Russell Moore urges evangelicals to stop lying and come back to Jesus

July 25, 2023

(RNS)—Russell Moore has a bit of advice for his fellow American Christians in his new book, *Losing Our Religion*.

Don't lie.

A simple principle, based on the Ninth Commandment's ban on bearing false witness, and one many Christian leaders are tempted to break by repeating claims that are popular but untrue, argues Moore.

"I'm not really talking to the people who are intending to deceive and destroy—yes, I would hope they stop lying too," said Moore in a recent interview about the new book. "I'm talking more about the disconnect between what people really believe and what the expectations of the tribe demand. And that is what I see to be so dangerous and exhausting to people."

Following Moore's advice could come with consequences. The former Southern Baptist ethicist was a rising star in 2013, when he was elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission after the group's former leader left amid scandal.

Moore was known for his love of 1970s outlaw country stars Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, his advocacy for immigration reform and his skepticism about the close ties between the Republican party and evangelicals.

Things went well until the rise of Donald Trump, which turned evangelical leaders into would-be contestants on a real-life version of "The Apprentice"—Trump's reality television series—"all clamoring to make the cut on the next episode and fearful of hearing the words *you're fired*," he writes in *Losing Our Religion*.

Moore's criticism of Trump as a candidate and as president, along with his advocacy for survivors of abuse in the SBC, made him enemies and eventually cost him his job. In 2021, he resigned from the ERLC to take a new role at Christianity Today, where he is now the editor-in-chief.

Inspiration for new book

His new book was inspired by conversations Moore has had in recent years with disillusioned evangelicals, some of whom he said are feeling a sense of despair at the state of the church and American culture. The book is part altar call for his fellow evangelicals and part retelling of the surprising lessons he's learned in recent years.

The book recounts Moore's struggles to reconcile what he believed with how he saw Christian leaders acting during the Trump era. He recalls a Baptist leader who told him he was playing the game of leadership wrong.

That leader suggested Moore give people "90 percent of the red meat they expect"—referring to conservative politics and the culture wars—and then he could spend 10 percent of his time on things he cared about, like immigration.

He also recalled being told to "get real"—meaning he should give up on naive ideals like telling the truth or acting with personal integrity, because the cultural and political stakes were too high for such niceties.

"People who have higher expectations for themselves and for others are

often made to feel naive and stupid," he said.

That willingness to do anything to succeed in politics, he writes, was rooted in the way churches treated celebrity pastors and leaders. As long as they got the job done, those celebrities could be terrible people and Christians would shrug it off.

That habit of overlooking the character flaws of Christian celebrities—such as disgraced former megachurch pastors Bill Hybels and Mark Driscoll or abusers like the late evangelist Ravi Zacharias—made it easier for evangelicals to overlook Trump's flaws, Moore said in an interview.

Downstream consequences

The way being a star pastor means you can get away with anything meant it was easier for Christians to accept unethical politicians.

"There's always this sense of the mission is too important to be worried about character," he said.

Moore said he often knew something was wrong in Southern Baptist and evangelical circles but talked himself out of saying anything—because everyone else seemed to be acting as if everything was OK.

He recalled teaching about a famed meeting between SBC legends Paige Patterson and Judge Paul Pressler at the Cafe Du Monde in New Orleans that helped launch a conservative takeover of the nation's largest Protestant denomination, as if it were the SBC equivalent of Martin Luther nailing his 95 Theses to the Wittenberg door.

That mythology didn't match the "Machiavellian lack of character" he saw among SBC leaders. Still, he said, it was as if there were things he was not allowed to notice or to say anything about. He realizes now he should have trusted his instincts.

“When I look back over my life and ministry, there were countless times where my mind was wrong,” he said. “And there were a lot of times when my heart was wrong—but very few times where my gut was wrong.”

Many Christian leaders stay silent—or make claims they know are not true—out of fear, Moore argues in the book. Pastors who go along with the crowd get to keep their job. Those who step out of line are punished. And all it takes is a few angry donors or church members to make a pastor’s or leader’s life miserable.

He predicts many pastors in the future will have day jobs or side hustles to protect themselves—rather than because the church can’t afford to pay them a salary.

“Pastors are increasingly not wanting to put their entire lives under the threat of one small group of people within a congregation,” he said.

Friends and lessons

Despite his concerns about the state of the church, Moore is hopeful. During his challenges, he’s made a number of new friends among people he used to view as “theological squishes”—people too willing to compromise on doctrine or theological lightweights.

Among his dearest friends is bestselling author Beth Moore (no relation), herself now a former Southern Baptist, who helped him keep the faith at some of his worst moments.

He said he was grateful for these new friends and for the way people stuck by him in unexpected ways.

He is also surprisingly hopeful about the future of the Christian church in America. In the interview, Moore recalled spending time teaching a semester at the University of Chicago, where he’d spent his days in the

classroom and his evenings talking with groups of evangelical students. They often would ask practical questions about how to pray or how to relate to their fellow students in a secular setting.

Those students, he said, were serious about living out their faith.

“I would tell them, ‘I don’t think your classmates hate you as much as you think they do,’” he said. “‘And if you would just have a little more confidence, then you actually could engage them.’”

These days, Moore gets hope from younger Christians, his friends, his faith and the lessons of Willie Nelson. In the book, Moore tells the stories of Nelson’s early struggles to break into country music, only to fail because he was trying to be someone he wasn’t.

Nelson left Nashville, traded country music’s marketing and rhinestone cowboys for bandanas and a more authentic sound, and found an audience, along with fellow outsiders like Jennings.

There’s a lesson in that for Christians, he said.

“Often there will be a small group of people who look like dissenters and rebels but who actually love and care about their institution or their tradition,” he said. “But it means there’s going to be change.”