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Men Don't Retreat: Freedom and Sovereignty in Christian Rhetoric

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Prominent Texas pastor Jonathan "JP" Pokluda conflates freedom and sovereignty in his pastoral advice, positioning freedom as that which comes after victory. Rather than retreat and find oneself pinned down, trapped, isolated, and annihilated, this masculine rhetoric promises that with victory, one is "free" to live as one wants. Analyzing the consequences of imagining freedom as being sovereign over a large terrain won through battle, this essay makes three contributions to the scholarship on Christian appeals to freedom. First, we demonstrate how these appeals to freedom reassert hierarchies of exclusion and control. Second, synthesizing across the literature on Christian appeals to freedom, we identify and articulate three topoi within this discourse: (1) a battle between good and evil; (2) an emphasis on God as having created and therefore defined or determined beings' true natures; and (3) a central concern with gender roles. Finally, we demonstrate how the metaphors, equivocations, symbolism and tone within Christian appeals to freedom—even, or perhaps especially in their banal form as pastoral advice—invite believers into a worldview in which (white) Christian men are the rightful or natural rulers of the United States.

Keywords: Evangelical, Freedom, Gender, Masculinity, Sovereignty

While teaching at a small Christian liberal arts college, a student told me (Sarah) that he was going to miss class while visiting his home church in Texas for a "men's advance." Chuckling a little sheepishly, he explained, "Men don't retreat in Texas." He was going on a men's retreat, but his church was calling it a men's advance. While anecdotal and idiosyncratic, this story brings the intertwining of Christianity, masculinity, and Texan regionalism into sharp relief. Men don't retreat in Texas—not even the Christian ones. Yet this church's rhetoric echoes a much larger chord in U.S. culture: to be a man and a Christian is to advance the gospel, your family, and your way of life against the ramparts of mainstream culture.

To be clear from the outset, both authors are feminist Christians. Raised in the bosom of U.S. evangelicalism, we attended Sunday school, church youth groups, summer camps, Bible studies, and Christian colleges. Indeed, we began writing and researching together when Sage was a student and Sarah was a faculty member at Hope College. We also both spent formative years in Texas. Sage lived in Texas during the Covid-19 pandemic and Sarah spent her (homeschooled) high school years in Dallas' northern suburbs and completed her MA at Texas A&M in College Station, TX. We are deeply familiar with the Texas subculture and what contemporary parlance

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deems "evangelical" Christianity—although our feminist commitments mean that we no longer fit very easily within what is contemporarily known as evangelicalism.

Which brings us to the difficulty of defining "evangelical." Historian David Bebbington defines evangelicalism by four doctrinal qualities (now known as the Bebbington quadrilateral) which include: (1) a particular regard for the Bible, (2) a focus on Christ's crucifixion as an atoning sacrifice, (3) a central focus on human repentance and conversion, and (4) an emphasis on preaching the gospel and evangelizing non-believers.[1] However, as historian Mark Noll notes, "evangelical is a slippery word" and many Americans who currently self-identify as evangelical cannot identify its historic doctrines; moreover, these doctrines often transcend the movement, uniting branches of Presbyterianism, Lutheranism, and Baptists.[2] As such, Putnam and Campbell attempted to chart "evangelicalism" not by doctrine but by "denominational and associational traditions."[3] Yet here again, the attempt flounders as some denominations (such as the Evangelical Presbyterian Church) claim the word "evangelical" but do not practice their faith in ways that align with other evangelicals—and many Black denominations fit Bebbington's definition but reject the term "evangelical."[4] Indeed, James H. Cone, Anthea D. Butler, and Robert P. Jones note that what is contemporarily known as evangelicalism in the United States has disturbing overlaps with the exclusions of white supremacy.[5]

As such, identifying contemporary evangelicalism as a *cultural movement* that emerged in the the 1970s and 1980s, Mark Noll and Lyman A. Kellstedt argue that evangelicalism is best defined by "beliefs and behaviors": they focus on regular church attendance.[6] In a similar vein, historian Kristin Du Mez includes regularly—even religiously—shopping at Christian bookstores and Hobby Lobby as defining behavior for evangelicalism.[7] Such behaviors are mingled with beliefs such as the divinity of Christ, the "urgent" need to spread the gospel, and the inerrancy of scripture.[8]

The focus in biblical inerrancy, however, routinely returns to gender and "family values." Here, Mark Ward Sr. clarifies that "family values" adhere to a patriarchal "gender ideology" that "flows" from contemporary evangelicals' "interpretation of biblical authority."[9] Known as Complementarian doctrine, this ideology became prominent in the 1970s and 1980s and views men as created

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[1] David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, UK: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

[2] Mark Noll, "Interview: Mark Noll," *PBS: Frontline*, December 10, 2003, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jesus/interviews/noll.html; see also Kristin Kobes Du Mez, "Hobby Lobby Evangelicalism," *Patheos.com*, September 6, 2018, https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2018/09/hobby-lobby-evangelicalism/.

[3] R.D. Putnam, and D. E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010); see also Mark Ward Sr., "Sermons as Social Interaction: Pulpit Speech, Power, and Gender," *Women & Language* 42, no. 2 (2019): 286.

[4] Noll, "Interview: Mark Noll."

[5] James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017); Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 3; Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

[6] Noll, "Interview: Mark Noll"; Lyman A. Kellstedt and Mark A. Noll, "Religion, Voting for President, and Party Identification, 1948-1984," in *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the 1980s*, edited by Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 368.

[7] Du Mez, "Hobby Lobby Evangelicalism"; Kristin K. Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020).

[8] Kellstedt and Noll, "Religion, Voting for President, and Party Identification, 1948-1984," 368.

[9] Ward, "Sermons as Social Interaction," 286.

for leadership and women as created for domesticity and submission—and women are explicitly forbidden from preaching to or teaching men.[10] Wrapped within this ideology are a number of other assumptions. Namely, that gender is rooted in biology, that there are only two biological sexes, that marriage and procreation are good, and that married, monogamous heterosexuality—the fusion of two "complementary" individuals—is the only appropriate practice of human sexuality.[11]

Defining contemporary U.S. evangelicalism is especially important because of the ways it overlaps with but is not subsumed by Christian Nationalism. As sociologists of religion Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry explain, Christian Nationalism is a framework that mobilizes people's fears of moral decline while suggesting that "Christian values should inform public policy."[12] Christian Nationalism is not a religion; some Christian Nationalists are evangelicals, others are atheists or anything in between.[13] Christian Nationalism advocates for Christian morality as U.S. governance, not evangelism. Or to put it another way, Christian Nationalism is about changing U.S. laws, not hearts and souls. However, as Christian Nationalism borrows from Christian morality, it draws heavily from the gender roles and "family values" enshrined in Complementarian doctrine. Moreover, as it articulates and amplifies the fears of moral decline, it often reinforces white supremacist exclusions.[14]

Within this context, we analyze Christian appeals to freedom in perhaps their most banal location: pastoral advice. Specifically, we study prominent Texas pastor Jonathan "JP" Pokluda's pastoral advice. Pokluda's ministry is centered in Texas churches affiliated with evangelicalism, but his influence is national.[15] Pokluda's pastoral advice emphasizes a confluence of evangelism, individualism, gender roles, and "right living."[16] Pokluda publishes book versions of his sermons through the Christian publishing house Baker Books.[17] Analyzing two of his recent books, *Outdated: Find Love that Lasts when Dating has Changed* (2021) and *Why Do I Do What I Don't Want to Do?* (2023; hereafter *Why*), we demonstrate how his appeals to freedom assert sovereignty, assuming all terrain belongs to Christian men.

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[10] Bethany Mannon, "XVangelical: The Rhetorical Work of Personal Narratives in Contemporary Religious Discourse," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (2018): 146; E. M. Cope, "Learning not to Preach: Evangelical Speaker Beth Moore and the Rhetoric of Constraint," in *Rhetoric, History, and Women's Oratorical Education: American Women Learn to Speak*, ed. D. gold and C.L. Hobbs (New York: Routledge, 2013), 220.

