

Article

'Policing Is a Profession of the Heart': Evangelicalism and Modern American Policing

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Abstract: Though several powerful explorations of modern evangelical influence in American politics and culture have appeared in recent years (many of which illumine the seeming complications of evangelical influence in the Trump era), there is more work that needs to be done on the matter of evangelical understandings of and influence in American law enforcement. This article explores evangelical interest and influence in modern American policing. Drawing upon complementary interpretations of the “antistatist statist” nature of modern evangelicalism and the carceral state, this article offers a short history of modern evangelical understandings of law enforcement and an exploration of contemporary evangelical ministry to police officers. It argues that, in their entries into debates about law enforcement’s purpose in American life, evangelicals frame policing as both a divinely sanctioned activity and a site of sentimental engagement. Both frames expand the power and reach of policing, limiting evangelicals’ abilities to see and correct problems within the profession.

Keywords: evangelicalism; policing; carceral studies



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1. Introduction

The *Strength for the Street Bible*, published by the American Bible Society (ABS), is like many specialty Bibles, in that it contains customized devotional guides, prayers, and an aesthetic meant to appeal to its intended audience. Similar specialty Bibles, offered by the ABS and other publishers, are geared to teens, men, women, doctors, and college students, to name only a few market segments. Additionally, the general thrust of the content of the *Strength for the Street Bible* is largely familiar. The text itself is the Good News Translation, an easy-to-read rendering of sacred writ, and the accompanying devotional materials offer readers tips on how to pray, deal with personal trauma, and understand God’s call on their lives. This particular call, however, is unlike any other: to patrol America’s streets and “bring order to the chaos,” to “enforce what God loves through working against oppression and crime.” This is why the *Strength for the Street Bible*, published “For the Men and Women in Law Enforcement,” is emblazoned with a police badge on the front cover and a large, striking “thin blue line” American flag on the back (*Holy Bible: Strength for the Street 2016; Miller 2016*, pp. 5, 9).

First published in 2016, the *Strength for the Street Bible* was initially developed for the Philadelphia Police Department. In 2018, ABS reported that it was in use across the country, with thousands of copies given to officers in twenty-five states (*Police Officers Find Strength in God’s Word 2017; Delp 2018*). Though the Bible is doctrinally non-denominational, it clearly fits with the turn toward evangelical identity that has characterized the ABS over the past two decades (two other police Bibles, discussed below, are likewise produced by publishers with clear evangelical connections and constituencies) (*Fea 2018; 2016*, pp. 310–11).

Evangelicals have been at the forefront of Christian engagement with law enforcement for much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, there is little scholarly discussion of this history and of contemporary Christian (or religious) interest in and relevance to policing. One statement from a recent inquiry into British policing and religion applies to the American context as well: “Just as religion is absent as a unifying theme

or analytical category in policing studies and criminology, so has policing been ignored in academic study of religion . . . policing does not figure as a site of significance where many of the most urgent issues might be being played out” (McFadyen and Prideaux 2014). One small sociological study on the experiences of Christian police officers also notes the general dearth of study of religion and policing (McNamara and Tempenis 1999). This is a remarkable oversight, given the dramatic influence of evangelicals in modern American life and the recurrence of diverse streams of “law and order” culture and politics that provided the foundation for the immense size and scope of the US criminal justice and prison systems (Murakawa 2014; Hinton 2016; Rios 2011; Gottschalk 2006; Forman 2017).

Scholars have explored evangelical influence in prisons in the United States and Latin America (Sullivan 2009; Erzen 2017; O’Neill 2015; Johnson 2017; Stoddard 2021; O’Brien forthcoming). There are also some critical explorations of religion, policing, and inequality within the U.S. criminal justice by theologians, ethicists, and biblical scholars (Winright 1995; Alexis-Baker 2007; McCaulley 2020; Grimes and Lloyd 2020). Considerations of the role of religion in the formation and work of the FBI are likewise valuable (Martin 2018; Johnson and Weitzman 2017; Martin forthcoming). My recent historical work has discussed policing as part of evangelicals’ broader interest in matters of crime and punishment in the 1960s and 1970s (Griffith 2020). However, there remains much more work to be done, particularly in understanding how officers on the local, departmental levels conceptualize their own faith; how evangelical Christianity has shaped police department culture; how law enforcement aesthetics have in turn influenced evangelical popular culture; and how evangelical religion functions in contemporary debates about policing, particularly with regard to over-policing and police violence against people of color. As important work continues to be produced regarding modern American evangelicals’ fascination with militarization and masculinity (Kobes Du Mez 2020); their influence in conservative politics (Williams 2010; Dochuk 2011); their relationship to consumer culture (Bowler 2013; Vaca 2019); complex (dis)engagement with race and civil rights issues (Miller 2009; Butler 2021); their negotiations of sexuality and gender (Griffith 2017; Dowland 2015; Løvdal Stephens 2019); and their consideration of global and social justice concerns (Steenland and Goff 2013; Kirkpatrick 2019; Swartz 2020), we might also ask how each of these important explorations and historiographical interventions likewise relates to law enforcement.

This article attempts to address this lacuna by exploring modern American evangelical policing culture. It argues that two distinct, yet mutually reinforcing messages recur in evangelical considerations of policing. First, evangelicals justify the work of policing with reference to divine purpose and vocation. Evangelicals understand police as far more than state employees; they are God’s agents for justice. Second, police are imagined as sentimental actors and subjects, drawing upon and conveying ideas and practices that tap into emotional reservoirs and themes of family, fatherhood, and therapeutic well-being.

Evangelicals conceptualize policing as a divinely appointed role for the protection of the social order against chaos and evil. Mobilizing biblical passages like Romans 13, evangelical pastors and Christian police themselves offer theologies of law enforcement work that defend the use of force and cast a vision of God’s purpose for earthly government. There is a spectrum here, as some evangelical conceptions of policing draw on punitive “law-and-order” tropes, while others focus more on a compassionate vision of policing as assisting the poor and oppressed (sometimes with competing messages coming from the same sources). The ambiguity here allows for evangelical defenses of policing to remain flexible, rebutting criticisms of police misconduct while maintaining the strength and presence of law enforcement in American society more generally.

