

The Growing Religious Fervor in the American Right: 'This Is a Jesus Movement'

Rituals of Christian worship have become embedded in conservative rallies, as praise music and prayer blend with political anger over vaccines and the 2020 election.

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A worship service led by Sean Feucht in Pasadena, Calif. Pandemic restrictions that temporarily closed churches accelerated the political activism of many Christians on the right. Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times

By [Elizabeth Dias](#) and [Ruth Graham](#)

Elizabeth Dias and Ruth Graham have covered religion in America for more than a decade. They reported this article from Phoenix, Dallas and Washington.

They opened with an invocation, summoning God's "hedge of thorns and fire" to protect each person in the dark Phoenix parking lot.

They called for testimonies, passing the microphone to anyone with "inspirational words that they'd like to say on behalf of our J-6 political prisoners," referring to people arrested in connection with the [Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol](#), whom they were honoring a year later.

Then, holding candles dripping wax, the few dozen who were gathered lifted their voices, a cappella, in a song treasured by millions of believers who sing it on Sundays and know its words by heart:

*Way maker, miracle worker, promise keeper
Light in the darkness, my God
That is who you are ...*

This was not a church service. It was worship for a new kind of congregation: a right-wing political movement powered by divine purpose, whose adherents find spiritual sustenance in political action.

The Christian right has been intertwined with American conservatism for decades, culminating in the Trump era. And elements of Christian culture have long been present at political rallies. But worship, a sacred act showing devotion to God expressed through movement, song or prayer, was largely reserved for church. Now, many believers are importing their worship of God, with all its intensity, emotion and ambitions, to their political life.

At events across the United States, it is not unusual for participants to

describe encountering the divine and feel they are doing their part to install God's kingdom on earth. For them, right-wing political activity itself is becoming a holy act.

These Christians are joining secular members of the right wing, including media-savvy opportunists and those touting disinformation. They represent a wide array of discontent, from opposing vaccine mandates to promoting election conspiracy theories. For many, pandemic restrictions that temporarily closed houses of worship accelerated their distrust of government and made churchgoing political.

At a Trump rally in Michigan last weekend, a local evangelist offered a prayer that stated, "Father in heaven, we firmly believe that Donald Trump is the current and true president of the United States." He prayed "in Jesus' name" that precinct delegates at the upcoming Michigan Republican Party convention would support Trump-endorsed candidates, whose names he listed to the crowd. "In Jesus' name," the crowd cheered back.

The infusion of explicitly religious fervor — much of it rooted in the charismatic tradition, which emphasizes the power of the Holy Spirit — into the right-wing movement is changing the atmosphere of events and rallies, many of which feature Christian symbols and rituals, especially praise music.

With spiritual mission driving political ideals, the stakes of any conflict, whether over masks or school curriculums, can feel that much larger, and compromise can be even more difficult to achieve. Political ambitions come to be about defending God, pointing to a desire to build a nation that actively promotes a particular set of Christian beliefs.

"What is refreshing for me is, this isn't at all related to church, but we are talking about God," said Patty Castillo Porter, who attended the Phoenix event. She is an accountant and officer with a local Republican committee to

represent “the voice of the Grassroots/America First posse,” and said she loved meeting so many Christians at the rallies she attends to protest election results, border policy or Covid mandates.

“Now God is relevant,” she said. “You name it, God is there, because people know you can’t trust your politicians, you can’t trust your sheriffs, you can’t trust law enforcement. The only one you can trust is God right now.”



Religious music, prayer and symbols are often featured at political rallies like a November 2020 event in Atlanta in support of President Donald J. Trump. Dustin Chambers/Bloomberg



People bowed their heads in prayer at a rally held by former President Trump in March in Commerce, Ga. Dustin Chambers for The New York Times

The parking-lot vigil was sponsored by a right-wing voter mobilization effort focused on dismantling election policy. Not everyone there knew the words to "Way Maker," the contemporary Christian megahit. A few men, armed with guns and accompanied by a German shepherd, stood at the edge of the gathering, smoking and talking about what they were seeing on Infowars, a website that traffics in conspiracy theories. Others, many of whom attended charismatic or evangelical churches, sang along.

