

THE OPINIONS ESSAY

Opinion Trump should fill Christians with rage. How come he doesn't?

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September 1, 2022 at 8:00 a.m. EDT



29 min

Options

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In many American places on a pleasant Sunday afternoon it is possible, as I recently did, to have coffee in the city at a bohemian cafe draped with rainbow banners, then to drive 30 or 45 minutes into the country to find small towns where Confederate and Trump flags are flown. The United States sometimes feels like two nations, divided by adornments defiantly affirming their political and cultural affinities.

Much of cosmopolitan America holds to a progressive framework of bodily autonomy, boundless tolerance and group rights — a largely post-religious morality applied with near-religious intensity. But as a religious person (on my better days), what concerns me are the perverse and dangerous liberties many believers have taken with their own faith. Much of what considers itself Christian America has assumed the symbols and identity of white authoritarian populism — an alliance that is a serious, unfolding threat to liberal democracy.

From one perspective, the Christian embrace of populist politics is understandable. The disorienting flux of American ethical norms and the condescension of progressive elites have incited a defensive reaction among many conservative religious people — a belief that they are outsiders in their own land. They feel reviled for opposing [gender ideology](#) that seems to have arrived just yesterday, or for [stating views on marriage](#) that [Barack Obama once held](#). They fear their values are under assault by an inexorable modernity, in the form of government, big business, media and academia.

Leaders in the Republican Party have fed, justified and exploited conservative Christians' defensiveness in service

to an aggressive, reactionary politics. This has included deadly mask and vaccine resistance, the discrediting of fair elections, baseless accusations of gay “grooming” in schools, the silencing of teaching about the United States’ history of racism, and (for some) a patently false belief that Godless conspiracies have taken hold of political institutions.

Some religious leaders have fueled the urgency of this agenda with apocalyptic rhetoric, in which the Christian church is under Neronian persecution by elites displaying Caligulan values. But the credibility of religious conservatives is undermined by the friends they have chosen to keep. Their political alignment with MAGA activists has given exposure and greater legitimacy to once-fringe ideas, including Confederate nostalgia, white nationalism, antisemitism, replacement theory and QAnon accusations of satanic child sacrifice by liberal politicians.

Surveying the transgressive malevolence of the radical right, one is forced to conclude: If this is not moral ruin, then there are no moral rules.

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The division between progressive and reactionary America does not fall neatly along the urban-rural divide. There are conservative megachurches in liberal strongholds, and Democratic-leaning minority groups in parts of rural America. But the electoral facts reveal a cultural conflict worsened by geographic sorting.

For decades, population density has been increasingly associated with partisan identification — the more dense, the more Democratic; the less dense, the more Republican. America might be united by its highways, but it is politically split along its beltways. Islands of urban, liberal blue dot a vast sea of rural, conservative red. And because the mechanisms that produce U.S. senators and electoral college electors skew in favor of geography over population, rural and small-town America starts with a distinct political advantage — the ability to transform fewer votes into better outcomes.

All this leaves portions of the nation boiling with righteous resentment. Many progressives feel cheated by a political system rigged by the Founders against them. Many religious conservatives feel despised by the broader culture and in need of political protection. In the United States, grievance is structural and is becoming supreme.

Anxious evangelicals have taken to voting for right-wing authoritarians who promise to fight their fights — not only Donald Trump, but increasingly, his many imitators. It has been said that when you choose your community, you choose your character. Strangely, evangelicals have broadly chosen the company of Trump supporters who deny any role for character in politics and define any useful villainy as virtue. In the place of integrity, the Trump movement has elevated a warped kind of authenticity — the authenticity of unfiltered abuse, imperious ignorance, untamed egotism and reflexive bigotry.

This is inconsistent with Christianity by any orthodox measure. Yet the discontent, prejudices and delusions of religious conservatives helped swell the populist wave that lapped up on the steps of the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. During that assault, Christian banners mixed with the iconography of white supremacy, in a manner that should have choked Christian participants with rage. But it didn’t.

Conservative Christians' beliefs on the nature of politics, and the content of their cultural nightmares, are directly relevant to the future of our whole society, for a simple reason: The destinies of rural and urban America are inextricably connected. It matters greatly if evangelicals in the wide, scarlet spaces are desensitized to extremism, diminished in decency and badly distorting the meaning of Christianity itself — as I believe many are.