This conceptualization of evangelicals’ broad endorsement of police as divinely appointed state actors fits within the historiographical framework advocated by scholars such as Axel Schäfer, who contends that evangelicals (and conservatives more generally) operate with stronger statist orientation than they are often given credit for. Postwar evangelicals are well-known for lobbying for state *withdrawal* in matters of the economy (Reagan-era deregulation and cutting of social expenditures), education (Christian private schools as an

alternative to public schools), and civil rights and religious liberty (contesting governmental oversight of religiously motivated discrimination, particularly on matters of sexuality or race). However, as Schäfer points out, evangelicals have a practical statist orientation that sits alongside their suspicions and criticisms of government, one exhibited through their acceptance and utilization of state funds for religious education and social services (Schäfer 2013). Evangelicals, as Schäfer puts it in his exploration of the movement's relationship to the modern welfare state, "preserved an anti-statist and insurgent identity while building up evangelical charities with taxpayer funds" (Schäfer 2013). Postwar evangelical political ideology, Schäfer pithily contends elsewhere, was "'characterized by a kind of antistatist statism' that combined denunciations of liberal public policy with growing support for the national security state, the politics of economic growth, and public aid for religious agencies" (Schäfer 2011, p. 5; 2012). Evangelicals' embrace of the military is a similar site of engagement. Scholars have shown how a similar impulse is manifested on both a political and cultural level, as evangelicals sacralized and lobbied for Cold War and "war on terror" militarization (and reveled in its associated masculine tropes) (Williams 2010; Kobes Du Mez 2020). However, consideration of policing offers us a way to understand the domestic side of a parallel statist, militarized impulse that likewise took hold in the U.S. in the second half of the twentieth century.

Consideration of evangelical police culture also offers further insight into the creation and maintenance of the carceral state itself. A striking parallel to Schäfer's "antistatist statism" characterization is that of carceral studies pioneer Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who uses a similar phrase in her groundbreaking text *Golden Gulag*, on the massive growth of prisons and the carceral state more generally in California (Gilmore 2007a). In that work and elsewhere, Gilmore analyzes (and warns of) the existence of systems of state surveillance and control that metastasize while other governmental programs that might promote human flourishing are eliminated: "We are faced with the ascendance of antistate state actors: people and parties who gain state power by denouncing state power" (Gilmore 2007b, p. 43). In addition to bolstering the large "non-profit industrial complex" that seeks human welfare while simultaneously discouraging social investment by the state, this relatively bipartisan political consensus also includes "prison, policing, courts and the military." As she argues, "A new kind of state—an antistatist state—is being built on prison foundations . . . The antistate state depends on ideological and rhetorical dismissal of any agency or capacity that 'government' might use to guarantee social well-being" (Gilmore 2007a, p. 245). Gilmore's answer is found in grassroots organizing that challenges the expansive criminal justice system that envelops so many poor people of color, and that works to redirect and redistribute resources through public programs that promote the common good. Whether or not one agrees with Gilmore's prescription, it is worth considering how her mode of analysis has not only opened up new avenues and debates regarding the growth of the carceral state, but also how the anti-state statist framework illumines explorations of evangelical religion.

Evangelical police culture is a sentimentalized, therapeutic form, one that attempts to resolve various tensions that individual Christian police officers face in their work, from marital pressures to on-the-job stressors. Through self-help manuals, retreats, films, and even the framing of scripture itself, Christian police officers are urged to heal, love, act with sensitivity, and stay positive. In the process these men (most evangelical policing materials assume a male audience) become better fathers, husbands, and guardians of the streets. Despite the aggressive posturing of law-and-order politicians who court evangelical voters, much of Christian police culture stresses more humanitarian and therapeutic sentiments. However, this sentimentality fits within the assumptions of the broader carceral state and, given the persistent cultural, political, and numerical influence of evangelicals in American life, risks uncritically sustaining and expanding the power and presence of police in the U.S. Evangelical police culture zeroes in on the hearts and emotions of individual officers without critically assessing the state's capacity for violence or structural inequalities that have enabled the U.S. criminal justice system to expand and operate in ways that

disproportionately affect the poor and people of color. As the content of the *Strength for the Street* Bible indicates, the evangelical law enforcement ministry message is very much focused on the spiritual and emotional well-being of officers. However, the medium, a Bible wrapped in “thin blue line” packaging, itself a distinctive marker of “blue lives matter” pro-police culture reinvigorated in the midst of protests against police brutality and violence against black Americans, is crucial as well. It is this medium and its accompanying assumptions that showcase the ongoing work of evangelicalism in continuing to bolster the power of law enforcement in American life.

2. Modern Evangelicals and Policing: A Short History

The modern police department was a British innovation, with the creation of the London Metropolitan Police in 1829. Over the course of the nineteenth century departments emerged in the United States, but it was not until the early twentieth century that they fully embraced modernization, adopting standardized procedures, uniforms, ranks, and technology. This replaced more informal systems of law enforcement, such as civilian night watches and ad hoc posses and patrols organized by sheriffs to react to disorder, as well as the police patronage systems that existed under urban political machines of the late nineteenth century. Though progress was slow, modernizing police departments became increasingly proactive and professional: well-trained and (in theory) nonpartisan officers patrolling streets, increasingly mobilizing the latest in modern technology, from radios to patrol cars to handguns (for a general overview of this period see [Walker and Katz 2018](#), pp. 30–44).

As police departments gradually professionalized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Christians voiced their support and developed ministry initiatives for officers. The Christian Police Association, a ministry to officers founded in 1883 in London, established over 120 branches throughout Europe and the U.S. Christians from across the denominational and theological spectrum praised police and anti-crime efforts as sacred. Indeed, many progressive Christians, who typically looked askance at punitive sentiment and violence, nevertheless exhibited a strong degree of trust in law enforcement as a means to achieve social justice. For instance, Charles Sheldon, the social gospel icon who coined the phrase “What would Jesus do?”, wrote in the popular publication *Christian Herald* of his hope that police could serve as “missionaries” to urban slums. Just as well-educated, compassionate missionaries had helped bring “civilization” to indigenous pagan peoples across the globe, a highly trained, culturally sensitive “missionary police” force could do the same for crime-ridden cities. Sheldon was aware of problems with narrow denominational loyalties, police corruption, and vindictive violence. However, he believed that “missionary police” could stand apart from sectarian politics and religion, and resist bribery and a vengeful spirit. Crucially, missionary police could also operate without prejudice, for they would gain cultural sensitivity through training and by living in the communities they served ([Sheldon 1925](#); [Griffith 2020](#), pp. 18–19, 44).

