more freewheeling and largely unaccountable traveling healers. As the Pentecostal denominations denounced or distanced themselves from the new, controversial public faces

of “Pentecostalism,” the healing evangelists increasingly drifted into more welcoming and unregulated nondenominational charismatic spaces, what we’re calling the fourth quadrant.

The second major Pentecostal revival was operating contemporaneously. A group of Pentecostal teachers at a Bible school in Saskatchewan were so taken by the healings and other charismatic experiences they witnessed at one of Branham’s revivals that, in 1947, they began praying for revival at their school too. Through their prayers and revival meetings, a different awakening broke out in Saskatchewan, quickly spreading to other parts of Canada and the United States. This group called itself the Latter Rain, or, sometimes, the New Order of the Latter Rain. So from 1948 to the mid-1950s, two sweeping revivals were reconfiguring fourth-quadrant Christianity in America.

The Latter Rain name was a biblical reference to the distinct weather patterns in Israel, where the rainy season begins with heavy rain in October (the former rains) and ends with heavy rain in May (the latter rains). For Latter Rain theologians, the highly charismatic early church represented the former rains, and they believed they were prophetically living into the latter rains: an end-times deluge of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, they sensed that God was revealing that the task of the church was not merely rejuvenating ancient spiritual practices that had fallen by the wayside in Christian history, like the Pentecostal focus on speaking in tongues. No, the Latter Rain folks also believed that the world was on the cusp of a global Christian revival once the proper government of the church was restored.

Frustrated with slow-moving and bureaucratic denominations, the Latter Rain leaders especially fixated on passages in the book of Ephesians, including Ephesians 2:20, which says that Christ’s church is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,” and Ephesians 4:11, where the author describes five leadership gifts Jesus bestowed on the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, and pastors. The Latter Rain mystics believed that, although the roles of supernaturally guided apostles and prophets had died out after the early church era, giving way to centuries of bureaucratic bishops and timid pastors, God would soon commission new Spirit-filled apostles and prophets to lead God’s people and bring about an end-times victorious church.

This Ephesians list of five gifts, and the aligning of church leadership around them, is often called the *fivefold ministry* model by proponents, and it usually includes an emphasis on the centrality of apostles and prophets. Slowly, over the next few decades, these fivefold teachings and prophecies spread into the diffuse Independent Charismatic networks. The Latter Rain teachings, though not enfolded into a single denomination or statement of faith, saturated many of these loose networks of nondenominational churches, forming what Mark Chironna, who has spent most of his life navigating those networks, calls “part of the subcultural language” binding them together.³⁵

The third revival came in the 1960s and 1970s and was centered in California. This revival is usually called the Jesus People or the Jesus Movement. Not all Jesus People communities were charismatic, but most were, so that the movement, in historian Larry Eskridge's words, "seemed to be awash in a Pentecostal ethos of glossolalia [speaking in tongues], prophecy, 'words of knowledge,' 'singing in the Spirit,' and divine healing."³⁶

Many of the Jesus People were hippies or ex-hippies, with an aesthetic akin to the 1960s countercultural movement. They emphasized Jesus as an iconoclastic, revolutionary figure, and they scorned more established mainline and evangelical churches as being hopelessly conformist. They sought mystical experiences through Christian worship and the new genre of Christian rock and roll they helped invent. In their suspicion of established practices, the Jesus People converts were particularly attracted to churches that were both nondenominational and charismatic. It's also worth noting that many of the excited new converts among the Jesus People were Jewish, and they wound up taking over or building new Jewish-Christian institutions that led to the creation of the concept and movement of Messianic Judaism: a controversial, predominantly Independent Charismatic movement of ethnically Jewish and theologically Christian people.

These three revivals, spanning four decades, shaped the Independent Charismatic sphere in the United States. All these overlapping waves of revivals and the networked-but-nondenominational character of the Independent Charismatic space have created a distinct leadership culture, within which all the characters of this book have proven quite skilled navigators.

