



Rector's Essay **Church Populism**

By Jarrett Kerbel (10/02/26)

Evangelicalism is experiencing a moment of reckoning. Having aligned themselves with policies and candidates who hardly accord with the teachings of Jesus, this already disparate American religious movement is fragmenting and reflecting.

As someone who has refused to yield the word evangelical to the populist religious right I am paying close attention to these discussions. For me, evangelical means that I know our God through scripture and so I hold the Gospel in highest esteem. It also means that, for me, Christ is at the center of my relationship with God, that grace converts and transforms our lives as we grow in communion with God, and that our faith is active and engaged in sharing the Good News in word and deed.

Recently, Skye Jethani from the Holy Post podcast helped me by reclaiming 'evangelical' for any disciple who lives by the Good News, while renaming the mass movement commonly identified as 'evangelicalism' as "American populist or consumer religion." Populist Christianity is highly adaptable, and highly entrepreneurial. It goes with the flow of popular culture, is highly attuned to market forces, and is very careful to make the Gospel support secular visions of the good life. Churches in this vein strive to be entertaining, consumer friendly, trendy, performatively casual, and focused on personalities, and celebrities. Worship spaces are like theaters and worship is like a Ted talk with contemporary music.

The danger with populist, consumer christianity is that it sacrifices the integrity of the Gospel for the sake of easy popularity and success defined by attendance figures.

Historically, the Episcopal church is the opposite of populist in both good and not so good ways. First, we adapt very slowly. Our focus on tradition and liturgy cause us to put integrity and continuity ahead of adaptation and creativity. Second, we have identified with cultural elites and shown little willingness to sacrifice elite cultural

markers and practices for the sake of reaching a wider demographic. For example, there are four times more Methodists in the country because historically they were mobile, adaptable, engaged, and ready to minister to anyone and everyone from the mill worker to the mill owners. Third, our focus on liturgical uniformity is a major obstacle to innovation and experimentation with ways to communicate the loving presence of God more effectively for more people.

These are just my takes. You can disagree and we can have a great discussion.

I am part of a generation of clergy that tried to graft entrepreneurial leadership and adaptability into the DNA of the Episcopal Church. It has not been easy. The grain of our church does not run toward populism. On the good side, this means that we have maintained the commonly held teachings of the universal church and the ancient wisdom embedded in our liturgy. It also means that we are willing to take the heat when it is time to stand up for justice, peace, and human rights as taught by Jesus. As the body of Christ, we are counter-cultural and so we rub against the elements of our popular culture that are unhealthy for God's people and God's creatures.

If I did not value our tradition I would not be giving my life to it. At the same time I am always asking myself the pressing questions: How do we open the doors wider? How do we attend to the spiritual hunger for more people? What markers of cultural elitism are disposable if we are to love and welcome our neighbors more effectively?