Sheldon’s police prescriptions reflected the colonialist humanitarian sentiments common among Protestants at the time, but his awareness of prejudicial law enforcement practices was apt ([Curtis 2018](#)). Just as early American law enforcement served to reinforce the nation’s white supremacist status quo by patrolling for escaped slaves, the modernizing law enforcement profession’s growth was marked by a continued expression of racist assumptions concerning the supposed criminality of black people and others deemed “outsiders” to American culture ([Walker and Katz 2018](#), p. 28; [Muhammad 2010](#)). Police focused patrols on black and immigrant neighborhoods, and routinely mistreated and brutalized residents with impunity ([Felker-Kantor 2018](#), pp. 21–23).

A “new” evangelical movement took hold in the postwar era, and it furthered the linkage between Christianity and police work. As some liberal Protestant leaders began exhibiting more critical sensibilities with regard to criminal justice in the 1960s and after, evangelicals urged respect for the law enforcement profession and pushed for policies and resources to aid and protect them. Pro-police evangelical sentiment was emboldened

in the aftermath of civil rights protests and urban uprisings of the mid-to-late sixties, like the 1965 Watts uprising in Los Angeles. Though many uprisings were responses to established patterns of police brutality against black Americans, leading evangelical figures and institutions such as Billy Graham and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) spoke in strong terms of their support for law enforcement and law and order more generally. As one NAE 1966 “Law and Order” resolution stated, “We deplore the un-American mood which has invaded our society which demonstrates itself as godless, revolutionary and disloyal to the government . . . We commend our law enforcement agencies who seek to fulfil their divinely endowed function of maintaining peace and safety and offer our assistance and cooperation in every way consistent with Christian principles” (Felker-Kantor 2018, pp. 19–42; Griffith 2020, pp. 120, 131–32; Policy Resolutions Adopted by the National Association of Evangelicals 1966).

Evangelicals started their own organizations to aid police, like the Fellowship of Christian Policemen (later known as the Fellowship of Christian Peace Officers) in 1971. Over one hundred FCPO chapters would form by 1983. Today there are over 250 local chapters with over 4000 officer members (Griffith 2020, pp. 159–60; Martini 2011; Our History n.d.). As public concerns about crime and social disorder grew, pop cultural products and evangelistic police outreach emerged in evangelical quarters that sought to explain the work of policing and advocate for its inherently Christian quality. For example, the seventies book and film combo *Barrett* told the true life story of a Christian police officer who made a dramatic hostage rescue, found his faith renewed, and embraced opportunities to tell colleagues and criminals alike the good news of Jesus Christ. The film would be shown by the FCPO at churches nationwide, including one showing in 1977 that attracted 1315 people. A similar film, *Heaven’s Heroes*, was released in 1980. Produced by Mark IV Pictures (whose earlier claim to cinematic fame was 1972’s evangelical end-times hit *A Thief in the Night*), *Heaven’s Heroes* told the true story of a Des Moines officer who embraced a Christian call to police work. He loses his life on the line of duty, but not before bravely saving the lives of others and sharing his faith with his partner on the force. Christian police leaders would also speak at churches and colleges, and were featured in Christian magazines and by publishing houses (Barrett 1976, 1978; Griffith 2020, pp. 161–65; *Heaven’s Heroes* 1980).

3. Romans 13 and American Policing

In these various forums, evangelical law enforcement advocates propounded theological justifications for their work and the expansion of Christian political and cultural influence more generally. Often police reported struggling with their vocations, particularly the possibility that they would need to use violent force in the line of duty. When one officer in *Heaven’s Heroes* wonders how someone could ever be a cop and a Christian, his partner responds that police are actually “God’s authority,” and that this notion has biblical support. Other evangelicals likewise turned to the scriptures for authoritative answers, and the passages they chose to appeal indicated a strong confidence in state authority and law enforcement.

When the officer in *Heaven’s Heroes* offers his Christian defense of policing, he references Romans 13. Verses from this biblical text also appear onscreen at the opening of the film. This reference was far from unique. With policing, Romans 13 has been (and remains) the go-to biblical reference for Christians to justify the work of modern law enforcement. Key verses from the chapter, written by the apostle Paul to the church in Rome, include: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (verse 1); “For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong.” (verse 3a); and “For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. However, if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (verse 4) (New International Version).

In this passage, Paul outlines exhortations to Christians to respect governing authority. Scholars have puzzled over this passage, with some even contending its abrupt quality and departure from other prominent concerns in Romans signals a possible textual redaction by an outside editor. Others have argued the passage is very much in line with Paul's thinking elsewhere, particularly his warnings against extremist temptations for Christians anticipating an overturning of the present age (Moo 1996, pp. 808–9). Still others have contended that the passage must be exegeted with reference to Paul's own clear awareness of the problems of human government, as evidenced by his experience of persecution and his reference to the oppressive authority of Pharaoh elsewhere in Romans (McCaulley 2020, pp. 25–46).

Practical application of the passage has proven more contested than its exegesis by biblical scholars. American Christians have long argued about the possibilities and limits of Paul's instructions, particularly when governmental authority seems to directly contradict divine instructions elsewhere in scripture. These debates reached fever pitch in the 1850s, as Americans debated the broad question of slavery's biblical warrant and whether obedience to pro-slavery laws (like the Fugitive Slave Act) was mandated by passages like Romans 13 (Noll 2006, p. 35; Mullen 2018). Debate over reconciling the Bible's simultaneous respect for and rejections of governing authority was reignited in the Civil Rights era, as preachers like Martin Luther King, Jr. declared the rightful priority of divine love over unjust state laws that mandated segregation.

Postwar evangelicals, however, were quite confident that Romans 13 and the biblical witness more generally contained clear instructions about modern law enforcement, repeatedly referencing the passage in defenses of police authority and conduct, sometimes alongside condemnations of the civil disobedience of civil rights activists. The biblical text itself proved adaptable to this interpretation. *The Living Bible*, an approachable, expertly marketed evangelical paraphrase of the biblical text that catered to middle-class American readers, inserted "policeman" into verses 3 and 4 of Romans 13: "For the policeman does not frighten people who are doing right; but those doing evil will always fear him . . . The policeman is sent by God to help you. But if you are doing something wrong, of course you should be afraid, for he will have you punished" (*The Living Bible* 1971). This was an interpretive stretch; policing was a modern innovation, despite its broad parallel with Roman soldiering of the first century. However, given that *The Living Bible* was wildly popular (it was the best-selling book in the US in 1972 and 1973), it was nonetheless an interpretation that would be read and repeated by many in American homes and churches (Vaca 2017, pp. 172–75).