The Culture of Independent Charismaticism

Charismatics are among the most innovative, media-savvy, and pathbreaking Christians out there. Every new technology—from magazines to radio to television to music to Facebook to YouTube—has been utilized by charismatics to drive their message home. Independent Charismatic worship music provides the soundtrack for other evangelicals. Additionally, the past fifty years have witnessed the growth of a colossal Independent Charismatic media sphere, one that most people outside that world are barely even aware of: charismatic news sites and magazines like *Charisma News*; charismatic television networks, such as Trinity Broadcasting Network and GOD TV; charismatic YouTube channels where prophets post their sometimes daily prophecies; and innumerable websites and social media pages that promote the charismatic celebrity class. And that's just in the United States. Dig even an inch into these media, and you will find webs of communication and relationship that span the globe and touch every continent.

Independent Charismatic leaders are entrepreneurial, whether they brand themselves as pastors, prophets, apostles, worship leaders, Messianic rabbis, evangelists, revivalists, faith healers, or spiritual life coaches. They are autonomous, managing their own ministries and churches, but they are also supremely collaborative. Over the past fifty years, certain social conventions have been established in these elite charismatic circles: go along to get along; you don't have to agree with someone 100 percent to be partners; develop your own schtick, and don't steal someone else's; respect your elders; lend your credibility to friends or future friends when you're on a stage with them; find spiritual fathers and spiritual mothers who will sponsor your rise; and, most of all, remember the goal: revival, revival, revival.

As much as these rules might seem calculating or cynical, I believe most of these leaders are utterly sincere and just following the incentives and laws of nature within the Independent Charismatic ecosystem. This is not a world of distinct boundaries, agreed-on statements of faith, or purity tests; that's what denominations are for! All roles are open to men and women and people of any race as long as they've got the gifting. Formal, accredited training is rare, so most Independent Charismatic leaders, like Paula White, apprentice themselves to people they want to emulate. If you read an Independent Charismatic leader's bio, you likely won't find academic credentials but accomplishments, mentors, and stylistic branding.

Depending on their background, Independent Charismatic leaders will sometimes speak of themselves as continuationists—as in the supernatural gifts of the Spirit continue today—and sometimes as evangelicals, or Pentecostals, or Spirit-filled. Those are all acceptable forms of identification. Independent Charismatic leaders may also speak about evangelicals as a group that they are *not* part of—meaning, particularly, first- and second-quadrant, noncharismatic, “mainstream” evangelicals. Yet I would argue that they are undeniably part of the broader phenomenon that we call *evangelicalism*.

Three brief analogies may help us make sense of this unusual religious leadership and social culture. First, it's a lot like Hollywood. The path to success is celebrity, and celebrity often depends on lucky breaks and who you know. New projects, new conferences, new concepts are constantly being put forward and assembled by entrepreneurial leaders. In Hollywood, fans don't have to choose between their love for Natalie Portman and their love for Gwyneth Paltrow; similarly, Independent Charismatic followers generally do not feel the need to follow only one apostle or megachurch pastor. Instead, Independent Charismatic leaders form different clusters and constellations of support and fandom.

Second, Independent Charismatic leadership culture is like a marketplace. In fact, it literally *is* a marketplace, in which huge sums of money flow through merchandising, ministry donations, worship-music sales, and television channels. But it's also a marketplace of ideas, where each leader is finding

their style or signature idea and promoting their brands and their memes. Leaders are always looking for their angle, the message or meme that will make them iconic.

Third, we could say that Independent Charismatic leadership culture is, ideologically, a lot like a lava lamp: you can distinguish certain movements—they prefer the language of “streams”—but those movements are constantly combining and recombining. It is not contradictory to simultaneously call yourself a pastor, an apostle, a Word of Faith preacher, a revivalist, and a social media personality. The NAR’s ideology is hard to track precisely because it is suspended within this ooze, along with so many other Independent Charismatic streams, endlessly merging within individual figures and ministries.

So now we can see more plainly why Paula White has had such phenomenal success. White was part of the first generation of Independent Charismatic leaders who navigated—and shaped the rules for navigating—the emerging internet and social media landscape. She proved herself to be extremely flexible and adept at playing this unique game by its unique rules, far more so than her husband, Randy. White assembled a distinct brand: white woman skilled in the idiom of Black Pentecostalism and vouched for and mentored by Black leaders like T. D. Jakes; therapeutic preacher with some Word of Faith / prosperity teachings in the mix; megachurch pastor; and “Oprah” to evangelicals.

