

## Something Is Stirring in Christian America, and It's Making Me Nervous

By David French. Oct. 16, 2025

Opinion Columnist

Despite what you may have heard about the renewal of interest in religion in America, we are not experiencing a true revival, at least not yet. Instead, America is closer to a religious revolution, and the difference between revolution and revival is immensely important for the health of our country — and of the Christian church in America.

At this point it's almost beyond debate that something important is stirring in American religion. There is too much data — and too many anecdotes — to ignore. The steady decline of Christianity in America seems to have slowed, perhaps even paused. There's evidence that Gen Z men in particular are returning to church and younger generations of Americans are now attending church slightly more regularly than older generations.

Americans just witnessed an immense stadium filled to the brim with people mourning Charlie Kirk, in a memorial service that was one part worship service, one part political rally. And that service was replicated at a smaller scale at vigils across America. Fox News reported that an average of 5.2 million people watched its coverage of Kirk's memorial service, with the audience spiking to 6.6 million viewers during Erika Kirk's remarks.

I can sense the change myself. When I speak on college campuses, students seem more curious about faith than they were even five years ago. When I write about faith, I get a larger — and more personal — response than I get when I write about any other topic. My inbox fills with heartfelt personal testimonies, including stories about how people both found and lost God.

As a Christian who has long lamented the decline of church attendance in the United States, I should be very happy about all these developments. After all, if people feel a God-shaped hole in their lives, shouldn't we rejoice when they find, in the words of scripture, the "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding"?

Make no mistake, there are marvelous stories of religious renewal and devotion in the United States. In February 2024, I spoke at a chapel service at Asbury University in Wilmore, Ky., the site of an extended and remarkable revival in 2023 that brought at least 50,000 people to that small town to experience what my newsroom colleague Ruth Graham called "the nation's first major spiritual revival in decades."

This revival had filled the students there with zeal, but that zeal manifested itself in humility and compassion. It was inspiring. It made me search my own heart to see more clearly my own faults and failings.

But that is hardly the universal experience people are having with America's religious surge. There is darkness right alongside the light. Christians stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. Christians have believed and applauded dark prophecies that compare Donald Trump to Jehu, a murderous Old Testament king who commanded the slaughter of the previous queen, Jezebel, and had the severed heads of the previous king's sons brought to him in baskets.

Incredibly, Christians are attacking what they call the “sin of empathy,” warning fellow believers against identifying too much with, say, illegal immigrants, gay people or women who seek abortions. Empathy, in this formulation, can block moral and theological clarity. What’s wrong is wrong, and too much empathy will cloud your soul.

There was the ReAwaken America tour that crisscrossed America during Joe Biden’s presidency, during which angry Christians called for vengeance at sold-out venues from coast to coast. And, as I wrote last month, the Kirk memorial itself mixed calls for love (most notably Erika Kirk’s decision to forgive her husband’s killer) with the Trump administration’s explicit hate.

Trump — to the laughter and cheers of the crowd — said that he hated his opponents. Stephen Miller, the president’s top domestic policy adviser, declared that his perceived political enemies were “nothing.”

“You are nothing,” he said, “You are wickedness. You are jealousy. You are envy. You are hatred.”

Is that what a revival looks like? And if our nation isn’t yet experiencing a genuine national revival — something like the Second Great Awakening, which swept through the United States in the early 19th century — then what is actually going on?

As a lifelong evangelical, I’ve been taught to hope, pray and work for revival. I’ve even experienced small-scale revivals — in my law school Christian fellowship and at a small church in Georgetown, Ky., where my wife and I served as volunteer youth pastors for a short period.

I love the succinct description of revivals by my friend Russell Moore, an editor at large and columnist for Christianity Today magazine. “Revival,” he wrote in *The Atlantic*, “is a concept with a long history in American evangelicalism, rooted in the Bible, that says a people who have grown cold and lifeless can be renewed in their faith. It is a kind of resurrection from the dead.”