The 1977 book *Holy Smokies* by Minneapolis police officer and preacher Al Palmquist (with a foreword penned by Billy Graham) offers an emblematic example of evangelical interpretations of Romans 13 with reference to policing. Palmquist, as with many Christian police narratives of the 1970s, wrestles in the book with the spiritual validity of his vocation. However, a clarifying moment comes when, in a moment that calls to mind Augustine of Hippo's conversion, Palmquist opens his Bible directly to Romans 13. "What I saw started me . . . It was as if I'd been blind and the scales had suddenly fallen from my eyes. I could see!" Noting that he was using *The Living Bible*, an elated Palmquist finds that the passage was in fact offering support for his profession: "Paul was talking about me, a street cop!" Not only this, policing was a *ministry*, a calling of servanthood bestowed by God, one that even raised the possibility of using violent force justly. Substituting his sidearm for "sword," Palmquist noted that the passage justified the use of his weapon (albeit defensively). "I wasn't bearing or toting the 0.357 magnum in vain! . . . I didn't have to wonder any more whether or not I was doing what He wanted me to do. I was!" (Palmquist and Hovelsrud 1977, pp. 74–75).

Palmquist, like other evangelicals, was under no illusions that temporal means like policing could secure eternal victory over sin. As evangelicals had argued in years past, the fundamental goal was not that criminals would be punished but that their souls would be saved. Palmquist therefore urged Christian officers to share the gospel on the beat

and warned against the overly punitive sentiments that were becoming attractive to many (Palmquist and Hovelsrud 1977, pp. 108–10). Indeed, drawing on his experience working in David Wilkerson’s Teen Challenge rehab center, he developed his own ministry to addicts and delinquents as complement to his patrol duties. Palmquist’s words and work here indicated that evangelical police culture was not totally punitive or retributive. As other evangelicals argued at the time, the hope was that police would work as humanitarian servants in their communities. Indeed, Robert Vernon, a Christian Los Angeles Police Department leader and a regular speaker to evangelical churches, was a leading proponent of community policing practices that attempted to improve officers’ relationships with neighborhoods they patrolled through proactive cooperation and conversation (Vernon 1974, 1993; Vernon and Lasley 1992; Griffith 2020, pp. 163–65).

4. Evangelical Law Enforcement’s “Focus on the Family”

Policing also proved to be a topic that could be linked to other signature evangelical issues, like family values. For example, in 1993 the evangelical family values ministry Focus on the Family published a book by Vernon, then the assistant chief of police at the LAPD. This was not a surprising development, given that Focus on the Family founder James Dobson’s famous parenting book *Dare to Discipline* contained warnings about youth lawlessness and a chapter on the disciplinary dangers of drugs (the LAPD provided Dobson material for the chapter) (Dobson 1970). However, in Vernon’s book law enforcement and crime issues were on full display. Vernon focused on the 1992 Rodney King uprising that wracked Los Angeles, which Vernon attributed less to the racism of the LAPD (despite the violent beating of the African-American King by officers and long history of complaints by black residents about the department) and more to the loss of family values in American society. This was the true root cause of the chaos on display. The answer to problems like these was to renew America’s commitment to family, the objective moral truths of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the police themselves (who, Vernon assured readers, were supported by most of the African American community) (Vernon 1993). These points echoed those of southern California pastor John MacArthur, whose large Grace Community Church was where Vernon served as an elder. “The only thing that keeps [sin] in control is the family and the government,” MacArthur preached the week of the riots. “As soon as the family disintegrates, and as soon as you lose respect for the family and the family is no longer there with its loving authority . . . you lose respect for the society and the government itself and it’s no longer there with wise moral strong leadership, you will have all hell break loose.” Citing Romans 13, MacArthur warned of the consequences of this breakdown in terms of resistance to law enforcement: “These people are not just opposing the police; they’re opposing God, almighty holy God” (MacArthur 1992). The *Los Angeles Times* noted that MacArthur did not speak to the matter of the acquittals of the officers who had themselves broken the law in their beating of King (God-Ordained 1992).

The humanitarian, community-focus of evangelical policing and the enmeshment of law enforcement and family values concerns broadened evangelical police culture beyond a simplistic punitive calculus. However, at the same time, it extended the power of the police and offered evangelical policing advocates a way to avoid discussing racism and systemic social problems. Activists also complained that community policing initiatives, like those advocated by Vernon, were little more than public relations stunts that fundamentally did little to address the problems in American policing (and even expanded officers’ footprints in communities under the guise of community engagement) (Felker-Kantor 2018, p. 114; Schenwar and Law 2020, pp. 141–72). As evidenced by Vernon’s remarks about the support of black residents, evangelicals also framed policing as colorblind and a guarantor of security for racial minorities. This argumentation did accurately correspond to the history of black communities and ministers who demanded more policing as a mode of securing their neighborhoods, especially once drugs began filtering into cities in the 1960s and 70s (Fortner 2015; Forman 2017). However, most of these ministers also pushed for economic, educational, and social services that would address the profound disparities brought

about by entrenched segregation and racism. Evangelicals like Vernon parted ways here. Instead of talking about legacies of racism and poverty, evangelicals focused instead on conservative values such as fatherhood and individual responsibility, and dismissed the idea that state programs could address rampant inequality. This colorblind, individualistic conceptualization would make it all the more difficult to challenge police brutality or the expanding carceral state, entrenching the ongoing racial and economic inequality evident in police encounters and the growing criminal justice system itself.