Independent Charismatic celebrity culture mingles very well with other forms of celebrity. Independent Charismatic leaders often have tens or hundreds of thousands of fans clamoring for their attention. They’re scrappy and entrepreneurial, and other celebrities apparently sense an affinity with them. In Paula White’s case, hosting a Christian talk show meant she was hobnobbing with a lot of famous guests.

As Without Walls International Church became one of the largest megachurches in the country in the late 1990s and early 2000s, professional athletes, including football star Deion Sanders and baseball star Darryl Strawberry, started attending. Paula was invited to lead a Bible study with any interested New York Yankees players when she was in town. This opened doors to similar opportunities with the New York Mets and then other NBA and NFL teams. When Michael Jackson was in crisis in 2003, having been charged with sexually abusing a boy, Paula was invited out to Jackson’s Neverland Ranch to personally minister to the pop star. At one point in 2004, supermodel Tyra Banks, a friend of hers, gave Paula a fashion photo shoot, and some of the photos ran in *Maxim* magazine with the headline “Sexy Televangelist.” White also became the personal pastor of the performer Kid Rock and officiated his short-lived marriage to model Pamela Anderson in 2006.

This is the context in which Paula White, in 2002, out of the blue, received a phone call from Donald Trump.

Paula White's Growth: Becoming Apostolic

To hear White tell the story, Trump is quite the preaching connoisseur. On the phone that day, the real-estate tycoon told White that he had seen her talk show and some of her sermons on TV while staying at his Mar-a-Lago estate, and he told her, “You have the *it* factor.” She offered the half-joking rejoinder, “Sir, we call that the anointing.”³⁷ Trump then recounted to White, point by point, three of her sermons on “the value of riches” that he had particularly appreciated.³⁸

Trump had spent years watching preachers on TV and evaluating their techniques, according to White, and he spent the rest of the phone call discussing and dissecting his favorite preachers' styles. He loves Billy Graham and Jimmy Swaggart, and he reserves a special place of affection for the famed Manhattan pastor Norman Vincent Peale. Peale was famous for his “power of positive thinking” approach to the gospel, which is a kind of noncharismatic version of the prosperity gospel. Trump had attended Peale's church for years, and after Peale's death, he struggled to find other sermonizers who could rival the Manhattan preacher.³⁹ Indeed, author Christopher Lane writes, “Trump [has] named Peale and his writings among his strongest influences.”⁴⁰

White describes a feeling she got from God as their friendship developed: “that Trump is ‘a spiritual assignment for me,’ that I am to pray over him daily and show him God. So I do.”⁴¹ Trump would later be a featured guest on White's talk show, and she wound up purchasing a \$3.5 million condo in Trump Tower in New York. So while many Americans outside of charismatic circles had never heard of her before 2016, Paula White has served as Donald Trump's personal pastor for more than twenty years.

When it comes to her marriage and ministry, Paula White avers that she was never in it for the money and fancy lifestyle. If anything, that was more Randy's fixation. In her 2019 autobiography, Randy comes across as the villain. He's the one who initiated their romantic relationship despite their existing marriages; he had affairs during their marriage; he was obsessed with money and fame; he was emotionally abusive and controlling; he sometimes threatened suicide in desperation. Many of Paula's critics are suspicious of this narrative, but the tawdry or exculpatory details of their marriage are not the point here; by 2004, it was clear that they were headed for divorce.

Then in 2006, Randy's eldest daughter from his first marriage, Paula's stepdaughter, was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer at the age of twenty-eight. This crisis and her eventual death a year and a half later, both delayed and cemented their impending divorce. Divorce is almost always messy, but this was worse than most: they were co-pastors of one of the largest churches in the United States, and they were both religious celebrities.

On the heels of their divorce announcement in 2007 came more devastating news for White. Senator Chuck Grassley revealed that the Senate Committee on Finance was opening an inquiry into the tax-exempt status of certain religious organizations: namely, six ministries led by Independent Charismatic prosperity preachers. The Whites were on the list. These triple crises brought about a destabilizing season for Paula as she tried to simultaneously divide up the ministry empire with Randy, skirt a congressional investigation, and grieve the loss of her stepdaughter.

By 2011, Without Walls International Church's property was under foreclosure, and it was forced to vacate its massive building, eventually entering into bankruptcy. Also in 2011, Senator Grassley published a scathing report on the Whites', and the other televangelists', decadent lifestyles and corrupt financial practices, although there were no penalties or ensuing prosecutions.⁴² Randy White disintegrated under the compounding pressure and retreated from public view.