Worship elements embedded into these events are recognizably evangelical. There is prayer and proclamation, shared rituals and stories. Perhaps the most powerful element is music. The anthems of the contemporary evangelical church, many of which were written in just the last few years, are

blending with rising political anger, becoming the soundtrack to a new fight.

Religious music, prayer and symbols have been part of protest settings throughout American history, for diverging causes, including the civil rights movement. Music is personal, able to move listeners in ways sermons or speeches cannot. Singing unites people in body and mind, and creates a sense of being part of a story, a song, greater than yourself.

The sheer dominance of worship music within 21st-century evangelical culture means that the genre has been used outside church settings by the contemporary left as well. "Way Maker," for example, was sung at some demonstrations for racial justice in the summer of 2020.

The use of music is now key to movement-building power on the right.

Demonstrators at the trucker protest in Canada called on God to metaphorically topple the walls of Parliament, a biblical reference to the story of Jericho. James Park for The New York Times

Marchers looped around Parliament in Ottawa during the trucker rally to protest covid mandates. Spencer Platt/Getty Images

At the protest that paralyzed the Canadian capital in February, a group of demonstrators belted out "I raise a hallelujah, my weapon is a melody" from a hit from the influential California label Bethel Music. Amid the honks of trucks, they called on God to metaphorically topple the walls of Parliament, recalling the biblical story of how God crumbled the walls of Jericho, and to end vaccine mandates.

At a recent conference in Arizona promoting anti-vaccine messages and election conspiracy theories, organizers blasted "Fresh Wind," from the global church Hillsong, and a rock-rap novelty song with a chorus that began "We will not comply."

A growing belief among conservative Christians is that the United States is

on the cusp of a revival, one where spiritual and political change are bound together.

"We are seeing a spiritual awakening taking place," said Ché Ahn, the pastor of Harvest Rock Church in Pasadena, who became a hero to many when his church successfully sued Gov. Gavin Newsom of California for banning indoor worship during the pandemic. "Christians are becoming more involved, becoming activists. I think that is a good thing, because the church has been slumbering."

The explicit use of evangelical worship for partisan protest took root in the early pandemic lockdowns, notably after California banned indoor church services and singing. Sean Feucht, a worship leader from Northern California, ran a failed campaign for Congress in 2020, and then launched a series of outdoor events, titled "Let Us Worship," to defy pandemic restrictions. Thousands of Christians flocked to his events, where prayer and singing took on a new valence of defiance.

When Mr. Feucht staged a worship event on the National Mall last Sept. 11, Mr. Trump contributed a video in which he praised Mr. Feucht for "uniting citizens of all denominations and backgrounds to promote faith and freedom in America." Even before the pandemic, he and other worship leaders were courted by Mr. Trump, who identified celebrities within the charismatic movement as natural allies.

A "Let Us Worship" service, one of a series of events started by Sean Feucht to defy pandemic restrictions. Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times

Mr. Feucht performing at a service. At events like this, music can move listeners in ways that sermons or speeches cannot. Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times

Since the fall, rallies and protests against Covid restrictions have expanded to include other conservative causes. On the San Diego waterfront in

January, local activists who opposed vaccine and mask mandates held a worship protest called "Freedom Revival," which combined Christian music with conservative speakers and booths promoting gun ownership and ballot initiatives that opposed medical mandates.

Shaun Frederickson, one of the organizers, who has resisted the San Diego municipal government's Covid response and called it "propaganda," said it was wrong to understand the event simply as protesting Covid-related mandates. It was about something deeper, he said in an interview: the idea that Christian morality is the necessary foundation for governance in a free republic.