Each of these features was present in the 2011 film *Courageous*. Produced by a small Christian studio also known for popular films like *Facing the Giants* and *Fireproof*, *Courageous* was a hit, grossing \$35 million at the box office on a \$2 million budget, with the fifth strongest opening ever for a Christian film at the time (only behind the *Passion of the Christ* and the *Chronicles of Narnia* films) ([Courageous n.d.](#); [Subers 2011](#)). The film tells the story of a group of police officers in contemporary Albany, GA, and the relational challenges they face with their families and friends. Though most of the main characters in the film are officers, the primary concern of the film is fatherhood. The officers learn that they must take responsibility for leading their families and loving their children, even gathering together at one point as a group to pledge their commitment to Christian fatherhood in a formal ceremony. Fatherhood is not only a positive good in the film; its absence presents profoundly damaging consequences. Several minor and major characters speak of the trauma they experienced because they lacked loving and present fathers. Indeed, America's crime problems at large are linked in the film to the national crisis of fatherhood. One character muses, "if fathers would just do what they were supposed to do half of the junk that we face on the streets wouldn't exist."

The final scene of the film shows the main character summing up the lessons he and his friends have learned, in an address to his church: "as a law enforcement officer I've seen firsthand the deep hurt and devastation that fatherlessness brings to a child's life. Our prisons are full of men and women who lived recklessly after being abandoned by their fathers . . . Many of these children now follow the same pattern of irresponsibility that their fathers did . . . a father should love his children [and] discipline them" ([Kendrick 2011](#)). The message is clear: societal renewal depends on Christian men courageously embracing their calling as fathers.

Fatherhood is the message, but policing is the medium. Much of the film focuses on police work, some mundane, some dangerous. Most of the gang members and criminals represented in the movie are black, with the primary "villain" (a car thief, drug dealer, and attempted cop-killer) wearing stereotypical black male clothing and exhibiting "street" mannerisms and language. Though race is never directly addressed in the film, the police and group of fathers are themselves a multi-racial crew, and a black officer serves as one of the main exponents of the importance of fatherhood and patriarchal concern for vulnerable women. One of the officers in the film is found to be corrupt (stealing drugs from the evidence locker), but the rest of the officers act valiantly and repeatedly bless their community with their courage. In its locating of the sources of criminality in broken families and black "street" culture, its lauding of fatherhood, and its focus on the heroism of Christian officers, *Courageous* is a culmination of the linkage of modern evangelical family values culture with their understandings of race and policing. The work of policing itself and the structural problems that might explain the broader context for poverty and crime in a context like south Georgia (a region with a long history of Christian support for segregation) remain unexplored ([Quiros 2018](#)).

Other recent scholarly works illuminate this linkage. Kristen Kobes Du Mez argues in *Jesus and John Wayne* that militant patriarchy has been historically constitutive of modern evangelicalism. Therefore, the political rise of Donald Trump, the masculine strongman *par excellence*, on the shoulders of 81% of the white evangelical vote should have been expected. However, we can push this point further. It is not simply that evangelicals have wanted a strong man like John Wayne who exemplifies the disciplined patriarch. They also want the role John Wayne the actor played on screen: a gun-toting enforcer, lawman, and protector

of the social order (and someone whose well-documented racism could be minimized in favor of other positive qualities) (Kobes Du Mez 2020, pp. 57–58). Similarly, as historian Paul Renfro has shown in his study of the influence of late twentieth-century moral panics concerning child abductions on the growth of the carceral state, “family values” and “law and order” frames are “interlocking” (Renfro 2020, p. 7). Cowboy masculine idealism, the “child safety regime,” and Christian police enforcing both the law and the definitions of fatherhood and the traditional nuclear family—each of these feeds the fascination, as Renfro puts it, with the “normative, patriarchal, procreative family as a ‘disciplinary matrix’—a site of social control and a guarantor of social order” (Renfro 2020, p. 17) (Renfro’s reference to this “disciplinary matrix” is drawn from the work of J. Jack Halberstam, who in turn is engaging with Judith Butler, David Eng, and others (Halberstam 2011)).

5. Contemporary Evangelical Perceptions of Race and Policing

Evangelicals’ biblical and familial frameworks for supporting the work of police inform their contemporary perceptions of law enforcement. However, even with these frameworks in view, it is important to note that white evangelicals are not the only Americans who have indicated strong support of law enforcement. 2017 polling showed that 20% of white evangelicals rated the work of US police as “excellent,” and 51% rated it as “good.” White mainline Protestant and white Catholic poll numbers were similar. However, race is a key marker of difference. For black Protestants, 17% rated police as “excellent” and 28% rated “good” (27% rated fair, and 28% poor). The difference was even starker when pollsters inquired about police treatment of minorities: 68% of white evangelicals and 58% of mainline Protestants gave a positive rating here, compared to only 25% of black Protestants (Shellnutt 2017).

There is evidence of some recent changes regarding perceptions of police violence against black Americans, though, importantly, not among evangelicals. In 2015 polling showed that majorities of white mainline Protestants and white Catholics believed police killings of black men were isolated incidents (73% and 71%, respectively) and not evidence of a broader problem of systemic racism. This paralleled white evangelicals’ response (72%). However, as policing has become increasingly contested in the aftermath of the highly publicized police killings of black people such as Michael Brown, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, many Americans (including many Christians) have begun contending for significant reform of police departments, and potentially their defunding. Polling in 2020 showed that, while white evangelical attitudes toward police remained the same, white mainline Protestants and Catholics’ responses shifted. That year, only 53% and 56%, respectively, saw the police killing of black men by police as isolated incidents, a drop that reflects the broader loss of public confidence in the police (Public Religion Research Institute 2020; Ortiz 2020).

In a time when police departments are under heightened scrutiny, evangelicals maintain their historic support for law enforcement and skepticism of racial problems within the profession. Politicians know this, and as they court white evangelical voters they speak in aggressive tones about the noble work of law enforcement. More than any other politician, Donald Trump’s campaigns and presidency were marked by recurring appeals to white evangelicals that link religion and support of the police. There was no purer distillation of these appeals than Trump’s Bible-wielding photo op in front of St. John’s Episcopal Church across from the White House in the midst of national protests of police killings of black people, a moment made possible via violent clearing of protestors and press in Lafayette Park by armed police and the military. Though Trump was widely criticized for the incident, he contended for the widespread acceptance of the sacred, “symbolic” power of his actions. “Most religious leaders loved it,” he claimed (Rascoe and Keith 2020).

The “religious leaders” Trump was referring to were his vocal white evangelical supporters. Evangelical leaders such as religious right icon Ralph Reed and Southern Baptist pastor Robert Jeffress praised the president’s actions at St. John’s (it was “completely appropriate,” Jeffress remarked). According to Johnnie Moore, one of Trump’s evangelical

advisors, the president was “defying those who aim to derail our national healing by spreading fear, hate & anarchy” (Coppins 2020; Boorstein and Bailey 2020).

