

Excerpt from *The Kingdom, The Power and the Glory* by Tim Alberta

Chapter 17: PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Two thousand souls filled the sanctuary's lower bowl one night in February 2023, yet they hadn't come for the sanctification. They kidded off the event with a blaring, rock-band rendition of "Christ Be Magnified"--"I won't bow to idols, I'll stand strong and worship you / And if it puts me in the fire, I'll rejoice 'cause you're there too"--but there was little rejoicing. Although they gathered inside Dream City Church, this wasn't a church service. It was the first Wednesday evening of the month. At Dream City, they meant it was "Freedom Night in America."

Pastor Luke Barnett greeted the first-timers in attendance. He explained that thus was a chance to "talk about what is happening in our nation" and "draw a line in the sand" to preserve its traditional Christian values. He couldn't take credit for the idea. Freedom Night, the pastor said, was the brainchild of a "visionary" Christian, "a wonderful, wonderful man of God who loves the Lord. As Barnett built up the introduction, like the announcer of an NBA All-Star Game--"He's a friend of Dream City Church..."--the crowd rose to its feel.

Charlie Kirk played it cool. After all he was used to big entrances.

Once a doe-eyed misfit with an outside self-image, he was now a doe-eyed misfit with seven million social media followers, having grown his youth-activist organization Turning Point USA from scrappy upstart into industry behemoth. Kirk had cannily tapped into the quick-twitch instincts of his fellow Millennials, building an empire of memes and merchandise, takedown and talking points, recognizing early in Trump's rise how "owning the libs" could be monetized. Fighting faux outrage on the left with faux outrage on the right, he became a profiteer of the American culture wars. Kirk, still shy of his thirtieth birthday, usurped the old guard of the conservative movement with such ease that even the right-wingers wise to his game had to play along. He enlisted volunteers and earned downloads and won headlines at an extraordinary clip. A few weeks before this Dream City event, Kirk had hosted the second-annual "AmericaFest" a four-day carnival of politics and culture, just down the street at the Phoenix Convention Center. The event attracted GOP heavyweights, Fox New celebrities, Internet luminaries--and a crowd bigger than most of the year's other right-wing gatherings considered.

Despite these many successes, Kirk, like the folks in his audience, was in no mood to celebrate. "It was a tough November for me, personally," he admitted. Studying the subdued expressions in the sanctuary, Kirk admitted to feeling "demoralized." Heads nodded all around me. Kirk said that he'd spent the month of December in prayer, seeking to understand what had gone wrong and what God was trying to tell him.

The conclusion Kirk reached?

"We need to *redouble* our efforts," he stressed. No matter how exhausted Christians were feeling—no matter how futile the fight to "get our country back" could seem at times—surrender was out of the question. "The enemy" wanted Christians to give up so that America might be conquered. Now they needed to prove themselves. It was, Kirk suggested, God's plan to withhold Republican victories in the midterm elections, to test their mettle. How would they respond?

"We've got to fight harder. We've got to organize," Kirk said. "We've got to continue to educate ourselves on where we come from in our biblical tradition, and from our history, to understand what we're fighting."

At some level, this was the same rah-rah rhetoric Kirk had been deploying since he founded Turning Point USA in 2012. But there was something newly distinctive about his approach. Having spent the past decade waging a war that was, at least superficially, ideological in nature, he was now hyping a struggle with higher stakes. This would be a spiritual battle, with implications much larger than any one election. He wanted the Dream City faithful to understand that they had entered a new phase of the war for America, one that couldn't be won by politicians and voters alone. To defeat the left, Kirk explained, patriots would need to be led into battle by the people who's been hanging back for too long: their pastors.

"The enemy would love nothing more than for the American Church to remain silent and complicit," Kirk declared from Barnett's pulpit. "Tyranny and totalitarianism will continue to grow if the American Church does not stand up."