"Christians are the ones that are responsible for granting you and myself the right and authority over government," he said. "Our motivation with the worship was to entertain people that need to be entertained, while we are going to hit them heavy with truth."

At the revival, as worship music played gently, Mr. Frederickson, in a cardigan and cuffed skinny jeans, urged the crowd to not believe "the lie" of the separation of church and state.

Among the speakers was Heidi St. John, a home-schooling advocate running for Congress in Washington State. She praised Moses' mother — "she did not comply!" — and exhorted people to leave their churches if their pastors were too politically "timid."

Mr. Ahn, the pastor, who also spoke at the event, said he did not see it simply as a worship service or a political rally. "It is both," he said. "My understanding of Jesus' kingdom is that he is Lord, not just over the church, but every aspect of society. That means family, education, arts, entertainment, business for sure, and government."

Worship is increasingly becoming a central feature of right-wing events not aimed at exclusively Christian audiences.

ReAwaken America events, hosted by an Oklahoma talk-show personality and entrepreneur, are touted as gatherings of “truth-seekers” who oppose pandemic precautions, believe that the 2020 election was stolen, distrust Black Lives Matter and want to explore “what really happened” on Jan. 6. Most of the events are hosted by large churches, and the primary sponsor is Charisma News, a media outlet serving charismatic Christians.

In February, a ReAwaken event at Trinity Gospel Temple in Canton, Ohio, opened with a set of worship music from Melody Noel Altavilla, a songwriter and worship leader at Influence Church in Anaheim, Calif. “Your presence fills the temple when we worship you,” Ms. Altavilla sang. The music soared in the darkened sanctuary.

In an interview, Ms. Altavilla said she was excited to be asked to perform because it was a chance to “create space for God” at a secular event.

She said she felt increasingly called to political action as part of her duty as a Christian. She recalled a biblical account in which men singing and praying went ahead of the Israelite army into battle. “Imagine if the armies in the Old Testament said, ‘No, Lord, this is too political, the worshipers can’t go out in front of the soldiers,’” she said.

Compared with 2016, Trump rallies are taking on the feel of worship events, from the stage to the audience. When Mr. Trump held his first rally of the year in Florence, Ariz., in January, he descended via helicopter into a jubilant crowd.

People on a highway bridge in Yavapai County, Ariz., cheered a cross-country demonstration by truckers and other motorists in February against pandemic measures. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

A rally held by former President Trump in March in Georgia. Support for Mr. Trump brought together charismatic Christians, media-savvy opportunists and secular believers of disinformation. Dustin Chambers for The New York Times

"I lay the key of David upon you," Anthony Kern, a candidate for the Arizona State Senate who was photographed on the Capitol steps on Jan. 6, 2021, proclaimed to the crowd from the stage, paraphrasing a biblical passage about power given by God. "That means the governmental authority is upon you, men and women."

Standing in the crowd, Kathy Stainbrook closed her eyes and raised her arms high in worship. She had come from Shasta County, Calif., with a group of Christian women involved in the Shasta County Freedom Coalition, a collection of right-wing groups that has included a militia, according to its website, and has supported an effort to recall a Republican county supervisor. The coalition also promotes "biblical citizenship" classes.

A friend of Ms. Stainbrook's, Tami Jackson, who was also in the crowd, said she had come to see politics as an inherently spiritual struggle.

She said she wanted to be a part of "staking claim" to what God was doing. "This is a Jesus movement," Ms. Jackson said. "I believe God removed Donald for a time, so the church would wake up and have confidence in itself again to take our country back."

If Americans would repent of Covid policies and critical race theory and abortion, Ms. Stainbrook said, God would bless future generations for good. She recalled lyrics in a song by Kari Jobe, "The Blessing": "May his favor be upon you, and a thousand generations."

"How did Paul and Barnabas escape jail?" Ms. Stainbrook said, referring to an account in the Acts of the Apostles. "They just worshiped, and chains fell off and the doors fell open."

Her words were drowned out by shouts of "Hallelujah" around her.