But Paula White landed on her feet. In 2011, she moved to Orlando and engineered herself into the role of senior pastor of a majority Black, prosperity-oriented, Independent Charismatic church called New Destiny Christian Center. This is also a muddled transition story involving the promising, dynamic, young Black founding pastor, Zachary Tims, whom Paula called a "spiritual son," dying of a drug overdose that year; Paula coming in as interim pastor, eventually being asked to stay on permanently; and Tims's ex-wife accusing White of manipulating the situation.⁴³ These are the sorts of thorny situations that denominations were created to avert or manage.

A subtle shift in White's status and theology emerged during this time, and that shift interests me more than the relational drama of these years. Somewhere in this liminal season, Paula White began picking up those old Latter Rain ideas about modern-day apostles. The process and timing of this theological evolution are not clear, and many sources are possible since these apostolic and prophetic ideas had been percolating for decades in Independent Charismatic networks.

One factor in the emergence of apostolic language in Paula White's ministry might be that New Destiny Christian Center, White's newly acquired church, had already embraced the Latter Rain concept of "fivefold ministry" before White got there.⁴⁴ A significant portion of charismatic Black fivefold ministries often get classified as part of "Black Pentecostalism" when they are actually nondenominational. In other words, observers assume they are part of denominational charismaticism (third quadrant), but they belong more properly in the fourth quadrant of my model. It's possible White was simply adopting the existing frameworks and theology of the new community.

Yet more influential than the church she took over leading, I believe, was the new spiritual father she found. Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams is an Independent Charismatic Ghanaian apostle, part of the proliferation and flourishing of charismatic Christianity in Africa. He's sometimes referred to as the

“Apostle of Strategic Prayer” for his emphasis on prophetic spiritual-warfare prayer.⁴⁵ But starting in 2012, alongside her entry into leading New Destiny church and right up to the present, Paula White, a white televangelist from Mississippi, has been looking to this Ghanaian apostle as her mentor and spiritual father. This is what I mean when I say that these Independent Charismatic (fourth quadrant) dynamics are transnational and involve webs of relationships that span the globe.

So in 2012, we find Paula White introducing herself to her new church and preaching about the need to move into an “apostolic reformation” and that “the prophetic always has to go along with the apostolic.”⁴⁶ As an aside, some eager analysts have used this shift into apostolic language to claim that White was part of the NAR, but, as we’ll see, the NAR was a set of networks built around C. Peter Wagner and his cohort of disciples. She did not, as far as I can find, even know Peter Wagner. White seems to be getting her own understanding of fivefold ministry and “the apostolic” through Duncan-Williams, whose intellectual lineage does trace back to some Latter Rain groups. He is part of the broader global Apostolic and Prophetic movement but is not directly tied to Wagner’s NAR groups.⁴⁷

Since at least 2012, through this Ghanaian apostle, Paula White has added “apostolic leader” to her brand. It was Archbishop Duncan-Williams who presided over Paula White’s third marriage in 2014, this time to the keyboardist from the famed rock band Journey, Jonathan Cain. In 2019, Paula White would announce that she was renaming New Destiny Christian Center as City of Destiny church and that she was handing off pastoral leadership to her son, Brad Knight, so that she could serve as the church’s “apostolic overseer” while also focusing on planting new churches.⁴⁸ This latest charismatic-apostolic rebranding of Paula White occurred just a few months before she officially became a White House employee.

Donald Trump and the Independent Charismatics

How did Donald Trump, a thrice-married, notoriously reprobate, real-estate tycoon and television personality win over millions of evangelical voters and gain their undying loyalty in the 2016 election and since? There are many ways to answer this question, but my argument in this book is that it had everything to do with Paula White and her Independent Charismatic celebrity class. I asked Stephen Strang—who, as founder and CEO of Charisma Media, which publishes *Charisma News* and *Charisma* magazine, is the headmost media mogul of the Independent Charismatic world in the United States—“Why do you think there has been so much alignment between Donald Trump and charismatic evangelicalism?” His response: “I can say it in just one word, or, I should say, one name: Paula White.”⁴⁹