[11] Stephanie Coontz, "From Yoke Mates to Soul Mates: Emergence of the Love Match and the Male Provider Marriage," in *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (ed). Stephanie Coontz (New York: Viking, 2006), 145-160; Sage Mikkelsen and Sarah Kornfield, "Girls Gone Fundamentalist: Feminine Appeals of White Christian Nationalism," *Women's Studies in Communication* 44, no. 4 (2021): 563-585.

[12] Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), x; Kristina M. Lee, "'In God We Trust?': Christian Nationalists' Establishment and Use of Theistnormative Legislation," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 52, no. 5 (2022): 419.

[13] Lee, "In God We Trust?"

[14] See John Fea, *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018).

[15] Kellstedt and Noll, "Religion, Voting for President, and Party Identification, 1948-1984," 368; Jones, *White Too Long*; and Jonathan J. Edwards, *Superchurch: The Rhetoric and Politics of American Fundamentalism* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015).

[16] Jonathan Pokluda, *Outdated: Find Love that Lasts When Dating Has Changed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 2021); Jonathan Pokluda, *Why Do I Do What I Don't Want To Do? Replace Deadly Vices with Life-Giving Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2023).

[17] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 211.

In many ways, Pokluda's rhetoric repeats Christianity's longstanding appeals to freedom as "freedom-from."[18] For instance, by advancing the gospel, men are set free *from* sin, death, and inconsequence because—within evangelical frameworks—by advancing the gospel one lives a righteous life, which leads to life-everlasting and provides meaning by bringing others to Christ. Pokluda's rhetoric, however, also conflates freedom and sovereignty: freedom is that which comes after victory. Rather than retreat and find oneself pinned down, trapped, isolated, and annihilated, this masculine rhetoric promises that with victory, one is "free" to live "as we wish we would."[19] Freedom is being sovereign over a large terrain won through battle.

This essay makes three contributions to the scholarship on Christian appeals to freedom, religious liberty discourse, and evangelical studies. First, by contextualizing Christian appeals to freedom within an understanding of sovereignty and containment rhetoric we demonstrate how these appeals—which seemingly argue for freedom—reassert hierarchies of exclusion and control. In so doing, we advance the existing understanding of Christian appeals to freedom by demonstrating how they borrow from and contribute to the rhetoric of Christian Nationalism.

Second, synthesizing across the literature on Christian appeals to freedom, we identify three *topoi*: (1) a battle between good and evil; (2) an emphasis on God as having created and therefore defined or determined beings' true natures; and (3) a central concern with gender roles. Identifying these rhetorical trends within Christians' appeals to freedom, we advance this scholarship by providing a framework for others to utilize as they assess Christian appeals to freedom and arguments on behalf of religious liberty in contemporary discourse.

Finally, by analyzing Pokluda's pastoral advice, we demonstrate how Christian appeals to freedom—even, or perhaps especially in their banal form as pastoral advice—equate freedom and sovereignty. Here, we provide a nuanced, detailed analysis of Pokluda's popular books, advancing the rhetorical scholarship on Christian appeals to freedom by detailing how this rhetoric's metaphors, equivocations, symbolism, and tone invite readers into a worldview in which (white) Christian men are the rightful or natural rulers of the United States.

Freedom, Sovereignty, Resistance Theology, and Containment Rhetoric

Sovereignty, as Stephen J. Hartnett and Bryan R. Reckard explain, has to do with how "nation-states create borders, organize space, and wield power over particular areas."[20] Borders symbolize a state's sovereign claim over a "territorial entity."[21] As such, sovereignty pertains to space or terrain. In democratic nation-states, however, "the people" retain their freedom; they consent to governance and hold their elected officials accountable. At least in theory, then, "the people" are free and sovereign.[22] As such, who constitutes "the people" becomes a matter of utmost importance. Surveying U.S. governance, social contract theorists such as Carole Pateman and Charles

[18] See Casey Ryan Kelly, "Chastity for Democracy: Surplus Repression and the Rhetoric of Sex Education," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 102, no. 4 (2016): 353-375.
[19] Jonathan Pokluda and Jon Green, "Why Do I Do What I Don't Want to Do?" *Baker Publishing Group*, 2022, http://bakerpublishinggroup.com/books/why-do-i-do-what-i-don-t-want-to-do/400271.
[20] Stephen J. Hartnett and Bryan R. Reckard, "Sovereign Tropes: A Rhetorical Critique of Contested Claims in the South China Sea," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 20, no. 2 (2017): 295; see also Anne Demo, "Sovereignty Discourse and Contemporary Immigration Politics," *Quarterly journal of Speech* 91, no. 3 (2005): 295.
[21] Demo, "Sovereignty Discourse," 295.
[22] Paul Elliot Johnson, *I The People: The Rhetoric of Conservative Populism in the United States* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2022).

W. Mills clearly demonstrate that U.S. sovereignty was built by and for propertied white men.[23] They constituted the original "the people" and others did not. Since the founding era, a wide variety of Constitutional Amendments and legislation have reshaped the contours of "the people," rendering appeals to freedom and sovereignty especially pertinent as they shape what it means to be a person or citizen in the United States.

Here, we draw on Phil Wander's conceptualization of the Third Persona and the theory of containment in order to better explicate the rhetoric through which freedom and sovereignty commingle.[24] In every rhetorical act, there is a First Persona. This is how rhetors present themselves. Edwin Black further theorized that every discourse has a Second Persona: this is who the rhetor wants the audience to become.[25] The Second Persona is identified by ideology. Rhetorical discourses invite audiences into a confluence of beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions. If audience members accept the invitation, they adopt that bundle of beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions—or worldview—becoming the Second Persona. For example, following Ernest Bormann, Michael McGee theorized "the people" as a sort of "dramatic vision" dangled in front of the audience, calling them into a "collective fantasy" and offering them the "desire to participate in that dramatic vision," thus becoming "the people" as described in phrases such as "We the people" in the Preamble of the Constitution.[26] Finally, Wander identified the Third Persona as the negated or silenced "other" lurking within a rhetorical discourse. The Third Persona is who the speaker does *not* want the audience to become. The Third Persona is rarely spelled out in detail. Instead, rhetors tend to imply, suggest, dance around, degenerate, or gloss over the Third Persona. Again, they are marked by the *silences* in a rhetorical discourse.

Containment theory builds on these conceptualizations, recognizing the ways in which rhetorical discourses juxtapose the Second and Third Personae, creating us-other binaries that contain the "others," typically denying them access to personhood and power.[27] By conceptualizing "others" as "not-us," rhetoric situates "others" as not as good, useful, meaningful, or real as "we" are—situates "others" as less than "We the people." For example, the U.S. Constitution establishes both sovereignty and freedom for "We the people." It mentions enslaved Black people only once, glossing over their existence in the phrase "all other Persons" even as that clause denies Black people representation, allocating representation instead at a 3/5ths allotment to their enslavers. Here, enslaved Black people are clearly not "We the people" but rather "others." They were not free and not sovereign. Since freedom and sovereignty are linked in the U.S. context, appeals to freedom are also appeals to sovereignty: rights and liberty are linked. When a discourse asserts "our" rights

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[23] Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988); Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Charles W. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press); Carole Pateman and Charles W. Mills, *Contract and Domination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

[24] Philip Wander, "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory," *Central States Speech Journal* 35, no. 4 (1984): 197-216.

[25] Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 2 (1970): 109-119.

[26] Michael C. McGee, "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61, no. 3 (1975): 239-240.

[27] Kristan Poirot, "Domesticating the Liberated Woman: Containment Rhetorics of Second Wave Radical/Lesbian Feminism," *Women's Studies in Communication* 32, no. 3 (2009): 266; see also Karrin Vasby Anderson, "'Rhymes with Rich': Bitch as a Tool of Containment in Contemporary American Politics," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 2, no. 4 (1999): 599-623; Flores, "Introduction: Of Gendered/Racial Boundaries and Borders," 317; Lisa A. Flores and Logan Rae Gomez, "Disciplinary Containment: Whiteness and the Academic Scarcity Narrative," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2 (2020): 237; Lisa A. Flores and Mary Ann Villarreal, "Unmasking 'Ignorance,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 106, no. 3 (2020): 312.

and liberty it is worth considering the negated Third Persona—the "not-us" whose rights and liberty are being constrained and denied.

