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Jon Ward (Courtesy of www.jonwardwrites.org/Lawrence Jackson)



by Maryanne Hannan

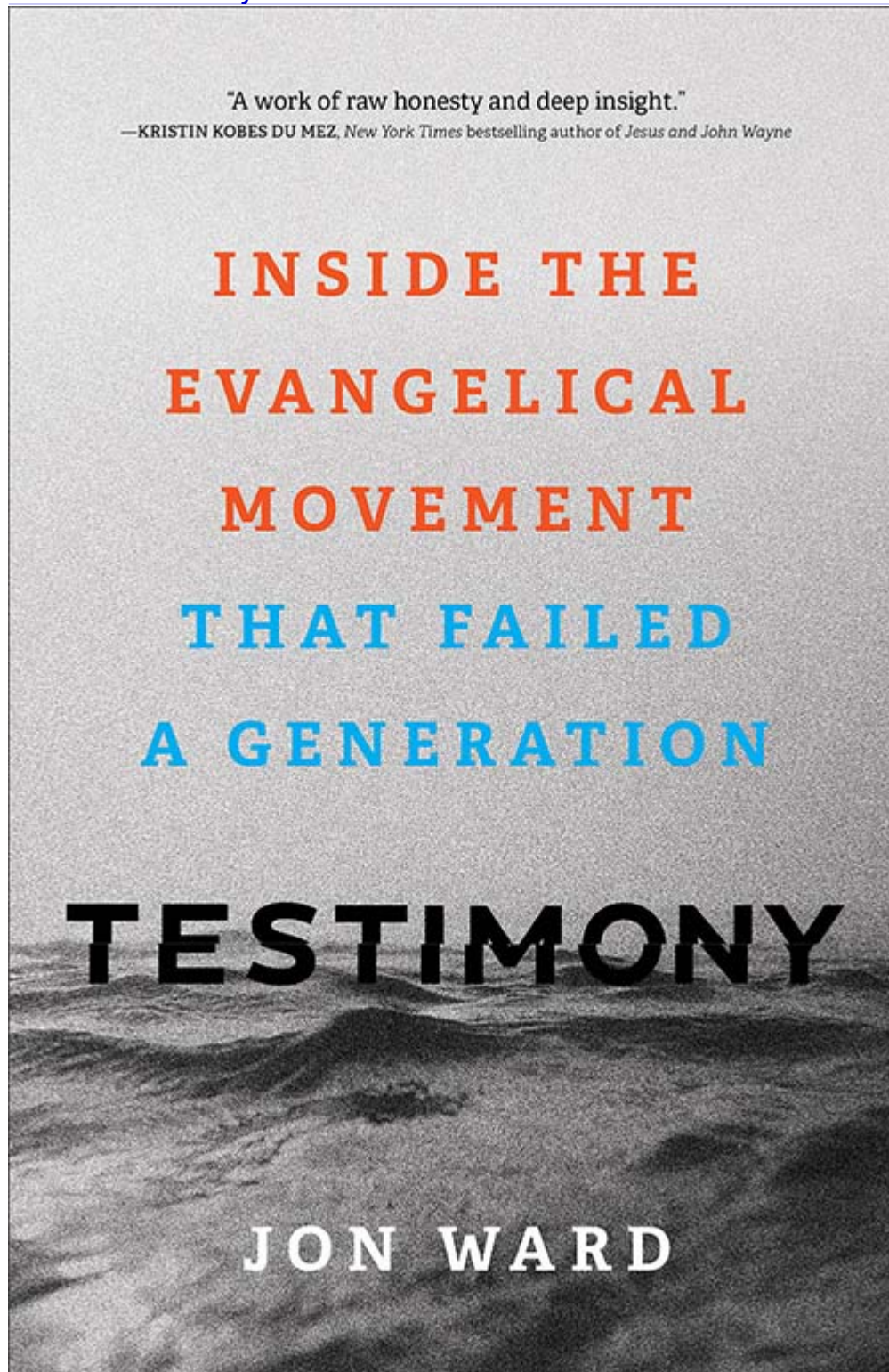
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Testimony: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Failed a Generation

Jon Ward

256 pages; Brazos Press

\$24.99

When historians of the future study this past decade, they will confront a great mystery: how — and why — American Christianity embraced the politics and the person of the 45th president of the United States. Fortunately, they will have one carefully documented contemporary account to consult, [*Testimony: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Failed a Generation*](#) by Jon Ward.

In three chronological sections, Ward documents his life from birth to early adulthood: from immersion in a conservative church culture, through disillusionment and finally to his eventual complete break from evangelicalism.

He slowly, painfully comes to realize, as he says in the book's introduction, "my own tribe of Christians has taken a battering ram to truth." *Testimony* is his attempt to set the record straight.