Not widely known is the fact that Donald Trump had flirted with the idea of running for president in the 2012 election cycle. According to White, Trump reached out to her in 2011, asking her to gather some Christian leaders to advise him and pray over whether he should run. So Paula convened a group of about thirty pastors and televangelists to meet with and intercede about Trump's presidential ambitions. As she tells it, she wound up advising Trump against running that cycle, and he ultimately agreed.⁵⁰ Ralph Reed, a leader of the religious right who was also discussing the run with Trump at the time, has an alternate theory about this decision-making process, noting that NBC "threw an unbelievable sum of money at him" to do another season of *The Apprentice* and that Trump simply couldn't refuse.⁵¹

By the time the 2016 campaign season rolled around, Trump was unequivocally running, and White writes that he asked her to "be in charge of reaching out to the evangelicals."⁵² She agreed, but there was a hitch. The superstructure of the religious right in the United States, since the 1980s, was predominantly built by first- and second-quadrant evangelicals: denominational leaders, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, institutional players, networked activists, and those in similar circles. But that was not the Pentecostal-charismatic crowd that Paula White ran with. As Strang, who lives in Florida and who has known Randy and Paula White since the 1990s and tracked their ministry for decades, detailed for me, "Paula's a wonderful person, but she does not move in evangelical [as in first- and second-quadrant evangelical] circles. . . . In fact, the evangelicals don't like her because she preaches like a house on fire, and she's not dignified . . . and a lot of them don't believe in lady preachers."⁵³

Instead of trying to cultivate the old guard of the religious right, Paula White reached out to the people she knew and began arranging meet-and-greets for different groups of Independent Charismatic leaders and Trump. Whether this strategy—reaching evangelicals through cultivating Independent Charismatic celebrities—was a stroke of genius on Trump's part or simply something he stumbled on accidentally, it worked.

These initial Christian leaders to meet with Donald Trump in 2015 were not your typical neighborhood-church pastors or religious right VIPs. No, it was televangelists, apostles, prophets, megachurch pastors, Messianic rabbis, faith healers, and prosperity gospel preachers—the entrepreneurs of the Independent Charismatic celebrity class—who got in on the ground floor of the Trump movement. This would eventually engender a revolution in the configuration of power in the leadership of the religious right.

Paula White was becoming Trump's evangelical translator and chaperone, briefing him before these gatherings about each of the people who would be there. These meetings are the genesis of a whole genre of photos: groups of religious leaders praying over or blessing Trump. And given that these were not the stoic and staid evangelical leaders of old, things sometimes got raucous, with prophets prophesying over

Trump and Word of Faith pastors naming and claiming blessings on his behalf. These charismatic religious leaders would even sometimes, as they were accustomed to doing in their churches, lay hands on the famously germophobic Trump, inadvertently proving just how far he would go to curry their favor.

Early in the 2016 campaign, most respectable evangelical leaders would not have wanted to lay hands on Donald Trump with a ten-foot pole. What these mainstream evangelical leaders were slow to realize at the time was that rank-and-file evangelicals loved Trump. From the summer of 2015 to the end of the primary, Trump was consistently winning a plurality of evangelical support, even if it was frequently a very small plurality. Members of the respectable evangelical class from the first and second quadrants were endorsing Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, Mike Huckabee, Mike Pence, or Ben Carson throughout the primary. But the Independent Charismatic leaders, led in no small part, as we shall see, by NAR networks, became the vanguard of Christian Trumpism.

As these dynamics became clear—elite evangelical derision, grassroots evangelical fervor—Trump started getting more and more faith-related questions from reporters. He made several high-profile faux pas—telling a group that he’d never asked God for forgiveness, pronouncing Second Corinthians “Two Corinthians.” Paula White, seeing these gaffes pile up, decided to intervene. She and Mike Huckabee sat down with Trump, and she said, “Sir, I suggest you make a decision whether you go public with your faith or whether you keep it very private and hold it close to your chest.”⁵⁴ She told him that these theological zingers would keep coming as long as he was willing to take public questions on his religious identity. So Trump opted, on White’s recommendation, to be candid about faith in private, with small groups of leaders, but to publicly offer only vague platitudes. This meant that Paula White became Trump’s spokesperson on matters of faith. She became the one to vouch for his sincerity and piety, and she became the gatekeeper for religious leaders wanting access to him. This had the added benefit of making Trump’s personal spirituality a Rorschach test, of sorts, which different Christian audiences could interpret variously.