In the United States, politicians and pastors have long used Christian appeals to freedom to establish sovereignty. As legal scholar Daniel Dresbach explains, Protestantism—with its vernacular scriptures and priesthood of all believers—has a "liberating" impulse, but the early Protestant reformers such as Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564) had very little to do with political theory.[28] When they did, these "Reformation patriarchs" taught that Christians should obey even oppressive civil authorities.[29] Sweeping across Europe during the sixteen and seventeen hundreds, however, Protestantism merged with secular political movements and theories, developing a strand of Resistance Theology wherein ministers such as Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) argued that "tyranny is satanic."[30] Far from obeying civil leaders, Resistance Theology appeals to freedom, arguing that to "resist tyranny is to honor God."[31] This nearly heretical notion was in full effect during the U.S. founding era, rallying revolutionaries under the motto "rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."[32]

Indeed, capitalizing on incidents such as the Stamp Act crisis and the so-called Bloody Massacre in which British soldiers killed five people in Boston, revolutionists painted "British rule as oppressive and even tyrannical."[33] Even deistic and agnostic revolutionary leaders drew on Resistance Theology to embed secularized versions of Resistance Theology into state constitutions and the Declaration of Independence—which maintains that men have the right and duty "to throw off" despotic governance.[34] Broadly speaking, then, Protestantism and Resistance Theology merged with conceptualizations of freedom and sovereignty during the founding era. Indeed, early U.S. citizens adopted the heavenly prophecy of a New Jerusalem from Micah 4:4 in which "every man" shall sit "under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid" as a metaphor for freedom.[35] For instance, this was one of George Washington's most regularly quoted verses and he used it to describe his plantation, Mount Vernon—where he enslaved over five hundred Black people—fusing a Christianized sense of freedom to an explicitly place-based, patriarchal and white supremacist experience of sovereignty.[36]

Recurring Topoi in Contemporary Christian Appeals to Freedom

The history of Resistance Theology and U.S. founding-era politics sets the stage, clarifying the intertwined relationship among Christianity, freedom, and U.S. sovereignty that ultimately informs contemporary Christian appeals to freedom. Synthesizing across the scholarship on Christian appeals to freedom, we identify three clear topoi: (1) a battle of good versus evil; (2) God as creator

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[28] Daniel L. Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 27-28,
[29] Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible*, 113.
[30] Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible*, 125.
[31] Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible*, 125.
[32] Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible*, 125-126.
[33] Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible*, 128.
[34] Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible*, 130-131.
[35] Micah 4:4, KJV; Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible*, 211.
[36] Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible*, 211-212; for a discussion of the founders as "plantation patriarchs," see Lorri Glover, *The Founders as Fathers: The Private Lives and Politics of the American Revolutionaries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).

and "definer" of all things; and (3) patriarchal gender roles.[37] Topoi are theorized by Aristotle as "places" to go when looking for an argument.[38] Together, these topoi form a pool of resources, arguments, metaphors, symbolism, and equivocations from which contemporary Christians launch appeals to freedom.

First, Christian speakers, pastors, and political agents appeal to freedom by imagining a cosmic battle of good and evil. In many ways, this rhetoric is Manichean—imagining a deadly either/or moral reality and interpreting "cultural, political, economic, and social" factors along this simplistic duality and as a duel between good and evil.[39] To achieve freedom, good must triumph over evil; this positions freedom on the other side of victory. The battle, however, originates as evil attacks Christians. As Cherian George notes, this framing positions Christian "culture wars" rhetoric and politics as self-defense.[40]

Analyzing this "self-defense" rhetoric, Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini note that Christians identify as oppressed minorities who nonetheless safeguard U.S. religious freedom.[41] Even as this rhetoric positions Christians as an embattled minority, it still calls Christians to "advance" the gospel (and Christian morality) against mainstream culture. The premise here, is that with God on their side—even as an underdog—Christians cannot lose the war.[42] For instance, in his analysis of megachurches, Jonathan Edwards writes that evangelical expressions of Christianity are "largely defined by narratives of confrontation with and marginalization within the larger social landscape."[43] Using "underdog" rhetoric, Christian speakers, pastors, and political agents promise freedom if their audience, congregants, or constituents persevere in battle. This rhetoric addresses contemporary concerns while maintaining the heart of Resistance Theology: tyranny is satanic. By imagining legislative acts of state as tyrannical and satanic, this rhetoric reframes civil governance as an attack on religious liberty and ultimately part of a cosmic battle in which Christians are victims—yet assured victory.

The second trend within contemporary Christian appeals to freedom is to identify God as creator and thereby attribute to God the right to define how things should be. This topoi imagines that

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[37] James W. Vining, "Resisting the New Legal Orthodoxy: 'Religious Freedom' as Battle Cry in Religious Right Culture War Rhetoric," *Ohio Communication Journal* 58 (2020): 105-119; Shane M. Graber, "The Bathroom Boogeyman: A Qualitative Analysis of how the *Houston Chronicle* Framed the Equal Rights Ordinance," *Journalism Practice* 12, no. 7 (2018): 870-887; Calvin R. Coker, "From Exemptions to Censorship: Religious Liberty and Victimhood in *Obergefell v. Hodges*," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 35-52; Riva Brown, Hazel James Cole, and Melody Fisher, "Race and Anti-LGBT Legislation: An Analysis of 'Religion Freedom' Coverage in Mississippi and National Newspapers," *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 11 (2018): 1579-1596; Matthew T. Althouse, "Reading the Baptist Schism of 2000: Kierkegaardian Hermeneutics and Religious Freedom," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 18 (2010): 117-193; Janet R. Jakobsen, and Ann Pellegrini, "Obama's Neo-New Deal: Religion, Secularism, and Sex in Political Debates," *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (2009): 1227-1254; Cherian George, "Hate Spin: The Twin Political Strategies of Religious Incitement and Offense-Taking," *Communication Theory* 27 (2017): 156-175.

[38] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2009) 2.23; see also James Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction*, 6th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 96-97.

[39] Reingard Nethersole, "Un-Speaking Manichaeism," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 55, no. 1 (2022): 20.

[40] George, "Hate Spin," 158.

[41] Jakobsen and Pellegrini, "Obama's Neo-New Deal," 1239.

[42] Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Christine Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 24.

[43] Edwards, *Superchurch*, 79.

God created everything and has "best use" policies and prescriptions for everything.[44] For example, as James Vining demonstrated, Christian appeals to freedom—such as Rev. Mark Creech's speech arguing against legalizing same-sex marriage in North Carolina—clearly and plainly stipulate how God defines things. Stating, "I believe God defines marriage" as the union of one man and one woman, and repeatedly lambasting liberal politicians as "evil" for attempting to "redefine marriage," Creech locates "ultimate authority" in a definition he attributes to God. Within this framework, freedom is re-imagined as living in accordance with God's definitions or intentions, so that one gets the best or most use out of life.[45]

Within this rhetoric, freedom is characterized by personal responsibility. Freedom is not defined as personal preference, living however you want, or anything goes. Instead, freedom is a meticulously curated lifestyle of responsibility. For instance, describing U.S. Baptist traditions, Matthew T. Althouse explains how early Baptists described congregants as "regenerate persons" who "freely" choose Christianity and who accept "*responsibility* for their own souls' welfare."[46] Here, "individual liberty" is defined in ways that depend on the Bible as interpreted and taught by Christian leaders—transforming "freedom" into social "responsibility."[47] Again, this echoes the founding era's Protestantism: believers are held responsible—to a community governed by white patriarchs—for their own souls and devotion. As described in Christian leaders' rhetoric on religious freedom, then, freedom entails a *right* way to live.