Trump’s evangelical allies, lining up with white evangelical sentiment more broadly, also signaled strong support for America’s police around the same time. Frequently citing Romans 13 as scriptural support, evangelical pastors and Trump supporters such as Jack Graham and Robert Jeffress argued, in the midst of national protests against police violence, that “to resist law and order is to rebel against God.” They urged fellow believers to “defend, don’t defund, the police” (Jeffress’ church, the immense First Baptist Church in Dallas, handed out yard signs to members with this latter slogan) (Graham 2020c; Dobbs and Jeffress 2020).

White evangelicals who wish to signal police support have also been increasingly concerned with staving off criticisms that their comments are racially insensitive or overlook police misconduct. In 2015 evangelist Franklin Graham drew criticism after he shared a social media post that said, “Listen up—Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and everybody else. Most police shootings can be avoided. It comes down to respect for authority and obedience . . . Even if you think the police officer is wrong—YOU OBEY . . . Some of the unnecessary shootings we have seen recently might have been avoided” (Fowler 2015). By contrast, white evangelicals (including Graham) in 2020 took pains to decry racism and note African-American support as they defended police (Graham 2020b). Vice president Mike Pence, an evangelical himself, did the same, pledging in his religiously infused 2020 Republican National Committee nomination speech that “we will keep supporting law enforcement and keep supporting our African-American and minority communities across this land for four more years.” This was a multi-racial vision of godly security: “We will have law and order on the streets of this country for every American of every race and creed and color” (Epstein 2020).

6. Ministering to the Ministers

Whatever one thinks about law enforcement’s place in American life at present, it is undeniable that the work of the profession itself is a challenge. Policing is stressful. Difficult work conditions, late-night shifts, and physical confrontations make for severe emotional and bodily consequences, taxing on officers and their families alike. Depression, alcoholism, substance abuse, and posttraumatic stress are common, with a 2017 report showing an average of 130 law enforcement officer suicides in the U.S. per year, more than officer shootings and traffic accidents combined (O’Hara 2017). Rates of depression and officer suicide in large cities are even more pronounced (Smith 2019).

In recent years evangelicals have attempted to answer these problems not only in public debate, but by ministering to and speaking with officers directly. In encounters with officers in print and in person, evangelicals continue to emphasize the divine calling of policing. At the same time, however, they have developed an expressly *sentimental* mode of speaking about the work of policing, characterized by language of love, self-help, and familial relationality.

6.1. Police Bibles

Police officers seeking scriptural solace have different Bibles customized for their profession to choose from, including Zondervan’s *Peacemakers New Testament* (produced in partnership with the American Police Chaplains Association), Holman Bible Publisher’s *Law Enforcement Officer’s Bible*, and the American Bible Society’s *Strength for the Street (NIV Peacemakers New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs 2016; CSB Law Enforcement Officer’s Bible 2017; Holy Bible: Strength for the Street 2016)*. Each offers a different scriptural translation: the New International Version, Christian Standard Bible, and Good News Translation, respectively. However, they are united in their aesthetic: blue and black hues and front-cover police badge seals. As mentioned earlier, the cover of *Strength for the Street* is the most striking: black, with a “thin blue line” wrapped all the way around. On the back cover the blue line intersects with a black-and-white American flag. The “thin blue line”

flag image has been a subject of controversy, as it became increasingly common in the years following highly publicized incidents of law enforcement violence in the mid-2010s. Many police and their supporters fly the flag or wear an image of it as a sign of support for the profession, though it has also been a known favorite of white supremacists (a connection that major sellers of the flag deny nonetheless) (Chammah and Aspinwall 2020).

The main purpose of these Bibles is to offer officers encouragement and general spiritual guidance. As the prayer opening *Strength for the Street* reads, officers “are hurting and need help . . . be their comfort, their healing, and their support.” Officers are told they are beloved children of God, who loves them like a father. Indeed, they can rest in this fact, repeating “Abba” to themselves as they breathe in and out during moments of quiet meditation (Miller 2016, p. 3; *Holy Bible: Strength for the Street* 2016). Topics in the Holman bible include the need to cultivate a prayer life and quiet spirit, the benefits of positivity, and tips for improving one’s marriage. Officers are urged to resist the pull of macho, tough “Dirty Harry”-style police personae and instead cultivate a loving relationship with Christ, “the most pro-cop person in the universe.” Jesus asks police officers “to take off your ‘Dirty Harry’ mask. He wants to behold his most beautiful child with nothing to hinder his view” (Meeks 2017). Guest authors elsewhere in the Holman Bible recognize the emotional burdens and traumas officers bear, and draw on therapeutic language in response, prescribing positivity, prayer, and solitude (Davis 2017, p. 1092).

The inside cover of the *Peacemakers New Testament* opens with “the Policeman’s Prayer,” a short poem that asks God for wisdom and protection of the officer’s wife and children. Short devotional exhortations spread throughout the NIV Bible counsel officers on topics such as stress, suicide, and the dangers of substance abuse. The Bible concludes with a Romans road-style exhortation to the reader to dedicate their lives to Christ, entitled a “Situation Report” about “who we are” (sinners) and “what God is doing to redeem us” (offering love and forgiveness through Christ) (*NIV Peacemakers New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs* 2016).

Other parts of the Bibles describe the biblical rationale for policing and highlight the Christian vision of *shalom* that should motivate police to do their jobs justly. Officers are to pray that God’s “definition of justice” is at the “center” of their work while asking for divine help “to defend the weak, vulnerable, outcast and oppressed.” Romans 13 is referenced in the Bibles’ devotional materials, but so is Romans 12, as a way to understand the divine calling of policing work as it relates to love for one’s neighbors. Police are to pray that God’s love would rule in their lives as they “carry out [God’s] higher Law: ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’” They are to be, as the *NIV Peacemakers New Testament* puts it, “God’s servant warriors” (*NIV Peacemakers New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs* 2016, pp. 3–4).

It is crucial to note that the police-themed content of these Bibles is not doctrinally divisive. There are no denominational particularities evident, and few discussions of controversial issues. It is an approach that has even proved amenable to non-Christians. One Muslim imam and police chaplain in Indianapolis reported his support for the ABS Bible and willingness to utilize it in the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department: “Everybody understands the language of compassion. Everybody understands the language of mercy and being there to support them” (McQuaid 2019).