Over the course of the Republican primary, as Trump’s rivals dropped out one by one and as his evangelical base remained unwavering, the old-guard leaders of the religious right slowly realized that Trump was going to be the nominee—and also that they had no relationship with him. Soon, as Strang puts it, “these evangelical hot shots”—most of whom had scoffed at the brash real-estate tycoon and his prosperity-gospel-touting female pastor—“had to go hat in hand to this thin little blonde lady who looks more like a fashion model than she does a preacher.”⁵⁵

In a turn that no one could have predicted even two years earlier, Paula White and her coterie of televangelists, prophets, and charismatic megachurch pastors were suddenly *the* Christian face of the Republican presidential ticket. Many have asserted that Donald Trump selected Mike Pence as his

running mate to “win over” or “secure” the evangelical vote. But I would argue that Pence’s elevation to the ticket in 2016 had much more to do with smoothing things over with the noncharismatic evangelical elite. Trump had already locked down the support of the evangelical multitudes.

We see this tension reflected among the people selected as Trump’s formal, and sometimes informal, circle of evangelical advisers. Relatively few of those people are first- or second-quadrant evangelicals, and the lion’s share are fourth-quadrant charismatics. There are various lists of these evangelical advisers from the 2016 campaign, the Trump administration, and the 2020 campaign; the group seemed to have a strong core with a more fungible periphery. Some of the people on these lists are exactly who longtime watchers of the religious right would expect: James Dobson, Ralph Reed, Franklin Graham—the usual suspects. But on all the lists I can find, Independent Charismatics make up at least half of the group, with Paula White serving as the chair and convener. There are also people on the list who might fit squarely in the first quadrant (denominational and noncharismatic), like Robert Jeffress, the well-known pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas. Their access to that cohort seemed to originate in the fact that they also had shows on televangelism networks, making them part of White’s social—if not theological—circle. The Trump campaign also, evidently, utilized the ethnic diversity of the fourth quadrant as nearly all the Christian leaders of color who were advising Trump were Independent Charismatic leaders.

In her public remarks about advising Trump, leading his evangelical advisers team, and brokering smaller-group gatherings of religious leaders with him, White returns again and again to the image of being a bridge builder. In September 2017, she would tell a room of religion journalists, when asked about her role as Trump’s spiritual adviser, “I say I’m a construction worker . . . it is building bridges. It is putting people around him, putting those men and women of God, which so far has totaled more than 400 men and women of God.”⁵⁶ But the most important bridge that White built from 2015 to 2020 was a bridge between the previously isolated and irrelevant Independent Charismatic celebrity class and the leadership echelon of the religious right.

Along the way, Paula White has accomplished a number of notable firsts. In 2016, she became the first woman to offer a benediction at the Republican National Convention:

We believe in faith that it’s time for darkness to be dispelled.

It’s time for this nation to live out its holy calling in the world,

And it is time for us to bridge the divide and become one again.

We believe in faith that it is time for us to become the light that this world so desperately needs.

She also became the first female clergy member to pray at a presidential inauguration:

Let your favor be upon this one nation under God. Let these United States of America be that beacon of hope to all people and nations under Your dominion, a true hope for humankind.⁵⁸

She even managed to finagle having her spiritual father from Ghana, Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams, pray at the private church service for Trump and Pence before the inauguration. He was, as far as I can find, the first African religious leader to do so.

A Televangelist in the White House

Through Paula White's closeness to Trump, her vast network of relationships among charismatic evangelicals, and her willingness to insert herself into Trump's—at the time preposterous—presidential campaign, Independent Charismatics moved from the margin to the center of right-wing Christian politics in America. The fringe became the carpet.

And toward the end of the Trump administration, Paula White—the “messed-up Mississippi girl” turned televangelist who hitched her wagon to Donald Trump's political ambitions—fully moved inside the administration. After years of informally advising Trump and convening and chairing his circle of evangelical advisers, sometimes as the only female religious leader in the room, she found, in 2019, her path finally cleared to take on an official role as a White House staffer in the Office of Public Liaison, running the administration's Faith and Opportunities Initiative. Having segued into more of an apostolic role a few months earlier, she was ready to lay aside her speaking, talk-show facilitating, and pastoring to focus on advancing Trump's agenda.