Finally, synthesizing across the scholarship on Christian appeals to freedom, we found patriarchal gender roles constituted an especially pronounced topoi. Gender and sexuality are key sites through which Christian political groups renegotiate the relationship between Christianity and U.S. public life.[48] Contemporary Christian speakers, pastors, and politicians appeal to freedom when they argue against same-sex marriage[49] and other LGBTQ+ rights (such as public bathroom and sports policies),[50] when they work to curtail women's roles in the church,[51] and when they recommend girls and women abstain from premarital sex.[52] Throughout history and still today, Christian doctrines and practices regarding women (and sexism) vary widely by denomination;[53] studying the rise of the Religious Right, however, Jonathan Edwards demonstrates that evangelical leaders' rhetoric on religious liberty foregrounds patriarchal gender roles as divine design.[54] Put simply, within this rhetoric, for men to be "free" women must be in need of masculine protection, destined for motherhood, and innately submissive.[55]

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[44] Mikkelsen and Kornfield, "Girls Gone Fundamentalist."
[45] Vining, "Resisting the New Legal Orthodoxy," 107-108.
[46] Althouse, "Reading the Baptist Schism of 2000," 178; N.T. Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 19.
[47] Althouse, "Reading the Baptist Schism of 2000," 181.
[48] Jakobson & Pellegrini, "Obama's Neo-New Deal," 1229-1230.
[49] See Vining, "Resisting the New Legal Orthodoxy"; Graber, "The Bathroom Boogeyman"; Jakobsen and Pellegrini, "Obama's Neo-New Deal."
[50] See Coker, "From Exemptions to Censorship"; Graber, "The Bathroom Boogeyman"; Brown, Cole, and Fisher, "Race and Anti-LGBT Legislation."
[51] See Althouse, "Reading the Baptist Schism of 2000."
[52] Mikkelsen and Kornfield, "Girls Gone Fundamentalist," 575.
[53] Lindsay Hayes and Sarah Kornfield, "Prophesying a Feminist Story: Sarah Bessey and the Evangelical Pulpit," *Journal of Communication & Religion* 43, no. 2 (2020): 37-38.
[54] Jonathan Edwards, "Democracy's End: Far-Right Fundamentalism and the Rhetoric of R.J. Rushdoony," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 54, no. 4: 351-365.
[55] See Graber, "The Bathroom Boogeyman"; Vining, "Resisting the New Legal Orthodoxy"; Jakobsen and Pellegrini, "Obama's Neo-New Deal"; Althouse, "Reading the Baptist Schism of 2000"; and Mikkelsen and Kornfield, "Girls Gone Fundamentalist."

Ultimately, these three topoi strategically overlap in Christians' appeals to freedom: in the cosmic war between good and evil, God's people battle by living "God-defined" lives, which are built around patriarchal gender norms—especially as expressed within heteronormative marriages and families. Right-wing evangelical leaders use appeals to freedom to advocate for religious liberty—yet, time and again, this rhetoric revolves around patriarchal gender roles. For instance, analyzing Christians' responses to *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), Calvin R. Coker explains how Christians' rhetoric framed Christians as underdogs in a cosmic battle, arguing that legalizing same-sex marriage infringed on Christians' Constitutional right to the "free exercise" of religion by creating a hostile environment that could make it harder for Christians to evangelize, and could even manifest in material harm such as lawsuits against businesses owned by Christians that refuse to serve LGBTQ+ people.[56]

Within the contemporary moment, it can seem odd that the cosmic battle of good and evil rests on heterosexuality and girls' and women's modesty, abstinence, and ultimately domesticity within a heteronormative household. However, by framing this rhetoric within the history of U.S. social contract theory, sovereignty, and Resistance Theology, it becomes far more apparent why evangelical leaders describe religious liberty as part of a cosmic battle that hinges on patriarchal gender roles. Sovereignty in the United States is grounded in (white) patriarchal men's exclusive freedom and territorial control, which includes containing women in the private sphere as well as controlling or displacing people of color. These exclusions are continually and purposefully reproduced through the constraints of patriarchal gender roles.

Even as evangelical rhetoric regarding freedom emphasizes gender, it ignores race. As Anthea D. Butler demonstrated, contemporary evangelicalism in the United States is a white movement. There are people of color and Black churches that adhere to the core doctrines—the Bebbington quadrilateral—with which evangelicalism is associated in the United States; however, few Black people identify as "evangelical" and even they tend to vote for Democratic candidates, eschewing the white politics currently championed by white evangelical leaders.[57] Far from addressing their Black counterparts or discussing racism, contemporary evangelicals' appeals to freedom have very little to say about race and racism. This silence suggests that people of color are often this discourse's negated Third Persona. Yet race and gender roles are connected in such a way that even though this discourse ignores race, by attending to gender roles it also contains race. "Race" is constructed through socio/legal definitions (such as the Jim Crow one-drop rules) and by controlling reproduction.[58] For instance, the "purity" of the white "race" was long constructed through U.S. anti-miscegenation laws that prohibited people of color from coupling with white people.[59]

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[56] Coker, "From Exemptions to Censorship."

[57] Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*; Diana Orcés, "Black, White, and Born Again: How Race Affects Opinions Among Evangelicals," *PRRI*, February, 17, 2021, https://www.prri.org/spotlight/black-white-and-born-again-how-race-affects-opinions-among-evangelicals/; Aaron Earls, "Evangelical Vote Once Again Split on Ethnic Lines," *Christianity Today*, September 29, 2020, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2020/09/evangelical-white-black-ethnic-vote-trump-biden-lifeway-sur/.

[58] Jacqueline Battalora, *Birth of a White Nation: The Invention of White People and Its Relevance Today*, 2nd edition (Routledge, 2021); Sarah Kornfield, "Spiritual Mothers: Evangelical Practices of Mothering in the 21st Century," in *Refiguring Motherhood Beyond Biology"*, ed. Valerie Renegar and Kirsti Cole (London: Routledge, 2023); Naomi Zack, "American Mixed Race: The United States 2000 Census and Related Issues," in *Mixing it Up: Multiracial Subjects* ed. San Kwan and Kenneth Speirs (Houston, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 13-30); Pateman & Mills, *Contract and Domination*, 5.

[59] Myra Washington, "Interracial Intimacy: Hegemonic Construction of Asian American and Black Relationships on TV Medical Dramas," *Howard Journal of Communications* 23, no. 3 (2012): 266-267.

In the contemporary era, evangelical communities—which are predominantly white communities—can reproduce whiteness by controlling women's reproduction.[60] Traditional gender roles in the United States, then, contain the seeds of both patriarchal and white supremacist expressions of freedom and sovereignty: white men retain their freedom and sovereignty, white women are contained within the "private sphere," and people of color are negated or excluded.[61]

Having identified these rhetorical strategies or topoi, tracing them across the literature on Christian appeals to freedom and situating them within the history of U.S. sovereignty, we adopt this framework as our analytical focus. We evaluate the appeals to freedom in Jonathan "JP" Pokluda's pastoral advice through these three intertwining topoi, demonstrating the nuanced ways in which these topoi operate even within seemingly depoliticized Christian discourse.

Hey Dude: Sovereign Freedom in Texas Pastoral Advice

In Texas, freedom and sovereignty are enshrined in the story of the Texas Revolution, which looms large in Texan collective memory, identity, and ambiance. For instance, the Lone Star Flag was the flag of the Texas Republic (1836-1846) and remains the Texas state flag, blanketing the region in the symbolism of its own sovereignty.[62] Here, historians identify a spirit of "Texas Exceptionalism."[63] Essentially, Anglo-Americans who immigrated to the Texas region—known as Texians—brought the myths of manifest destiny and American Exceptionalism with them into Mexico. Spurred by a variety of factors, including Mexico's restrictions on chattel slavery, Texians revolted against Mexico and—after a surprising victory—spent a decade as an independent Republic until becoming the 28th state in the United States of America in 1846.[64] Texas was then spared the devastation of the Civil War, recovering much faster than the rest of the Confederacy and leading the way in converting slave labor into "prison labor camps."[65] Texas governance has long been committed to a whitewashed version of this story, and the Texas legislature enshrined Texas Exceptionalism as the only legitimate history for public school curricula as recently as 2021.[66] As this story of Texan Exceptionalism circulates through Texas and the United States, it renders Texas a particularly salient icon for frontierism, rugged individualism, and the triumph of grit.[67] Indeed, the dominant, curated understanding of Texas Exceptionalism renders Texas a story of American Exceptionalism *par excellence*.