To grasp how, and why, it's important to begin at the beginning.

History can be a strange and foreign place to visit. But Palestine in the first century A.D., when Jesus gathered his movement, holds a mirror to our times: It was a period of social unrest in which relatively minor provocations could lead to mass protests and violence — and when Christianity (initially the Jesus movement within Judaism) was founded as a revolt against the elites.

The Holy Land was riven by a culture war. On one side were Greek cultural imperialism and Rome's brutal occupation. On the other was a Jewish people committed to preserving its identity but divided between accommodation and violent resistance. Conflict often played out along an urban-rural divide. Cities were relatively cosmopolitan. The countryside was religiously conservative. And it was from the latter — the Galilean cultural backwater — that Jesus emerged.

Residents of Galilee, who spoke their native Aramaic with a distinct accent, were sometimes dismissed as hicks. More sophisticated Jews thought them ignorant of the Torah. But Galileans were highly religious and respectful of the temple cult in Jerusalem. Most were peasants who engaged in agriculture and fishing and lived in small villages. Jesus' hometown, Nazareth, probably counted 400 residents. When the future disciple Bartholomew first heard about Jesus, his response was revealingly dismissive: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

The lower classes in Galilee, according to recent studies, were routinely exploited by the wealthy, creating an undercurrent of economic discontent. The people resented the tribute paid to Rome, the Jewish officials paid to collect it, and the whole idea of being dominated and defiled by a pagan power.

Roman officials, as elites are wont to do, fed these resentments by arrogantly, or stupidly, violating local and religious customs. Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea — whom we know from the criminal sentencing of Jesus — brought military standards decorated with images of the Roman emperor into Jerusalem in the dead of night, inciting a throng of offended Jewish protesters to bare their necks for execution rather than live to see such sacrilege. Pilate also stole money from the treasury of the Jerusalem Temple to build an aqueduct — and dispersed an angry, unarmed crowd with bloody blows.

Full-scale, armed rebellion by the Jewish people was still decades away. And during this period, the rule of Rome's proxy in Galilee, Herod Antipas, was relatively benign. Yet before and after Jesus, a line of holy men and malcontents gathered supporters to challenge Roman control. They usually got quashed by marching legions. But most Jews lived in aching longing for Israel's national restoration, brought about by a revolutionary leader or a messianic king.

Put another way: People were primed for a militant, populist uprising to take back the Holy Land for God. This was the milieu entered by Jesus, in about 28 A.D.

Jesus did not spend any time (according to the records we have) spreading his message in the Romanized cities. This might have reflected a desire to avoid immediate conflict with Roman authorities and their Jewish proxies — the kind of clash that cost Jesus' prophetic predecessor John the Baptist his head. Yet Jesus also preached in the countryside because it was where He received his most enthusiastic reception. Rather than cultivating connections to the wealthy, He sought the company of people of low social status. And they appreciated it.

In the present day, the frightening fervor of our politics makes it resemble, and sometimes supplant, the role of religion. And a good portion of Americans have a fatal attraction to the oddest of political messiahs — one whose deception, brutality, lawlessness and bullying were rewarded with the presidency. But so it is, to some extent, with *all* political messiahs who make their gains by imposing losses on others and measure their influence in increments of domination.

Jesus consciously and constantly rejected this view of power. While accepting the title “Messiah,” He sought to transform its meaning. He gathered no army. He skillfully avoided a political confrontation with Rome. He said little about history's inevitably decomposing dynasties. He declared instead a struggle of the human heart — and a populist uprising, not in the sense of modern politics, but against established religious authorities.

His rhetorical sparring partners were often the Pharisees, who sometimes don't get a fair shake in the Gospels. They were part of a lay movement teaching that the piety and purity expected of priests should apply to the whole Jewish people. According to the Gospels, they occasionally invited Jesus to their homes for an evening of dinner and debate. One gets the impression that Jesus argued so adamantly with them because they had so many convictions in common: They shared beliefs in the importance of the Torah, in outreach to average people and in the eventual resurrection of the dead. But it was Jesus' reinterpretation of these commitments that eventually (many years later) split Christianity from Judaism.