"Part 1: Growing Up Evangelical" covers the years 1977-2000, a seminal period in the development of what is broadly known as evangelical Christianity, those churches outside mainline Protestant denominations that have come to political prominence of late.



Jon Ward at age 20, being rebaptized at Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland, in 1997 (Courtesy of www.jonwardwrites.org)

Born to parents who were involved in the Jesus Movement of the '60s and '70s and its tangled aftermath, Ward had a front-row seat to the rise of disparate churches, internal disagreements and the personalities that led them. He was the first baby baptized in what would become Covenant Life Church, where his father was pastor. His parents' connections with C.J. Mahaney, Larry Tomczak, Lou Engle and other prominent religious leaders brought Ward close to becoming a leader in this world when he came of age.

Were it not for these connections and Ward's journalistic penchant for careful documentation, this book might be another coming-of-age memoir wherein the boy, locked in an enclosed, self-reinforcing world, gets wind of the power of critical thinking through education and slowly seeks out the truth for himself.

But Ward's is a mythic journey toward truth, and Jesus' teachings never lose their luster. Through all of his faith grievances, Ward never wavers in his fundamental trust in Jesus as "the way, the truth, and the life."

Meanwhile, as Ward struggles to accommodate himself to his tight church community, much is happening elsewhere. Religious and cultural conservatives consolidate around abortion, finding it successful in serving simultaneously as a wedge issue against those outside the church, and a bridge among those inside.

These years see the emergence of new initiatives — Promise Keepers and the annual March for Life, to name a few — as well as evangelical celebrities like Chuck Coulson and Jerry Falwell.

Less tangible forces also take root: the belief that America was chosen by God to be a Christian nation, the emphasis on a personal emotional experience of God, the withdrawal from all things political, and the diametric opposite of arguing for Christian beliefs in the public square.

It's a dizzying history, and Ward tries to make sense of the parallel trajectories. "I was suffocating," he finally acknowledges.

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"Part 2: Separation" covers the years 2001-12. As Ward loses connection with the church community of his youth, he finds a replacement in his near-zealous pursuit of truth discovered through his career in journalism.

At his work for the politically conservative Washington Times, he gets increasingly important assignments until finally becoming the correspondent to the George W. Bush White House. Toward the end of this period, he moves to Huff Post and enjoys ever more visibility and success, a valuable asset because of his extensive familiarity with conservative causes and ways of thinking; even so, he never stops

learning and keeps an open mind.

This book profits from the research skills Ward developed as a journalist. Many of his recollections are footnoted. He recorded sermons and took notes at seminars, preserved accounts from newsletters and documented revealing tweets before they were selectively taken down by their authors. His careful documentation preserves a history of this time that may have been lost otherwise. It makes for dense but valuable reading.

The final section, "Part 3: Reformation," covers the period 2013-22. This is better-trod territory, as versions of the experiences Ward recounts have been shared by many. Ward does an excellent job of recounting and analyzing the events of this period and managing to offer new insights into a now-familiar tale.

He moves to Yahoo News and pieces together the painful history of sexual abuse allegations in the Covenant Life Church and Sovereign Grace Ministries.

In researching Georgia's voting history, he discovers more vicious racial hatred than he had even imagined, often perpetrated by white Christians. He shares a newfound admiration for the black church, whose members keep faith alive despite challenges.

Ward's is a mythic journey toward truth, and Jesus' teachings never lose their luster.

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Over his life, Ward has honed a core belief in the possibility of truth where truth can be established, the need for faith when it cannot be — and the ability to discern the difference. In his mind, Trump is an anathema, his "unique and historic assault on truth was central to his malignance," and Ward blames churches for failing to teach discernment as part of discipleship.

But as he concludes the book, he recognizes that "seeking truth is not enough. Truth must be accompanied by love," which demands an active Christian presence in a messy world, through things like working for racial justice and an intelligent abandonment of single-issue voting.

Even as he calls for this, Ward makes a grim prediction, "I do not think most evangelicals will turn from their ways. It will have to start small, with a spark."

While he has achieved success and respect in the wider world, Ward is pained by the failure of family and friends to embrace that which he has, with such hard work and faithfulness, defined as truth. In his words, "I found it terrifying to watch many people I knew intensely and angrily support a prelude to fascism." This pain hovers over the book as a whole.

Testimony is not a perfect book. As a memoir, it comes close to inflicting unexamined collateral damage on family, friends and other-minded Christians. As a history, it veers toward the polemical, as evidenced by the subtitle and Ward's emphatic denunciations. As intellectual and cultural analysis, with its references to Gnosticism, Manichaeism and Makoto Fujimura's border-stalking, it is unsustained.

But Ward's generous, brutally honest account of his faith journey, his Christian *testimony*, is perfect for its time and perfect for me.