Fitting this Texas narrative, Pastor Jonathan "JP" Pokluda is a seemingly self-made man—or pastor. His sermons and books are filled with stories of his wild, rough and tumble youth, his extraordinary financial success as a businessman and preacher, repeated reminders that he is very

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[60] Jones, *White Too Long*; Kornfield, "Spiritual Mothers."
[61] Charles W. Mills, "Body Politic, Bodies Impolitic," *Social Research* 78, no. 2 (2011), 583-606; Harris, "Whiteness as Property."
[62] For a discussion of visual symbolism and colonialist public memory, see Joshua Ewalt, "A Colonialist Celebration of National <Heritage>: Verbal, Visual, and Landscape Ideographs at Homestead National Monument of America," *Western Journal of Communication* 75, no. 4 (2011): 367-385.
[63] John Willingham, "Should We 'Forget the Alamo'?" Myths, Slavery, and the Texas Revolution," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 126, no. 4 (2023): 466-493.
[64] Erika J. Pribanic-Smith, "Political Papers and Presidential Campaigns in the Republic of Texas, 1836-1844," *American Journalism* 35, no. 1 (2018): 52.
[65] Alex Mendoza, "Review: *The Counter-Revolution of 1836: Texas Slavery & Jim Crow and the Roots of U.S. Fascism* by Gerald Horne," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 127, no. 1 (2023): 130.
[66] Willingham, "Should We 'Forget the Alamo'?" 467.
[67] Willingham, "Should We 'Forget the Alamo'?" 470.

tall (6'7''), and nostalgic recollections of John Wayne.[68] Pokluda writes about his truck, how attractive his wife is, and how much he loves motorcycles, guns, and mixed martial arts.[69] To put it briefly, Pokluda's First Persona is in the image of Texas Exceptionalism: rugged and successful in conquest. Pokluda presents himself as an expert who can help others master life. His published books of pastoral advice, *Welcome to Adulting* (2018), *Outdated*, and *Why* are geared toward young adults and Pokluda dishes out no-nonsense advice in areas he has seemingly already mastered—managing an adult household, dating and marriage, and replacing "deadly vices" with "life giving virtues."[70] Pokluda is the first to admit he is not perfect, yet even in humility Pokluda is the biggest man around. He claims to be "an expert in sin," bolstering his ethos as he urges readers to "take my word for it" and dishes out advice.[71]

Pokluda writes to both men and women, but his tone and appeals are masculine. Pokluda's masculine tone is especially apparent in contrast to evangelical women's ministries that use cozy, conversational "Hey Girl!" styles.[72] Unlike the gentle, sisterly advice featured in evangelical women's ministries, Pokluda's pastoral mode is best described as a "Hey Dude" approach. The First Persona throughout *Outdated* and *Why* is that of a straight shooter, just telling it like it is. This tone is part of Pokluda's appeal: it is widely celebrated in the endorsements for his books. For instance, prominent pastor and author Ben Stuart describes Pokluda's writing as "bold" with "let's-get-real honesty" and Christian author and dating coach Kait Warman commends Pokluda as "not afraid" to say things.[73]

In what follows, we use the intertwining topoi we identified within Christians' appeals to freedom—a cosmic battle, God as creator/definer, and gender roles—to organize our analysis of Pokluda's pastoral advice. In so doing, we not only identify how these topoi function persuasively, but by situating Pokluda's appeals to freedom in the context of sovereignty and containment we demonstrate how well-intentioned, genuinely devout pastoral advice can reinscribe patriarchal and white supremacist exclusions and containments, ultimately naturalizing Christian Nationalist assumptions within evangelical communities. And here, we note that Pokluda's Texas identity is not incidental. The Texian history of conquest and the ongoing celebration of Texas Exceptionalism sets a national spotlight on ruggedly individualistic Texas men—indeed more Texas politicians have followed this spotlight to the U.S. presidency and vice presidency since the 1930s than candidates from any other state.[74] Pokluda's Texan First Persona bolsters his national viability but it also reinforces the exclusions and hierarchies circulating within this commingled expression of freedom and sovereignty in the United States.

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[68] Pokluda, *Outdated*; Pokluda, *Why*, 68, 73, 179, 186.
[69] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 52, 58, 74.
[70] Pokluda, *Why*.
[71] Pokluda, *Why*, 23.
[72] For instance, Pokluda's masculine tone comes into sharp relief when compared to Texan sisters Kristen Clark and Bethany Beal's cozy sisterly advice in their GirlDefined women's ministry. This conversational, friendly tone for Christian women's ministries is broadly analyzed in rhetorical studies; see Mikkelsen and Kornfield, "Girls Gone Fundamentalist"; Bethany Ober Mannon, *I Grew Up in the Church: How American Evangelical Women Tell Their Stories* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2024); Mikkelsen and Kornfield, "Girls Gone Fundamentalist."
[73] Pokluda, *Why*.
[74] Virginia, New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Massachusetts have all fielded more U.S. presidents and/or vice-presidents than Texas, but not since the 1930s. See Janna Lewis, "Texans Who Were Presidents, Vice-Presidents," *Fort Cavazos Sentinel*, January 22, 2009, https://cavazossentinel.com/leisure/texans-who-were-presidents-vice-presidents/article_6b538cd2-aa2a-53a2-bc6f-6df30cfadf71.html.

Fighting for Freedom

Pokluda's most recent book, *Why,* is centered around Romans 7:15-19. Its opening premise is that Christians are doing what they do not want to do, which Pokluda frames as being caught or held captive in sin. Pokluda promises that by following his advice and example, Christians can leave behind "deadly vices" and find "the same freedom I have."[75] Here, metaphoric equivocations are at work: sin is captivity and holiness is freedom. Within this metaphor's logic, captivity and freedom are binary juxtapositions just like sin and holiness. There is no neutral ground within these binary states: all behavior is either sinful or holy and one is either enslaved or free. Pokluda invites his readers into a Second Persona, into an "us" characterized by freedom and holiness. For instance, he describes a "daily commitment to pursuing the things of Jesus" as what it "means to be a disciple," and then cheers his readers on, stating "you can do this."[76] The Second Persona enjoys true freedom as disciples of Christ. By negation then, the Third Persona remains captive—enslaved by their own sinful nature and Satan's temptations.[77]

Pokluda structures *Why* around violent metaphors. The book is divided in two parts, "The Ancient Battles" and "The Modern Wars." In each chapter Pokluda pits a vice and virtue against each other. The ancient battles include the "classic" sins of pride, anger, greed, apathy, and lust, which Pokluda juxtaposes, respectively, with the virtues of humility, forgiveness, generosity, diligence, and self-control.[78] These seemingly timeless "battles" are complemented by "modern wars," which Pokluda describes as specific threats within contemporary U.S. culture. He pits these threats against seemingly biblical counterpoints: perception management vs. authenticity, entitlement vs. gratitude, busyness vs. rest, drunkenness vs. sobriety, and cynicism vs. optimism.[79] In *Why,* Pokluda's metaphors situate all of history and every moment of every day as a battle between virtue and vice, freedom and captivity, Christianity and Satan.

Indeed, Satan appears as the chief villain in this metaphor. Pokluda writes explicitly about Satan, repeatedly making statements such as "the spiritual war is real and Satan hates you" and "we have an enemy, Satan, who is not of this world and wants nothing more than for our sin to devour us and destroy our lives."[80] Personifying evil as Satan, Pokluda positions Christians as under attack: Satan attacks "us." The Second Persona is embattled. "We" are always already under Satan's attack. Within this framework, Pokluda encourages Christians to fight for their freedom rather than succumb to captivity.

Throughout *Why*, Pokluda repeatedly and metaphorically uses words and phrases such as "victory," "battle," "packs a heavy punch," "fight back," "guard," "captive," "execute," "kill," "ammo," "win," and "lose." For instance, Pokluda refers to "prayer and Scripture meditation" as Christians' "best ammo" against the "stresses of this world."[81] These metaphoric terms cluster around explicit imagery of sin as captivity. This imagery is so central to Pokluda's message that we represent it here at length, using italics to highlight the metaphoric content.