Jesus tested the boundaries of his faith. He intensified the moral demands of Jewish law by teaching that God expected the full transformation of *inner* motives. At the same time, He de-emphasized the ritual distinctives of the law, including Sabbath observance and dietary restrictions. “The Sabbath was made for man,” He said, “not man for the Sabbath.” And: “A man is not defiled by what enters his mouth, but by what comes out of it.”

Jesus was an observant Jew, but one who redirected the meaning of observance. Rather than emphasizing the elements of his faith that set God's people apart from other nations, He focused on the elements of Judaism with universal application: to love God, to love one's neighbor, to love enemies and strangers. These themes were previewed by Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah; Jesus pressed them further. This was not the abandonment of Israel's God, but an unmediated, intimate way to understand and approach Him — one that circumvented the Temple and its burnt offerings.

This earned Jesus the enmity of the religious establishment and the Roman administration, both of which feared the social and political dislocation that often accompanies religious reform. It was enough to secure for Jesus a shameful execution in the company of thieves. But the inclusive faith He taught went on to resonate with people throughout the centuries and across the globe.

The ethos of the Jesus movement was anti-elitist. But it is the substance of its critique that mattered (and still matters) most:

- **Jesus preached against religious hypocrisy** — the public display of piety that hides inner corruption and imposes a merciless virtue on others. The Pharisees, at one point, were subjected to seven “woes” by Jesus, in the spirit of this one: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.” The idea was not only that religious figures should practice what they preach. It was that religious observance could divert them from God’s true priorities, convincing them they were righteous even when they missed the main points of their faith.
- **Jesus welcomed social outcasts whom polite society rejected** — people with leprosy, prostitutes, the mentally disabled, tax collectors and those in the catch-all category of “sinners.” He elevated the status of women, who traveled with Him throughout Galilee. And He commended religious and ethnic outsiders — Romans, Samaritans, Canaanites — who displayed genuine faith. In one of his vivid parables, the town’s most “respectable” people are invited to a wedding feast. When they beg off en masse, the host fills the banquet hall with “the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind” — a dramatic, even offensive, inversion of social status. The insiders were locked out. The outsiders joined the party. This was not only the announcement of a new age but of a new order, in which the last shall be first. And the reverse.
- **Most important, Jesus proclaimed the arrival of a kingdom** — the Kingdom of God — demanding first loyalty in the lives of believers. The word “kingdom” led to immediate misunderstandings, even among Jesus’ closest followers, who expected a messianic kingdom that would liberate the Holy Land. The disciples even argued over who among them would be given greatest precedence in this earthly realm, provoking a firm rebuke from Jesus: “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.” Like other Jews, Jesus believed in a future age in which God’s sovereignty would be directly exercised on Earth. But He came to believe that his life and ministry had inaugurated this kingdom in an entirely novel way.

Jesus rejected the role of a political messiah. In the present age, He insisted, the Kingdom of God would not be the product of Jewish nationalism. It would not arrive through militancy and violence, tactics that would contribute only to a cycle of suffering. Instead, God’s kingdom would grow silently, soul by soul, “among you” and “within you,” across every barrier of nation or race — in acts of justice, peacemaking, love, inclusion, meekness, humility and gentleness.

When we act according to this counterintuitive conception of influence, a greater power achieves its aims through our seemingly aimless lives. But such a countercultural path, Jesus warned his followers, might lead to persecution or even death. And this was the path Jesus took as He walked, step by step, toward Jerusalem and the cross.

What brought me to consider these historical matters is a disturbing realization: In both public perception and evident reality, many White, conservative Christians find themselves on the wrong side of the most cutting indictments delivered by Jesus of Nazareth.

Christ’s revolt against the elites could hardly be more different from the one we see today. Conservative evangelicalism has, in many ways, become the kind of religious tradition against which followers of Jesus were initially called to rebel. And because of the pivotal role of conservative Christians in our politics, this irony is a matter of urgency.

Having known evangelicals who live lives of moral integrity and serve others across lines of race and class, I have no intention of pronouncing an indiscriminate indictment. But all conservative Christians must take seriously a sobering development in America's common life. Many who identify with Jesus most loudly and publicly are doing the most to discredit his cause. The main danger to conservative churches does not come from bad laws — it comes from Christians who don't understand the distinctives, the demands and the ultimate appeal of their own faith.

