

Phoenix pastor a missionary to Christian nationalists

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PHOENIX, Ariz. (RNS)—Phoenix pastor Caleb Campbell has a theory about the growing number of Americans who are labeled as Christian nationalists.

Most would rather go to Cracker Barrel than storm the Capitol.

Many see themselves as good Christians who love their country. But somewhere along the way, they began to think being a good American and being a Christian were one and the same.



Caleb Campbell

“Their whole life has been the intermingling of their American civil religion and their Christian religion,” said Campbell, pastor of Desert Springs Bible Church and a self-described missionary to Christian nationalists.

To help his fellow Christians make a clearer distinction between their faith and their identity as Americans, Campbell founded a group called Disarming Leviathan. He spent the last year reading Christian nationalist books and attending events like Turning Point USA’s monthly Freedom Night in America, held at a Phoenix megachurch.

He also signed up to teach a “biblical citizenship class” run by Patriot Academy, founded by Rick Green, a former Texas state legislator turned Christian “Constitution coach.” The class mixes details about America’s founding and the Constitution with Bible verses and conservative politics.

God-and-country patriotism remains popular in the United States, according to a recent report from Pew Research. Nearly half of Americans (45 percent) believe America should be a Christian country, including 78 percent of white evangelicals and 62 percent of Black Protestants.

Fear religion losing influence

Though few want the U.S. government to adopt Christianity as the country’s official religion, according to Pew, many Americans fear religion is losing influence in the culture.

That fear, says Campbell, has led a growing number of his fellow believers to embrace a more extreme form of God-and-country patriotism, one more focused on winning the culture war than following Jesus.

Campbell expected many of the people in Christian nationalist settings he met to be angry political partisans. Instead, most were good-hearted people who thought they were doing the right thing for God.

“That was an aha moment,” he said.

At the time, Campbell had been focused on arguing with Christian nationalists, trying to convince them their ideology—popularized by politicians, pastors and online activists—is incompatible with the teachings of Jesus.

Misguided and fearful

But that approach did not work. He began to think of them as “Aunt Betty”—a loved one who is misguided and fearful.

“Aunt Betty is watching a whole generation of Americans deconstruct their American civic religion, and it’s freaking her out,” he said.

Campbell decided instead to approach Christian nationalists as a missionary, “leading with kindness and generosity.” What Christian nationalists needed, he decided, was conversion, not confrontation.

“I started thinking, how do I actually bring Jesus into this person’s life, because they’re being sold a version of Jesus that is not accurate biblically and is going to end up disappointing them,” he said.

He particularly is concerned about what he called “seeker-sensitive Christian nationalism” that seeks to attract new churchgoers through worship services that praise Jesus and “own the libs” at the same time.

“It’s a brilliant church-growth strategy,” Campbell said.

“I’ve been at this for long enough to know if I got a car dealership-size American flag, put it in front of my building and did a ‘why biblical justice is not social justice’ sermon series, I could get 1,000 people,” he said.

Christian nationalism fuels anger

Rather than helping people deal with their anxieties about cultural change or focusing on people’s faith, Campbell argues, this strategy fuels anger by giving believers someone to blame for their problems.

This kind of seeker-sensitive Christian nationalism has been on display over the past year at Freedom Night in America, a monthly revival and political

rally hosted by Charlie Kirk, head of Turning Point USA, at Dream City, a Phoenix megachurch not far from Campbell's congregation.

Freedom Night services, which are streamed by both Dream City and Turning Point, have featured Kirk and conservative figures like writer Eric Metaxas, "Fox and Friends" host Pete Hegseth and John Cooper, lead singer of the Christian band Skillet.

The events look like a typical megachurch service, beginning with a few worship songs, followed by some announcements, an offering, and even an altar call. But instead of a sermon, there's a talk by Kirk, who often is joined by a guest.