> When you are *trapped* in sin, imagine yourself in a *cage*. The door is *locked*, and as you look around you see many others in *cages* too. But because of the gospel, Jesus

[75] Pokluda, *Why*, 136.
[76] Pokluda, *Why*, 19.
[77] Pokluda, *Why*, 33, 59.
[78] Pokluda, *Why*, 23.
[79] Pokluda, *Why*, 121.
[80] Pokluda, *Why*, 33, 59.
[81] Pokluda, *Why*, 184.

> comes and *unlocks* the *cage*. He leaves the door *open* and invites you to *walk out*. As you *step out* of the *cage* that has *held* you *prisoner*, he gives you the *key* to the *cage*, which is your story. Every time we share our story and tell what God has saved us from, our sin loses power over us, and others are often *freed* from their *cages*. Do not be ashamed of your story. Do not hide it. Use the story God has saved you from, by his kindness, to *walk freely* out of your *cage*, and invite others to do the same.[82]

This metaphoric image juxtaposes slavery/captivity with Christianity/freedom. By receiving the gospel, Christians are freed from their cages. In Pokluda's imagery, Christians still need to walk out of those cages, which involves an ongoing battle as Satan attempts to force Christians back into their cages. Indeed, when writing about dating and marriage in *Outdated*, Pokluda insists that the most important feature to look for in a romantic partner is a "battle" partner. Using his own relationship as an example, he writes, "I don't need a trophy wife by my side. I need someone to go into battle with me."[83] Although, as he notes, his wife is also very physically attractive.[84] Pokluda's cage imagery clearly situates freedom on the other side of victory. Christians are freed by the gospel but must fight for freedom, resisting Satan's attacks even as they share the gospel—making freedom possible for others.

Here, we pause to note two subtle moves within Pokluda's battle framework. The first is a subtle spatial metaphor within the battle metaphor. In the "cage" passage excerpted above, Pokluda describes Christians as walking out or stepping out of their cages into freedom. These spatial and terrain terms are reinforced throughout Pokluda's writing. He refers to discipleship as a *journey*, writes of following the right *path*, warns against *drifting* off the path, and urges Christians to *walk* and even *run* after Christ.[85] Freedom is spatial: Christians walk out of their cages into freedom, battling Satan for every inch of terrain. Second, Pokluda radically amplifies the violence of Scriptural metaphors. Pokluda regularly refers to 2 Corinthians 10:5, which reads "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."[86] Pokluda, however, amps up this familiar verse, repeatedly writing variations of the following, "we must learn to take those thoughts captive, *imprison* them, and *execute* them, lest they carry us somewhere wicked and evil."[87] As such, Pokluda builds on a Scriptural metaphor but imbues it with considerably more violence. Indeed, Pokluda routinely borrows key terms, imagery, and phrases from the Bible, but radically amplifies and distorts them. This invites his Second Persona into a reinterpretation or reimagination of Scripture in which battle is far more central to daily life and in which battle involves extreme violence—fighting for rights and liberty—rather than turning the other cheek.[88]

In these intertwined moves, Pokluda deploys the battle trope with a clear sense of terrain even as he heightens or exploits the "preinstalled symbols" of Christian religiosity.[89] Ultimately, these subtler aspects of the battle metaphor pitch the cosmic battle between good and evil, Christianity and Satan, freedom and captivity in especially violent and spatial terms, culminating in the sense that Christians must *fight* not just for their souls but for their *land*.

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[82] Pokluda, *Why*, 138, emphasis added.
[83] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 74.
[84] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 74.
[85] Pokluda, *Why*.
[86] 2 Corinthians 10:5, NIV.
[87] Pokluda, *Why*, 40-41, 102, emphasis added.
[88] The phrase "turning the other cheek" is in reference to Matthew 5:38-40.
[89] George, "Hate Spin," 161.

God-Defined Freedom for Individuals

Within Pokluda's pastoral advice, freedom is not anything akin to doing what you want or the absence of external constraints on one's choices and actions. Indeed, doing what you want is how Pokluda describes faux-freedom. Pokluda makes this point early in *Why*, explaining an epiphany he had during his first night at college, "Whatever I wanted to indulge in I could, because I was *free*."[90] Describing the next few months as being filled with sex, drugs, and alcohol, Pokluda ends this story with a scene of him weeping "uncontrollably," lost and alone.[91] Later, quoting New Testament scholar D. A. Carson, Pokluda writes that "we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom."[92] Instead of the faux-freedom of "disobedience," Pokluda calls his audience into a lifestyle following "God's intended design," a lifestyle of self-control.[93]

Pokluda argues that just as Steve Jobs invented the iPhone and knew the most about it, so too God invented humans, and "anything outside of the context of God's intended design is ultimately going to be harmful to us and will fall short of the standard God has set for us."[94] Here, Pokluda echoes Romans 3:23-24, "for all have sinned and *fall short* of the glory of God,"[95] exploiting the "preinstalled symbols" of Christianity—in this case equivocating "anything outside the context of God's intended design" with sin.[96] Similarly, in his dating advice, Pokluda writes that humans "are given a lot of freedom in how we pursue relationships, but things go better for us when we follow God's advice."[97] Again, Pokluda links this to God's design for humans, writing that since God created everything, "all things function" according to God's design.[98]

Following God's intended design, however, is not easy because of Satan's attacks. Only with the help of the Holy Spirit can Christians "experience the freedom that comes through self-control," especially when tempted by lust.[99] For Pokluda, freedom "is a grind" and "takes a great deal of time and effort," and—as such—requires rigorous self-control.[100]

The equivocation between self-control and freedom works because the supposed alternative is captivity. Either Christians stay in the cage or they fight for freedom through self-control. Pokluda makes this dichotomy explicit as he writes about lust, stating, "we will either control our sexual desires or be controlled by them. Living with self-control takes effort and intentionality."[101] Pokluda makes the same point about alcohol, writing, "Scripture presents a dichotomy for believers: either we are controlled by the Holy Spirit, or we are controlled by some other spirit."[102] With this pun on "spirit," Pokluda drives his either/or point home.

Indeed, doubling down on his either/or approach, Pokluda puts salvation on the line. In the conclusion of *Why*, Pokluda writes that if readers continue to willfully sin—and his definitions of sin are broad—then they need to ask, "*Do I really know this Christ*?"[103] This question is a sucker-

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[90] Pokluda, *Why*, 34, emphasis in original.
[91] Pokluda, *Why*, 35.
[92] D. A. Carson, quoted in Pokluda, *Why*, 87.
[93] Pokluda, *Why*, 101, 104.
[94] Pokluda, *Why* 104.
[95] Romans 3:23-24, NIV.
[96] George, "Hate Spin," 161; Pokluda, *Why*, 104.
[97] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 15.
[98] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 15.
[99] Pokluda, *Why*, 101.
[100] Pokluda, *Why*, 103.
[101] Pokluda, *Why*, 113.
[102] Pokluda, *Why*, 179.
[103] Pokluda, *Why*, 206, emphasis in original.

punch for Christians. This question puts a Christian's entire identity and salvation on the line. Ratcheting up the book's either/or dichotomies, this question presents readers with only two options. Either readers live entirely free, self-controlled, and "Spirit-controlled" lives, or they are Satan's slaves and likely not even Christians. For Christians, the provocation to be sovereign over one's own freedom—through self-control and in adherence to extremely narrow imaginations of God's design—has never been higher.

For Pokluda, God's design or intent for humanity is entirely individualistic. God's "design" is seemingly about how much alcohol one drinks, how "far" one goes when kissing and making-out with one's romantic partners, and about curbing attitudes and feelings such as pride and anger.[104] This matches larger trends in evangelicals' rhetoric, as religious scholar Anthea D. Butler writes, "sin for evangelicals" is always framed as "personal, not corporate."[105] For instance, Pokluda retells the parable of the good Samaritan,[106] omitting its opening question, "who is my neighbor?" This question—which Pokluda omits—highlights the ethnocentric tension between Israelites and Samaritans. Instead, Pokluda postulates that this parable is a critique of "busyness," which he claims is exemplified by the Israelite priest and Levite in the story.[107] Similarly, Pokluda recounts the biblical story in which Jesus teaches his disciples in the home of Mary and Martha. In this story, Mary shirks her duties of hospitality, joining the disciples in learning from Jesus. Martha complains, asking Jesus to make Mary help her with the duties of hospitality.[108] Retelling this story, Pokluda omits the context of structural sexism that excluded women from religious learning. Instead, Pokluda claims that Jesus "put Martha in her place" for being sinfully busy with trivial matters (e.g., providing hospitality to male guests, as was the expectation for women within in this patriarchal culture).[109] This interpretation omits how Jesus *refused* to exclude Mary from the male privilege of learning and discipleship. That is, Jesus refused to put *Mary* in her place (the kitchen) and even nudged Martha to think outside her patriarchal role and imagine an equality of discipleship. Pokluda's renditions of these biblical stories omit the structural problems of ethnocentrism and sexism, instead recasting these Scriptures as being about the supposed individual sin of busyness.