In 2023, shortly before he died, Tim Keller, the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York and one of the leading evangelical pastors and theologians in the nation, wrote that genuine revival has three characteristics: It wakes up “sleepy” Christians, it converts nominal Christians into a more vital and genuine faith, and it brings non-Christians to Christ.

Keller noted that revival begins with repentance. “Ordinary Christians aren’t usually sad enough or happy enough,” Keller wrote. “We’re not convicted enough about our sin. We’re not experiencing deep repentance and therefore we don’t experience high assurance” — by which Keller meant the high assurance of God’s love.

That’s exactly the biblical model. Time after time in scripture, revival and renewal begins with repentance. In the Book of Acts, when Peter spoke to a crowd in Jerusalem about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, listeners were “cut to the heart” and cried out to Peter and the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

In the Old Testament, when a king of ancient Judah, Josiah, heard the book of the law for the first time, “he tore his robes” in grief. When Jonah called on the people of ancient Nineveh to repent, scripture records that the people of the city declared a fast and put on sackcloth, a sign of mourning for their sin.

In other words, revival begins with the people proclaiming, by word and deed, “I have sinned.”

MAGA Christianity has a different message. It looks at American culture and declares, “You have sinned.”

And it doesn’t stop there. It also says, “We will defeat you.” In its most extreme forms, it also says, “We will rule over you.” That’s not revival; it’s revolution, a religious revolution that seeks to overthrow one political order and replace it with another — one that has echoes of the religious kingdoms of ages past.

And don’t be fooled when these revolutionaries call themselves “conservative.” All too many conservative Christians are actually quite proudly radical. They want to demolish the existing order, including America’s commitment to pluralism and individual liberty, and put their version of Christianity at the center of American political life.

A revolution can look like a revival, at least for a time. A revolution can fill stadiums. A revolution can even attract converts — converts to the revolutionary cause, if not the Christian faith. A revolution can make you feel alive with purpose, and when the revolution has religious elements, it can flood you with the burning conviction that you are doing God’s will.

Look closer, however, and you can see that religious revolution is usually antithetical to religious revival. Yes, there are people who enter the church because of politics and then find their way to genuine Christianity, but the revolution is a roadblock to genuine Christian growth. Revolutionaries will conceal sin. They can’t permit any cracks in their righteous facade. Any weakness undermines their claim to the national throne. The other side is wicked. We are not. The revolutionary’s ferocious ideological purity can masquerade as religious devotion. But unless it’s tempered by mercy, the revolutionary spirit is a fundamentalist spirit — and heaven help the person who stands in the way.

In his piece about revivals, Moore writes, “Denominations that are glacially slow to recognize documented sexual-abuse cover-ups are lightning quick to expel congregations they find to be too affirming of women’s leadership.”

The reason is obvious: Exposing sexual abuse can lead to public anger and contempt. If an institution can’t protect vulnerable people from harm, then what gives it the right to rule?

In a revival, however, exposing sin is necessary. Transparency and honesty trigger repentance. Repentance facilitates justice, and it leads to forgiveness. In the revivals I’ve experienced, politics was the last thing on our minds. Instead, our focus was on becoming more like Christ — and that meant turning from my own sin, not focusing on the faults of others.

For all the talk of religious revival in American evangelicalism, there is an odd disconnect. Evangelicals might be growing in political power, but there is not much evidence that they are growing in devotion.

For example, Ryan Burge, a professor at Washington University in St. Louis’s John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, analyzed data from the Cooperative Election Study and found that

the percentage of self-identified American evangelicals who “seldom” or “never” attend church has been increasing since 2008. In 2024, half of all evangelicals attended church once per month, or less.

Political evangelicalism can look quite godless. In the past 10 years, Donald Trump has influenced the culture of the church far more than the church has influenced Trump. When a pastor declares at a ReAwaken America rally that he has “come ready to declare war on Satan and every race-baiting Democrat that tries to destroy our way of life here in the United States of America,” he is imitating Trump, not Christ.