A few days after White assumed this new role, while the news was still fresh that a charismatic televangelist had joined the White House staff, I helped to gather a group of Jewish and Christian Baltimore clergy and congregational leaders on the completely unrelated question of congregational security. This was in the wake of a growing number of shootings at synagogues and churches, and we thought it important for pastors, priests, and rabbis to think collaboratively about issues of congregational safety during a rising tide of violence and attacks.

A friend and colleague of mine, a Black Independent Charismatic bishop who leads a network of congregations, attended the event, and his response to the safety prompt took me aback: “Our Black

congregations don't worry too much about violence and attacks. We're Black people in Baltimore: we live with the threat of violence every day. What really worries people in my congregation right now is Paula White."

I wasn't sure what he meant, so I asked him to elaborate. "The people I minister to have spent years and years watching Paula White, following her ministry, and learning from her," he told me. "Now she took this White House job, working for that man, and my people are in a genuine crisis of faith. I have congregation members in tears telling me, 'I thought Paula was filled with the Spirit of God, but if she can go and serve Trump, I don't know what it means to be filled with the Spirit of God.'" As far as I can tell, these small pockets of predominantly Black Independent Charismatic communities have been the only significant chunk of the fourth quadrant that's resisted Christian Trumpism.

But Paula White was, in many ways, *not* the first televangelist to get a job in the White House. The first, I would argue, was Donald Trump himself, who had entered the White House two years earlier. In the picture that Paula White paints, Trump has long been an assiduous student of TV preaching, particularly what's propagated by prosperity preachers and positive thinkers. With his oddly coiffed hair, his formative Norman Vincent Peale theology, his salesmanship, his bombastic oratory, and his unflinching personal schtick forged out of years of celebrity and television savvy, Trump has pantomimed the televangelists. His celebrity could easily mingle with Paula White's clique of entrepreneurial charismatic celebrities because Trump's whole brand is made of similar material. For what is "Make America Great Again" if not a gospel? It's a nationalistic prosperity gospel, to be sure, mixed with a few "American carnage" fire-and-brimstone threats if Trump's ways are not followed. Coached by Paula White, Trump has now mastered the religious dimension of his own televangelism career, riding evangelical support all the way to the White House.

There was only one official White House-sanctioned prayer offered on the morning of January 6, 2021. It was led by Paula White. On that cold January morning, before Donald Trump's speech at the Ellipse telling the lusty crowds to "fight like hell," before Rudy Giuliani shouted for "trial by combat," and before the crowds began marching across the National Mall to threaten lawmakers into reneging on American democracy, an invocation from Paula White opened the event.

Let us pray, because God is going to be in today. We believe in miracles. . . .

So let every adversary against democracy, against freedom, against life, against liberty, against justice, against peace, against righteousness be overturned right now in the name of Jesus . . .

God, we ask right now in conclusion for your provision, for your protection, for your power, for an outpouring of your Spirit like never before. I secure POTUS [President of the United

States]. I thank you for President Trump. I thank you that he has stood with Israel; he has stood with life; he has stood for righteousness. . . .

He has walked in your ways. And as you have allowed me to have a relationship with him and his family for twenty years, right now, as his pastor, I put a hedge of protection around him. I secure his purpose. I secure his destiny. I secure his life.⁵⁹

This tenacious, talented, tragic, triumphant woman—someone who has broken every glass ceiling she came up against—became the first pastor to offer an official blessing over an attempted American insurrection.

It's true that Paula White has built bridges. She built a bridge that allowed her fellow Independent Charismatics to enthusiastically join the inner circle of power within the religious right. She built a bridge across a major divide in American evangelicalism between charismatics and noncharismatics. And she built a bridge between the Independent Charismatic celebrity class and the White House.

These bridges proved strong enough that the leaders of the NAR, and other ambitious charismatic leaders and networks, could link arms with other Christians and Trump advisers in an attempt to overthrow our democracy, all under the banner of Christian unity and revival hope. So it's time that we meet one of the most pivotal leaders in constructing modern fourth-quadrant Christianity, the renegade seminary professor who became an apostle: C. Peter Wagner.