Likewise, Pokluda characterizes anger and entitlement as individualistic vices or sins. For Pokluda, anger is exclusively about interpersonal conflict with a parent, roommate, romantic partner, or so on—and all complaints are evidence of selfish entitlement. This worldview has absolutely no inkling of systemic problems (economic injustice, sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, etc.) that might be met by righteous anger. Here, we read the negated Third Persona, drawing attention to a willfulness or "trained incapacity" that ignores contemporary righteous anger and activism within movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo—and #MeToo's explicitly Christian iteration #ChurchToo.[110] Pokluda's pastoral advice ignores, silences, and negates these movements and their overlaps with Christianity. In so doing, this discourse ignores, silences and negates

[104] Pokluda, *Why*; Pokluda, *Outdated*.
[105] Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 11.
[106] Luke 10:25-37.
[107] Pokluda, *Why*, 161.
[108] Luke 10:38-42.
[109] Pokluda, *Why*, 162.
[110] For an discussion of Christian activism and #BlackLivesMatter, see Amanda Nell Edgar and Andre E. Johnson, *The Struggle Over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter* (Lanham: MD, *Lexington Books*, 2018); for an introduction to #ChurchToo, see "#MeToo #ChurchToo," *Faith Trust Institute: Working Together to End Sexual and Domestic*

racially and ethnically oppressed people, patriarchally oppressed women and LGBTQ+ people, economically oppressed people, and those who experience a confluence of oppressions.

Ultimately, Pokluda's pastoral advice insists that God has designed humanity with specific roles, behaviors, and intentions in mind. To experience freedom, Pokluda recommends a self-controlled lifestyle that adheres to God's design. However, what he identifies as God's design includes extra-biblical interpretations[111] and/or explanations of Scriptural advice that omit the historic context of that advice. Moreover, Pokluda omits the structural injustices to which Scripture clearly objects—for instance, the Old Testament prophets railed against economic, ethnocentric, and sexist oppressions that systematically exploited foreigners, widows, and orphans. Ignoring the structural problems that uphold white supremacy and patriarchy, Pokluda advises Christians to follow incredibly individualistic and often extra-biblical guidelines. In so doing, Pokluda's advice equates "freedom" with the sovereignty of self-control and ultimately supports a patriarchal and white supremacist "status quo." Indeed, as detailed below, his guidelines center around gender roles that not only reinforce patriarchy but ultimately reinforce white supremacy within the *de facto* segregation of U.S. churches, housing, and education.

Gender Roles and Freedom

Pokluda's pastoral advice advocates for evangelism, emphasizing that Christians' lifestyles are an important witness.[112] Here, patriarchal gender roles take center stage: when men lead and women follow within loving, monogamous marriages, Pokluda prophesies that there will "be a revival."[113] Pokluda writes that when Christians romantically pursue "each other the way God desires," they will create a "great awakening" and Christianity will "spread like wildfire" as "godly marriages" witness to a watching world.[114]

Pokluda describes God's "design" for dating as "counter cultural."[115] His dating-advice book, *Outdated*, is organized to highlight a "counter cultural" lifestyle: each chapter presents a "lie" that mainstream society supposedly believes and then "counters" it with a biblical "truth." For instance, Pokluda insists that mainstream society lies when it teaches that "physical attraction is ultimate" and that biblical wisdom counters this lie, teaching that "physical qualities ultimately won't last."[116] For Pokluda, by living—and dating—in "counter cultural" ways, Christians experience freedom *and* evangelize, which frees others from captivity.[117]

Pokluda's pastoral advice contains classic features of historic Christianity that are not mainstream in contemporary U.S. culture, such as defining all pre-marital sex as sinful. Pokluda broadens this category of sin to include masturbation and porn—which he broadly defines as any visualization or explicit thoughts about "someone who is not your spouse."[118] However, aside from his

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Violence, 2023, https://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/metoo-churchtoo; for a discussion of "trained incapacity," see Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1954/1984), 7.

[111] For instance, Pokluda's admonitions against masturbation.

[112] Pokluda, *Why*, 210.

[113] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 34.

[114] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 34.

[115] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 157.

[116] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 61.

[117] Pokluda, *Why*, 138, 210.

[118] Pokluda, *Why*, 110; Pokluda, *Outdated*, 149.

admonitions against (broadly defined) sexual immorality, Pokluda's advice is quintessentially mainstream when it comes to gender roles.

For example, tapping into long-standing associations of men as initiators and leaders and of women as passive (or femme fatales), Pokluda advises women against asking men out on dates. Specifically, Pokluda argues that when women ask men out, they end up with "a passive husband" and the man ends up with "a controlling wife."[119] Here, Pokluda retells the story of Adam and Eve,[120] casting Adam as passive and thus Eve as controlling, and notes that this pairing (passive husband/controlling wife) is "one of the most common root causes of problems in marriage."[121] This is not "counter cultural" advice; this is traditional, patriarchal gender roles.

For Pokluda, "passivity" is only a problem when men are passive; women are ideally passive. For example, the entire point of *Outdated* is to help single Christians get married as quickly as possible. To that end, Pokluda offers two lists, one for men and the other for women.[122] Both lists start with the action items of having a "thriving relationship with Jesus" and overcoming sin.[123] Next, Pokluda advises men to make a list of the godly women they know and then "be a man" and start asking women out, working their way down their lists.[124] In contrast, Pokluda advises women to wait for a godly man to ask them out and then say yes.[125] Here, Pokluda frames passivity and acquiescence as ideal feminine traits.

Pokluda's advice fits within Complementarian doctrine, teaching that God designed men for leadership and roles such as preaching and teaching, and that women are designed for submission and roles such as nurturing children. Moreover, Pokluda insists that God's goodness cannot be fully experienced outside of these roles.

Beyond insisting on patriarchal gender roles, Pokluda's pastoral advice veers into an uglier expression of sexism. Pokluda made headlines in Christian news outlets for a January 2023 sermon in which he recounted being sexually propositioned by a stranger he rather juicily described as a "perfect, physically beautiful" woman with "everything in the right place."[126] The story ends with Pokluda explaining how he resisted the temptation and refrained from ruining his marriage because Proverbs 5:6-7 came to mind and he realized this woman was a bad idea. Writing for *Baptist News Global*, religious scholar Sheila Way Gregoire responded that "women deserve better than to go to church and hear all that stops our pastors from having sex with total strangers is a Bible memory passage."[127] Continuing, Gregoire stated that Pokluda's sermon "invited men to judge every woman around them on the basis of where her body parts landed" and concluded by stating that women "want to go to church without having to hear a pastor call his wife 'smokin' hot,' or brag about the hot women who want to have sex with him, or tell us how hard it is for Christian men

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[119] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 130.
[120] Genesis 2-3.
[121] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 130.
[122] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 202-203.
[123] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 202-203.
[124] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 128, 202-203.
[125] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 202-203.
[126] Ian M. Giatti, "Texas Pastor Goes Viral for Sermon Describing Proposition from 'Perfect Woman,'" *Christian Post*, February 24, 2023, https://www.christianpost.com/news/texas-pastor-goes-viral-for-sermon-describing-proposition.html.
[127] Sheila Wray Gregoire, "Can Pastors Please Stop Salivating over Women's Bodies in Sermons? A Response to Jonathan Pokluda's Objectification of the 'Perfect' Woman," *Baptist News Global*, February 24, 2023, https://baptistnews.com/article/can-pastors-please-stop-salivating-over-womens-bodies-in-sermons-a-response-to-jonathan-pokludas-objectification-of-the-perfect-woman/.