When a right-wing radio host takes to the stage on the same tour and taunts Fani Willis, the Fulton County, Ga., district attorney who filed criminal charges against Trump, by shouting, “Big Fani. Big fat Fani. Big fat Black Fani Willis,” he is imitating Trump, not Christ.

Similarly, when a pastor named Doug Wilson calls transgender Americans “trannies,” or gay Americans “gaytards,” or women he doesn’t like “lumberjack dykes” and “small-breasted biddies,” he is imitating Trump, not Christ.

In the Book of Galatians, Paul contrasts the fruit of the spirit with what he called the “acts of the flesh,” the sins that can destroy the soul. Those sins include the very characteristics that mark America’s religious revolution: “hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions.”

The fruit of the spirit — “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” — in contrast, is present when Christ is present. This is the fruit of a real revival.

How will we know when revival sweeps America? It won’t necessarily be when the stadiums fill or even when the churches burst at the seams. The will to religious power can draw a crowd, at least for a time.

We will know when revival comes because we will see believers humble themselves, repent of their sins, and then arise, full of genuine virtue, to love their neighbors — to help them, not hurt them — and in so doing to heal our nation.

### **Some other things I did**

My Sunday column was about a Trump-appointed judge, Karin Immergut, who sees through the Trump con:

Presidents have enjoyed a degree of judicial deference in part because they have earned it. Generations of good faith and fair dealing with federal courts have even created a doctrine called the “presumption of regularity,” where courts presume that official duties have been properly discharged — unless there is “clear evidence to the contrary.”

There is now “clear evidence” — in the form of Trump’s own words — that there is nothing regular about this administration.

Judge Immergut understands this reality clearly. She understands that there are traditions that predate court precedent, that predate any deference to the executive. “This country,” she wrote,

“has a longstanding and foundational tradition of resistance to government overreach, especially in the form of military intrusion into civil affairs.”

“This is a nation,” she continued, “of constitutional law, not martial law.”

That’s correct. The best way to evaluate the reasoning behind Trump’s actions is to examine Trump’s words, and Trump’s words reveal a man who isn’t just “untethered to the facts”; he’s also untethered to the law.

### **Dishonest presidents should be entitled to no deference at all.**

On Saturday, we published a conversation with Michelle Cottle and E.J. Dionne Jr. The subject was Donald Trump’s military deployments to American cities. I’m concerned that we’re facing something worse than the red scares of the past. Now we face a blue scare.

French: It’s like you have the anti-Lincoln in the White House.

Dionne: Yes.

French: If you’re looking at Lincoln’s first Inaugural Address, he very eloquently, eloquently sort of begged and pleaded that we must not be enemies, we must be friends. We must remain friends. And of course, that fell on deaf ears. But now you have the exact opposite going on right now in the White House. And I think if you’re wanting to look for historic parallels, you’re going to go to Red Scare One and Red Scare Two.

Red Scare One came after World War I, Red Scare Two after World War II. But this isn’t a “Red Scare.” That actually undersells it. This is a “Blue Scare.” In other words, what he’s essentially saying is that it’s not the Communists we’re after — it’s Blue America. It’s the entire superstructure of Blue America, which they are categorizing as the equivalent of Communist Marxists. They’ll use that language.

So they’re turning all the engines of government against political opponents, justifying it to their base by claiming these people are the ultimate threat to the American experiment. This is Stephen Miller’s constant rhetoric. In that way, it makes the Red Scare look tame; it’s worse than the Red Scare because it’s like the Red Scare metastasized.

David French is an Opinion columnist, writing about law, culture, religion and armed conflict. He is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and a former constitutional litigator. His most recent book is “Divided We Fall: America’s Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation.” You can follow him on Threads (@davidfrenchjag).