Each year, thousands of American evangelicals descend upon the nation’s capital as Christian heritage tourists. Participating in organized tours, they ride together on buses, stay at inexpensive hotels, stand in line in the hot sun, take photos, and buy souvenirs while listening to guides instruct them in “a national myth of origin in which they play a starring role.” In *Saving History: How White Evangelicals Tour the Nation’s Capital and Redeem a Christian America*, religious ethnographer Lauren R. Kerby (Harvard Divinity School) provides a perceptive and engaging account of how these Christian tourists use history to make sense of their nation and their place in it.

As a participant-observer, Kerby is able to tease out the seemingly contradictory roles that white evangelicals embrace vis-à-vis the nation. At once insiders and outsiders, they move fluidly between the roles of founders and exiles, victims and saviors. Through careful observations and nuanced analysis, Kerby describes how these roles are alternately embraced and set aside depending on which identity imparts the most power in any given situation.

As founders, white evangelicals not only celebrate the heroic white men who founded the nation, but also cast these men in their own image—as illustrious forerunners of conservative white evangelicalism. In doing so, white evangelicals effectively erase the existence of other forms of American Christianity, of liberal, mainline, and non-white expressions of the faith that shaped the nation’s history. This erasure is apparent in heritage tourists’ neglect of statues commemorating figures such as Sojourner Truth and Rosa Parks, who, as Kerby points out, are also representatives of America’s Christian past. Yet attention to such figures by official capitol tour guides are perceived by heritage tourists as “political correctness,” as a distraction from the nation’s true (white, male) Christian founders.

It is by identifying as exiles and victims that white evangelicals are able both to claim their place as rightful representatives of the American nation and to lament their own cultural displacement. Employing marketing strategies that play on white evangelicals’ sense of outsider status, Christian heritage tours bill themselves as alternatives to dominant and destructive secular narratives of the nation’s past. Tour guides then make a point of highlighting real or imagined efforts to erase America’s Christian past, alleging the willful neglect or misinterpretation of explicitly Christian inscriptions and objects and insinuating the endangered status of relics that bear witness to the role of Christianity in America’s founding.

According to Kerby, Christian heritage tours are more initiation than vacation; they exist as part of a larger cultural, political, and educational matrix that inculcates these teachings within white evangelical communities. Heritage tourists hear and see precisely what they came to experience, and then return home to share photos,
films, and memories. In this way, they participate in the final role, that of savior. By teaching, and by voting, they can do their part to restore America to its mythical Christian past.

Although much of Kerby’s analysis is dispassionate and her engagement with her subjects frequently empathetic, she does not withhold a critical assessment of the way conservative white evangelicals use the past to shape the present. As Kerby astutely points out, both the insider and the outsider narratives are rooted in partial truths, but the Christian Right has simplified them into a powerful jeremiad of restorative nostalgia: “In a nation that reveres tradition yet cheers for underdogs, the Christian Right managed to have it both ways.” All of this amounts to a “masterstroke of political strategy,” one that enables white evangelicals to claim the moral authority of outsiders by deploying the rhetoric of minority status, even, for example, as they deny the rights of same-sex couples, transgender individuals, or other sexual minorities. So, too, are white evangelicals able to advocate for religious freedom by using inclusive language that masks the narrow application of those freedoms to conservative white evangelicals themselves.

In the end, Kerby cannot help but be struck by “the visceral wrongness” of the project she details. In a poignant conclusion, she recounts a visit to the newly erected Museum of the Bible. There, standing before an interactive display on American music inspired by the Bible, she is surprised to discover Barack Obama’s rendition of “Amazing Grace” as an option. Pressing play, she hears the first African American president’s voice fill the space, startling the man next to her. Like Kerby, he did not expect to hear Obama’s voice in that space. As president, Obama’s Christian faith had been relentlessly attacked by white evangelicals who did not consider it a legitimate expression of Christianity. For a moment, Kerby glimpses “another face of American Christianity, one that offered comfort and hope—even grace.” That face, she concludes, had been absent from the Christian heritage story of America, “and we are all the poorer for it.”

Kristin Kobes Du Mez
Calvin University


African Americans have arguably dominated, high school, collegiate, and professional sports since the end of World War II. The integration of major league baseball in 1947 opened the door to a wealth of untapped talent from the segregated Negro Leagues, and many of these players, such as Jackie Robinson and his teammates Roy Campanella and Don Newcombe, Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, and the great Negro League pitcher Satchel Paige, were perennial all-stars. Historians know far