not to lust."[128] Agreeing with Gregoire, we add that there was nothing surprising about this news except that it made the news. We were raised on sermons with anecdotes like this and Pokluda's books routinely recount how attractive women romantically approach and/or sexually proposition him. Indeed, in one such story in *Why*, a beautiful woman offered to pay him hundreds of dollars for sex—which he declined because she "looked desperate and needy" although, of course, still gorgeous.[129]

These stories position Pokluda as preeminently masculine: a guy's guy with "a significant sexual past."[130] Pokluda is not alone in these braggadocio accounts. Sociologist Sarah Diefendorf notes that Christian men "relish describing their struggles with lusting over women's bodies."[131] These performances situate them as manly and thus powerful as they reproduce a routine aspect of hegemonic masculinity while still—seemingly—remaining holy or at least monogamous.[132] Meanwhile, these pastoral anecdotes communicate to women that their physiques are continually appraised by and are of the utmost importance to Christian men, even when pastors turn around and denounce feminine beauty as unimportant, unspiritual, and ultimately "fleeting" and "fake," as Pokluda does in both *Why* and *Outdated*.[133] This rhetoric reduces women's value to their bodies *and* denounces them as fake and worthless. This is a classic double bind: women must be beautiful to be worthwhile but cannot put effort into beauty lest they seem vain and worthless.[134] Trapped in both directions, women's worth is determined by patriarchal logic.

Pokluda cares about romantic relationships: he wrote an entire book about dating and routinely revisits the topics of lust, love, dating, and marriage.[135] Pokluda wants readers to adhere to patriarchal gender norms, which he frames as a "counter cultural," *free* lifestyle. Aside from abstaining from premarital sex and sexual immorality (in the broadest possible terms), however, there is little in Pokluda's writings that is "counter cultural"—unless one hears the silences and omissions that weave throughout these books, constituting the Third Persona. Namely, just as Pokluda's advice omits people of color and racism, his advice is also for a world without LGBTQ+ people. Even when writing about dating, relationships, and marriage, Pokluda never mentions LGBTQ+ people or even celibate "same-sex attracted" people.[136] Additionally, Pokluda's advice omits women's agency: his rhetoric imagines and calls forth a world in which men lead and women respond. To be clear, Pokluda does not condemn women's agency or same-sex marriage. Instead, these are silences and omissions—they are never stated but everywhere implied. The "counter cultural" parts of Pokluda's advice are not said aloud; they are glossed over and assumed. Yet these silences have real consequences as they negate people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and women's leadership in the home, church, and world.

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[128] Gregoire, "Can Pastors Please Stop Salivating Over Women's Bodies in Sermons?"
[129] Pokluda, *Why*, 100.
[130] Pokluda, *Why*, 105.
[131] See Gregoire, "Can Pastors Please Stop Salivating Over Women's Bodies in Sermons?"
[132] Sarah Diefendorf, "After the Wedding Night: Sexual Abstinence and Masculinities over the Life Course," *Gender & Society* 29, no. 5 (2015): 647-669.
[133] Pokluda, *Outdated*, 67; Pokluda, *Why*, 100.
[134] See, for instance, Christian K. Nelson, "Unbinding an Audience and a Speech: Dove's Answer to the Beauty/Authenticity Double Bind," *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* 14, no. 1 (2013): 115.
[135] Pokluda, *Outdated*; Pokluda, *Why*.
[136] For a discussion of the language of "same-sex attracted" within Christian discourse, see Christine J. Gardner, "'Created this Way': Liminality, Rhetorical Agency, and the Transformative Power of Constraint Among Gay Christian College Students," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (2017): 31-47.

Conclusion

Pastor Jonathan "JP" Pokluda never advocates for specific politicians or policies in his recent books of pastoral advice. Yet they are profoundly ideological. They cultivate and appeal to a Second Persona, calling (white) evangelical Christians into a worldview in which men lead, women follow, LGBTQ+ people disappear, and in which no one acknowledges or attempts to end structural inequalities such as racism or poverty. Moreover, by framing this worldview as "counter cultural" and by explicitly framing Christian discipleship as a battle, Pokluda welcomes his readers—generally young adult, white, evangelical Christians—into the culture wars.

Pokluda's advice is popular among Christians—especially evangelicals. His speaking engagements, book contracts, and social media notoriety speak for themselves. Pokluda's First Persona looms large, mixing a straight-shooter attitude, "hey dude" tone, blunt approach, and overt performance of masculinity and individualistic grit. There is a sense of *real* manliness in Pokluda's writing—indeed, he regularly dishes out advice on how to be a man, showcasing his fighting Texas spirit. Indeed, Pokluda's First Persona draws upon and capitalizes on Texas' reputation of masculine, gritty (white) exceptionalism *par excellence* within the United States.

We are convinced that Pokluda is authentic in his devotion, evangelism, and attempts to help others develop their Christian faith: Pokluda is doing what he sees as his best for Christ. We are also cognizant of the ways in which some matters become less a matter of choice and more an agency of "trained incapacity," as "past training" causes a misjudgment of the "present situation."[137] That is, one need not refuse to "face reality" to miss the obvious; instead, through "trained incapacity" one's very "abilities can function as a blindness."[138] People can be trained to ignore, negate, and omit that which stares them in the face. Understanding Pokluda's rhetorical ideology as ignorant of injustice does not excuse it as innocent. Instead, our goal is to demonstrate how this ideology—with its omissions and negations—sets the stage for white supremacist, patriarchal, and heterosexist politics and practices.

Pokluda calls his audience into an ideology in which Christians must battle for terrain, fight to enjoy sovereignty, and inhabit heteronormative gender roles in order to be free. Pokluda welcomes readers into a war he claims is already happening; he trains readers to see everything as individualistic, building a "trained incapacity" to see the privileges of white supremacy and the oppressions of structural injustice, and he baptizes heterosexism as God's design for humanity. Along the way, Pokluda's rhetoric creates a clear Third Persona by omitting people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and women's agency. As such, Pokluda does not need to tell readers how to vote. When readers follow his advice they go on offense—fighting for their freedom—and this entails a whole range of interpersonal and political behaviors.

Moreover, when Christians believe that they alone are free, that they alone are sovereign — that everyone else is enslaved to Satan—there can be no choice but to wrest political control from others. Indeed, within this framework, there is no benefit to a secular (enslaved) government. Here, we seek to make the links between the ideology that operates within Pokluda's appeals to freedom and Christian Nationalism more explicit. If only Christians are free, then only Christians should govern; if only evangelical lifestyles (replete with heterosexism and a "trained incapacity" to see structural injustice) are free, then this is the lifestyle local, state, and federal legislation ought to favor. Within this framework, Christian men cannot retreat, they must lead the fight for freedom.

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[137] Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 7, 10; see also Ryan Neville-Shepard, "Rand Paul at Howard University and the Rhetoric of the New Southern Strategy," *Western Journal of Communication* 82, no. 1 (2018): 20-39.
[138] Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 7, 10.

Ultimately, this research advances the scholarship on Christian appeals to freedom, the discourse of religious liberty, and evangelical studies in three ways. First, our research has situated Christian appeals to freedom within the context of U.S. sovereignty and containment rhetoric, demonstrating how arguments that appeal to freedom can reassert hierarchies of exclusion and control. This context bridges the gap between mundane, weekly sermons and the more shocking expressions of Christian Nationalism, demonstrating how they are connected by a shared ideology. Second, we synthesized the contemporary literature on Christian appeals to freedom and religious liberty, identifying three topoi that circulate throughout this rhetoric: a battle of good vs. evil, an emphasis on God-given definitions, and a near obsession with gender roles. By identifying these topoi and modeling their use as a framework for assessing Christian appeals to freedom, we hope to help others understand how Christian appeals to freedom rhetorically function in the United States. Finally, through our close reading of Pokluda's pastoral advice, we advance the scholarship on Christian appeals to freedom by demonstrating the argumentation, metaphors, equivocations, and symbolism that constructs the Second Persona and negates the Third Persona in this discourse, calling (white) Christian men into a fighting Texas spirit—battling mainstream culture for sovereignty.