This development deserves some woes of its own:

- **Woe to evangelical hypocrisy.** Given the evidence of sexual abuse in the Southern Baptist Convention, the corruption and sexual scandal at Liberty University, the sex scandal in the Hillsong ministry, the sexual exploitation revealed in Ravi Zacharias's ministry, and the years of sexual predation at the (Christian) Kanakuk summer camps, Americans increasingly identify the word "evangelical" with pretense, scandal and duplicity. In the case of the SBC, victims (mostly women) were ignored, intimidated, dismissed and demeaned. Many of the most powerful Southern Baptist leaders betrayed the powerless, added cruelty on top of suffering and justified their coverup as essential to Christian evangelism. How can hearts ostensibly transformed by Christ be so impervious to mercy?
- **Woe to evangelical exclusion.** In their overwhelming, uncritical support of Trump and other nationalist Republicans — leaders who could never win elections without evangelical votes — White religious conservatives have joined a political movement defined by an attitude of "us" vs. "them," and dedicated to the rejection and humiliation of social outsiders and outcasts. From the start, the Trump-led GOP dehumanized migrants as diseased and violent. It attacked Muslims as suspect and dangerous. Even when evangelical Christians refuse to mouth the words of racism, they have allied themselves with the promoters of prejudice and white grievance. How can it be that believers called to radical inclusion are the most hostile to refugees of any group in the United States? How can anyone who serves God's boundless kingdom of love and generosity ever rally to the political banner "America First"?
- **And woe, therefore, to Christian nationalism.** Evangelicals broadly confuse the Kingdom of God with a Christian America, preserved by thuggish politicians who promise to prefer their version of Christian rights and enforce Christian values. The political calculation of conservative Christians is simple, and simply wrong.

Many perceive that their convictions and institutions are under assault by "woke" liberalism. Despite a judicial environment generally favorable to religious freedom, some view this tension as a death struggle for American identity. Their sources of information (such as conservative talk radio and Fox News) make money by inflating anecdotes into the appearance of systematic anti-religious oppression. And this led religious conservatives to seek and support a certain kind of leader. "I want the meanest, toughest SOB I can find to protect this nation," Southern Baptist pastor Robert Jeffress explained in his 2016 defense of Trump.

This view of politics is closer to "Game of Thrones" than to the Beatitudes. Nowhere did Jesus demand political passivity from his followers. But his teachings are entirely inconsistent with an approach to public engagement that says: "This Christian country is mine. You are defiling it. And I will take it back by any means necessary."

By assaulting democratic and religious pluralism, this agenda is at war with the constitutional order. By asserting self-interested rights, secured by lawless means, this approach has lost all resemblance to the teachings of Christ. A Christianity that does not humanize the life of this world is not Christianity.

The theological roots of this error run deep. Evangelicals often think that being a Christian means the individualistic acceptance of Jesus as their personal Savior. But this is quite different from following the example of Jesus we find in the Gospels. “He never asks for admirers, worshipers or adherents,” Soren Kierkegaard observed. “No, he calls disciples. It is not adherents of a teaching but followers of a life Christ is looking for.”

What might an outbreak of discipleship look like? It would not bring victory for one ideological side or to one policy agenda. Christ did not deliver a manifesto or provide a briefing book. He called human beings to live generously, honestly, kindly and faithfully. Following this way — which the Apostle Paul later called “the Way” — is not primarily a political choice, but it has unavoidable public consequences.

Imagine if today’s believers were to live out the full implications of their faith.

Instead of fighting for narrow advantage, they would express their love of neighbor by seeking the common good and rejecting a view of greatness that makes others small.

Instead of being entirely captive to their cultural background, they would have enough critical distance to sort the good from the bad, the gold from the sand. This might leave them uncomfortable within their own tribe or their own skin — but the moral landscape is often easier to see from the periphery.

Instead of being ruled by anger and fear, they would live lightly, free from grudges and ready to offer forgiveness — thus preserving the possibility of future reconciliation and concord.