6.2. Christian Law Enforcement Retreats

Evangelicals also offer options for police in need of more personal spiritual support. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association houses the leading evangelical ministry to police. The BGEA’s National Law Enforcement Ministry’s aim is, in the words of one of its founders, to provide for the “spiritual fitness” of law enforcement (Naber 2018). Its initiatives include a Critical Incidence Response Ministry, which sends teams of trained crisis counselors to locations where traumatic incidents have occurred (like officer deaths), and a law enforcement chaplaincy program that offers training to Christians to provide

“emotional and spiritual care to law enforcement officers” (National Law Enforcement Ministry: Law Enforcement Chaplain Training Program n.d.).

In 2013 the BGEA held its first annual National Law Enforcement Retreat, a gathering in North Carolina (later expanding to Texas) organized to help officers struggling emotionally and spiritually in the midst of their pressure-filled profession (the Southern Baptist Convention had held similar retreats a few years earlier (Higgins 2004)). Retreats have been held every year since. As one attendee put it in a promotional video, the retreats are “an opportunity to better deal with the trauma they face on a daily basis.” Fellowship with other officers and spiritual nourishment are the goals. As another officer attendee said, “here I’m able to hug my brother and say I understand, let’s pray together. That’s what takes those burdens off . . . it’s been giving me some tools to be a better husband and police officer at the same time . . . I feel good again, I feel ready to strap on that gear again. I feel light enough in my mind, and it’s because we got to come here.” The focus is on the inner lives of officers. “It’s a reset button,” as the BGEA’s Law Enforcement relations manager put it. “It’s about a heart change, it’s not just about a profession” (National Law Enforcement Ministry: Law Enforcement Appreciation Events n.d.).

Sessions at the retreats bear this vision out. Speakers tell officers that Jesus is with them and that he understands the challenges they face. Many sessions feature difficult, emotional stories of death, temptation, and loss from Christian police leaders, along with their remarkable testimonies of God’s faithfulness in the midst of trials they face on the job. Marriage and family are regular themes, as speakers encourage police and their spouses to develop habits of listening, honesty, and spending time together. One attendee testified to the power of these messages and the fellowship of the officers at the retreats: “when I came here in 2016 I was broken. But I had an opportunity to sit amongst my fellow brothers and sisters in blue and share stories and weep with them. And it rejuvenated me to get back out there” (National Law Enforcement Ministry n.d.).

God’s divine purpose for police work is also an overriding concern at the retreats. Romans 13 is frequently cited, often as a way to reassure officers that their work is divinely ordained and aligned with God’s purposes for the world. “The Lord hasn’t called us to a job,” one speaker proclaimed in 2015, “he has called us to a ministry . . . we’re not cops, we’re servants of God” (Parker 2015). Elsewhere speakers exhorted attendees to remember that their work is part of God’s victory against the forces of darkness and the chaotic powers and principalities of Satan. Even to quit the force is to walk away from God’s purposes. One speaker exhorted officers to stick with their calling, and for spouses to realize that law enforcement work is of critical importance even though it makes for stressful marriages. They must not quit. After all, God “has chosen you and me . . . how dare you walk away?” (Parker 2020).

6.3. Policing and the Power of Evangelical Sentimentality

Whether reading police Bibles or attending these Christian law enforcement retreats, in the therapeutic encouragement and exhortations regarding their divine calling, police officers encounter a *sentimentalized* mode of evangelical faith. Sentimentality is a feature of modern evangelicalism that is often overlooked, due to many observers’ focus on evangelical influence in politics, conservative doctrinal boundary-drawing, and “culture war” issues. However, the evangelical sentimental impulse is powerful, as evidenced by the extremely popular array of books, sermons, and paraphernalia that convey messages about Christian emotion and loving, familial connection (to God and one another) from popular authors and pastors such as Max Lucado, Joel Osteen, and Rick Warren. Drawing upon philosopher Robert Solomon, Todd Brenneman has conceptualized evangelical sentimentality as “an appeal to tender feelings” (Solomon’s words), suffused with tropes of the fatherhood of God; the infancy of human beings; and the nostalgia of home and the nuclear family. As Max Lucado has written in one of his works (that in total have sold more than 100 million copies), “God is *for* you. Turn to the sidelines; that’s God cheering your run . . .” (Brenneman 2013, pp. 2–6).

The sentimental focus on God's infatuating love for individuals is domesticated, in that the homespun language of fatherhood and early childhood becomes the primary framework by which many modern evangelicals conceptualize their relationship to God. However, this does not mean that evangelical sentimentality lacks political consequences. Notions of fatherhood, the home, and family are both the mediums and the message for evangelical politics, sites of authority and the very issues of political concern themselves for believers. But decoding when and where evangelical sentimentality goes to work politically is a challenge for observers and opponents alike, due to the "obfuscating power" of its seemingly apolitical nature and redirection away from structural problems (Brenneman 2013, pp. 6–14, 114).

In his analysis of the politics of evangelical sentimentality, Brenneman focuses on mobilization of "Christian America" tropes, the ways sentiment offers cover for evangelicals' "personal influence" strategy of social change, the fearful foil of violence mobilized by Jack Chick tracts and *Left Behind* novels, and, most importantly, the domestic nostalgia of family values politics. Evangelicals, Brenneman contends, "rely on the combination of sentiment and fear to police gender roles" (Brenneman 2013, pp. 133–34, 138; see also Bivins 2008). However, given the animating presence of these tropes within their law enforcement ministry, we might also say that evangelicals rely on this combination to simply *police*.

Though sentimental language is proffered to give officers confidence and a sense of their work's meaningfulness and spiritual vocation, it is also here that the sentimental register exerts political consequences. Officers' use of violence is rarely glorified by speakers in Christian police retreats, but it is assumed (and sometimes directly declared) that violent force is not only just, but ordained by God. One BGEA retreat speaker urged retreat attendees to view their work as a divine mission against Satan, "the invasion of God into darkness." The speaker, an officer himself, then told the story of his own pursuit of a drug dealer, being shot at, and returning fire. "By the grace of God he missed, and by the wrath of God I didn't. And he's under that sheet, not me. Only by God's grace. This ended the way it did because I wasn't alone" (Amos 2020). The act of killing is narrated as an act of grace. Though the shooting was in self-defense, the broader implication here (and elsewhere, as speakers narrate the work of arrests and the putting down of protest and civil unrest) is that violent, even fatal expressions of police power are endowed with divine blessing. With this blessing, critique and scaling back of police power becomes all the more difficult, as evidenced by the several speakers at retreats who complained about the prospect of having their departments lose funding in the aftermath of "defund the police" activism. "There shouldn't be any worry about equipment or overtime," one speaker argued. "This is a serious issue . . . we are going to fight this thing all the way" (Williams 2020; Graham 2020a).