At the Freedom Night in October, Dream City pastor Luke Barnett took to the stage as the band finished their set, repeating the last line of an old-school worship tune, singing, "You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship you." Barnett then introduced Kirk that night as a religious teacher rather than a conservative activist.

"If there's anyone who I believe that God has raised up in America, to share about life inside the kingdom, and what it looks like, what it can look like to our nation today, it's our guest tonight, Charlie Kirk," he said.

'Demand the welfare of the nation'

As Kirk began, he quoted Jeremiah 29:27, a popular Bible verse, giving it a new twist. The verse, addressed to the people of Israel during their captivity in Babylon, is often translated as, "seek the welfare of the city where I sent you into exile," followed by a command to pray. For Kirk, the verse became a call to political action.

"Demand the welfare of the nation that you are in because your welfare is tied to your nation's welfare," he told attendees.

Joanna Kline, assistant professor of Old Testament at Gordon College in Massachusetts, questioned the accuracy of Kirk's translation. For one thing, it leaves out the command to pray. It also missed the original context of the verse, which was intended to tell the Israelites that they'd be in exile for decades. That group of people also had no power to make demands.

"Who would they make demands to?" she said.

A spokesman for Turning Point USA said Kirk sees himself as a lay Christian trying to do his part, rather than a pastor or religious leader. In that role, Kirk is trying to get his fellow Christians involved in shaping the broader culture.

That's very different than Christian nationalism, the Turning Point spokesman said, and has long been a Christian practice.

The spokesman also said Kirk was concerned about the pandemic shutdowns that affected many churches and, in Kirk's mind, interfered with the right to worship. That showed him the need for political involvement by churches, because even if churches stay clear of politics, government officials don't leave churches alone.

"His main point is that churches should preach the gospel," the spokesman said. "His second point is to make sure that churches are able to do this."

Author Victor Marx, who spoke at a Freedom Night in April, said holding an event to discuss politics at a church on a Wednesday night was much different from holding a discussion of politics on a Sunday morning.

A friend of Kirk's who has also spoken at a Turning Point USA event for pastors earlier this year as well as other conservative gatherings, Marx rejected the label of being a Christian nationalist.

Personal reason for concern

“To say that our country needs to be run at every position by Christians—that is not what I believe,” he said.

For Campbell, his concerns about Christian nationalism have a personal side.

A former skinhead, Campbell first showed up at Desert Springs Bible Church in his early 20s, when he was invited to play drums in the band. The friendship and welcome he found at the church changed his life, he said, and he abandoned the hate he’d felt as a young person.

He eventually joined the church staff and in 2015 became senior pastor. At the time, the church was mostly white and did not reflect the diversity of its community. Campbell began working to change that—building close ties with Black and Hispanic churches and working on issues like immigration.

Things went well at first. But Donald Trump’s election in 2016 and the accompanying MAGA Christianity began to split his church. People he’d known for decades left to find a congregation that better fit their politics. Some of them ended up going to Freedom Night at Dream City, which led him to attend one of the services there and made him aware of the growth of Christian nationalism.

Campbell wants to help people like his former church members find a better way to live their faith. Currently, he is working on a book project modeled after the Alpha program—a popular evangelistic method centered on kindness, hospitality and conversation.

“This is the Alpha program for Christian nationalists,” he said.

Dennae Pierre, a Phoenix pastor and executive director of the Surge Network, which helps churches from different ethnic backgrounds, believes

Campbell is on to something.

Pierre has worked closely with Campbell in the past and watched him lead his congregation through a difficult transition. Though many church members have left, she said, Campbell's congregation also attracted new people who felt ostracized by the fusion of faith and politics in other churches.

She, too, thinks conversion rather than confrontation will help people find something better than Christian nationalism.

"When we think about Christian nationalism, I think there needs to be an intentional discipleship process, to dismantle what is unhealthy and to rebuild people with a more gospel-centered vision of what it means to be a Christian," she said.

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