Instead of turning to violence in word or deed, they would assert the power of unarmed truth. They would engage in argument without slander or threats — demonstrating not wokeness or weakness, but due regard for our shared dignity.

Instead of being arrogant and willful, they would approach hard issues with humility, recognizing that even the most compelling principles are applied by fallible men and women. They would know that people who esteem the same ideal can come to different policy conclusions — and be open to the possibility of changing their own mind.

Instead of ignoring the cries of the ill, poor and abused, they would honor the unerasable image of God we see in one another. Believers don’t accept a society divided by rank or dominated by the illusion of merit — they seek to subvert such stratification in constructive ways, to prioritize justice and common provision for people in need.

Instead of giving in to half-justified despair, they would assert that there is hope at the end of a twisting road. Even when their strength is drained by long struggle and the bitterness of incoming attacks, they would live confidently rather than desperately, with faith in God’s mercy and hope for a tearless morning.

Other noble religions and ethical systems come to similar conclusions. But for a Christian, one moment near the

beginning of Jesus' ministry draws the distinction between B.C. and A.D. Jesus stood up in a Nazareth synagogue and read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

These are some of the most hopeful words in history. Jesus thought He could implant a new way of life on Earth. Defying most historical practice and precedent, He sought to reform human affairs in ways that privilege the poor, the prisoner, the blind, the oppressed. He wanted to put the joy, freedom and healing of outcasts at the center of a new era. At least trying to live under the inspiration of this good news lends purpose to our days and nobility to our failure.

This call is not merely political. Many are haunted by Jesus' words, are drawn to emulate his person and find Him mysteriously present in their lives. Billions of human beings — Roman emperors and Celtic tribesmen, Byzantine artists and medieval peasants, Puritan settlers and enslaved Africans, Honduran farmers and Chinese house church leaders — have claimed to feel Christ's comfort in their suffering, his guidance in their confusion, his company in their loneliness and his welcome at the hour of their death. If this is not the work of God, it is among the strangest developments in the human story.

But the soul's trust is only the beginning of the heart's quest: to value those whom Jesus valued, and to serve those whom Jesus served.

I know that people inspired by this vision have done great things in the past — building hospitals for the poor, improving the rights of women and children, militating against slavery, caring for the mentally disabled, working for a merciful welfare state, fighting prejudice, improving global health. But precisely because these things have happened, it is difficult for me to comprehend why so many American evangelicals have rejected the splendor and romance of their calling and settled for the cultural and political resentments of the hard right. It is difficult for me to understand why so many believers have turned down a wedding feast to graze in political dumpsters.

Are churches failing to teach an authentic Christian vision to Christian people? Have pastors domesticated the Christian message into something familiar, unchallenging and easily ignored? Do the dark pleasures of resentment and anger simply have a stronger emotional appeal than the virtues of compassion and self-sacrifice?

Or maybe it just feels impossible to judge your own upbringing and cultural background. It is hard to question the aggressive, predominant views of your community or congregation. It is far easier to seek belonging, even if it means accepting a lie or ignoring a wrong. Thus, moral courage is often a solitary stand.

What I am describing, however, is not a chain or a chore. When we are caked with the mud of political struggle, and tired of Pyrrhic victories that seed new hatreds, and frightened by our own capacity for contempt, the way of life set out by Jesus comes like a clear bell that rings above our strife. It defies cynicism, apathy, despair and all ideologies that dream of dominance. It promises that every day, if we choose, can be the first day of a new and noble manner of living. Its most difficult duties can feel much like purpose and joy. And even our halting, halfhearted attempts at faithfulness are counted by God as victories.

God's call to us — while not simplifying our existence — does ennoble it. It is the invitation to a life marked by

meaning. And even when, as mortality dictates, we walk the path we had feared to tread, it can be a pilgrimage, in which all is lost, and all is found.

Before such a consummation, Christians seeking social influence should do so not by joining interest groups that fight for their narrow rights — and certainly not those animated by hatred, fear, phobias, vengeance or violence. Rather, they should seek to be ambassadors of a kingdom of hope, mercy, justice and grace. This is a high calling — and a test that most of us (myself included) are always finding new ways to fail. But it is the revolutionary ideal set by Jesus of Nazareth, who still speaks across the sea of years.