Evangelical religion aids in this politicizing sentimentalization process. It attempts to resolve the increasingly charged public debate about policing (and police funding) not by focusing on structural matters, critical conversations about the use of force, or even the size and scope of police departments (though undoubtedly most evangelical police advocates are against defund-the-police measures). Instead, evangelical police culture zeroes in on the hearts of law enforcement officers themselves. As the police chief of Birmingham, AL said in a video promoting the BGEA law enforcement retreats and urging command staff to support the attendance of their officers, "we have to make sure we do everything we can to protect and support their hearts. Because policing is a profession of the heart" (National Law Enforcement Ministry n.d.).

In his work on evangelical influence in Latin American anti-gang initiatives and prisons, anthropologist Kevin Lewis O'Neill has argued that a similar process happens when ministers focus on matters of self-esteem and individual transformation of gang members rather than the clear economic and political reasons for why gangs develop and persist. Ministers evince "a mode of Christian governance that polices the soul instead of the streets . . . Public concern gets mapped onto rather private spaces" (O'Neill 2010, pp. 82–83; 2015). In the same way, evangelicals have taken the focus of problems of

policing out of the streets (and out of the city council or state legislature) and put it in the hearts of officers. The effect, however, is that the power of policing, and its violent possibilities, ultimately is not questioned or challenged. This is, to paraphrase O'Neill, a form of governance that polices the souls of police, so that they might govern the streets all the more powerfully.

Sometimes political consequences filter through by what is not said. One 2014 retreat speaker directly confronted the charged matter of Michael Brown's killing by a Ferguson, MO police officer the year before, and the accompanying protests of police throughout the nation. How is it, he argued, "as a white Christian police officer [that] now I am a racist bigot hate group?" Gesturing to African American officers in the room, he went on: "How is it that you became seen as an 'Uncle Tom' racist bigot hate group?" He continued on, lamenting the fact that officers lack support from public and departmental administrators alike (Hensley 2014). Complaints and laments like these were a common feature of other retreat talks as well, as speakers framed these challenges as part of the broader condition of trauma that officers faced. However, though this was a live political issue, one that encompassed debates about race, use of force, and police funding, the retreat speakers largely sidestepped direct or critical consideration of any of these topics. The "how is it?" questions remained unanswered, as speakers showcased little to no willingness to engage the well-known racial disparities endemic in American criminal justice or the historic racist actions and policies of police departments. The answer was not to be found in any of the policy solutions or consideration of debates about the scope and purpose of policing, but instead in the transformed, steeled hearts of Christian officers who could bear one another's burdens and accept their call from God.

Critics of contemporary American policing often frame the problems as matters of militarization, of rampant, uncontrolled violent force. There is often a great deal of public focus on "warrior cops" and their associated weaponry and violent tactics, such as machine guns, flashbang grenades, tanks, and chokeholds (Balko 2014). Reforms therefore typically target problems in this vein (chokehold bans, body cameras that record arrests), or stress the need for better community-police relationships. However, understanding modern policing with a "warrior" lens alone is incomplete. At the same time, we should also take into account the ways a kind of "soft" security functions through sentimentalization of policing (O'Neill 2015, pp. 10–11). Language of God's love and presence in the midst of trauma and stress brings comfort to officers, as police are narrated as "just like us"—they are humans with vocational, relational, emotional, and spiritual needs. Their trauma is to be expected given what they face on the job and they are, as retreat speakers constantly stress, *normal*. However, this actually indicates the core problem. In these retreats and police Bibles, we gain a glimpse of how violence to the bodies and souls of police themselves (as well as those who they surveil and arrest) is normalized, something that seems "naturally" human and an expected part of human societies. Sentimental concepts of God's presence in and purpose for officer's pain push aside any critical assessment that the work of modern policing is perhaps flawed itself.

Evangelical sentimentalization also informs the relationship of Christian police to the communities they patrol. Police are often idealized by evangelicals less as tough-minded, aggressive punishers of crime and more as devoted servants who love, serve, and relate to their communities as family and friends. As a prayer printed in the *Strength for the Street* Bible says, "I pray, Father, that somehow, some way, our officers would not see themselves as separate from the people they serve. We want to see relationships restored in this city and across our nation" (*Holy Bible: Strength for the Street* 2016). There is a correspondence in texts like these to the mentality undergirding community policing reform strategies, discussed earlier, that attempt to foster positive police-community relationships through improved communication and outreach to residents. However, in the same way that sentimentalization of individual officers obscures the broader systemic problems at work in American policing, this social sentimentalization of community policing likewise does not fundamentally challenge the power, funding, or deployment of police as a re-

sponse to social problems that could be addressed in other ways. Nor does it address the fact, as critics of community policing have pointed out, that the terms of community-police relationships are set by the police themselves, thus preventing true accountability (Vitale 2017, pp. 16–17; Schenwar and Law 2020, pp. 141–72).

7. Conclusions

Critical consideration of the connection of evangelicalism and policing should not allow observers to miss the very real problems of crime and violence that have wracked many American communities, or the personal traumas that officers experience. What it should do, however, is push observers to consider the ways evangelical religion, with its anti-statist impulses that combine sentimentality, family values, and divine sanction of state violence, limit consideration of other options for dealing with crime and personal trauma. Policing, as many have pointed out, is not the only way to deal with crime and community problems (Vitale 2017; Schenwar and Law 2020; Kaba 2020). It has not even proven to be among the *effective* ways to reduce crime over the long haul, as studies have shown no national correlation between police spending and crime rates (Bump 2020). Given the other options available for addressing root causes of crime and violence, as well as the immense personal costs officers endure as they go about their work, we might ask how evangelicals, and other citizens of our nation more generally, can consider new ways of understanding and addressing our present criminal justice problems and fractures. In doing so, we all might find our families, communities, and hearts renewed.

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