Kirk had come to issue a challenge to the clergy. There was a time, he said, when it was defensible to avoid partisan disputes. But now, given the overt efforts to destroy the nation's Judeo-Christian culture—including a state-ordered shutdown of churches—there was no excuse. Any pastor who declared political neutrality was a weakling at best or a traitor at worst.

This was chesty stuff coming from a twenty-nine-year-old whose role theological exploit was getting his name, image, and likeness dropped by Liberty University. And yet, one could see how Kirk felt emboldened to lecture the nation's ministers. He wasn't merely speaking to a crowd of several thousand professing Christians, but so from the pulpit of one of America's largest megachurches. For his successful appropriation of clout—if not credibility—Kirk could thank one person: Pastor Barnett.

The leader of Dream City wasn't known for his discernment. In the summer of 2020, as the coronavirus raged nationwide, he lent his stage to then-president Donald Trump for a campaign rally, boasting that his church operated a cutting-edge air filtration system that killed "99 percent" of the virus. (The pastor's sidesplittingly absurd claim, which was

quickly debunked and later removed from the church Facebook page, distracted from the more pressing question of why he'd sanctioned a presidential campaign event inside his sanctuary.). Unlike so many other pastors I'd encountered, Barnett came across as credulous to a fault, a man who seemed thoroughly convinced of both the righteousness of his cause and the utter, no-time-to-waste urgency of advancing it.

On this particular night, Barnett previewed a promotional video for his audience at Dream City. It told of an upcoming conference—"On This Rock"—that his church would host later in the month. About two thousand pastors would be coming to Dream City to learn how to "take a stand" and defeat the leftist agenda.

As the lights dimmed, two gargantuan monitors depicted a violent storm moving in. "Now is the time..." the banner read, "for church leaders to stand for Christ." Soon typhoon waves were crashing against a church building, and the famous words Jesus spoke to Peter scrolled across the screen: "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." For a grand finale, the video showed a promotional reel of the pastors who would be headlining the event. Among them were Barnett; his father, Tommy Barnett; his brother, Matthew Barnett, and, naturally, Jentezen Franklin.

Barnett and Kirk made for a formidable tag team. Barnett whose dynasty ministry had deep ties to the Charismatic Movement, could reach millions of Stephen Strang-reading churchgoers; Kirk had well placed political allies including but not limited to the entire Trump family and was fast becoming a player in the evangelical world. Having established a religious foothold several years earlier with Freedom Night in America, Kirk began hosting his own pastor's conferences in 2022. That same year, he launched the "Saving America Tour," which played in church sanctuaries from coast to coast. For an encore, in 2023, Kirk had announced the "Kingdom to the Capitol Tour," a traveling revival that would bring music, prayer, and advocacy to each of the fifty state capitals before the year's end.

Kirk was preparing an all-out blitz on American churches. It didn't appear to be a bluff: he certainly had the resources and the organization — and the chutzpah — to succeed where other right-wing agitators had failed. At one point, describing how atheism had led to mass violence in centuries past, Kirk, without a trace of self-awareness, announced to his audience, "God will not honor those that try to do big, majestic, and temporal things non in His name."

Kirk was doing a big, majestic, temporal thing with Turning Point, USA — and with its newest division, TPUSA Faith. The only thing standing between conservatives and control of the nation's key institutions, he believed, was impotent pastors. Teaming with their outspoken counterparts in the clergy, Kirk was preparing to crank up the pressure. And if he couldn't get through to these church leaders and their congregations — with the conferences and tours, the radio ranting and social media shaming — Kirk knew someone else could: Eric Metaxas.

AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM HAS LONG BEEN PLAGUED BY A CERTAIN pedagogical insecurity. Whatever their collective influence amassed in certain arenas—politics and business, certainly—evangelicals have chafed at their seeming exclusion from elite social, academic, and intellectual circles. This hunger for relevance can result in the lionizing of men who infiltrate society’s innermost sanctums, seemingly on their behalf, representing their views and validating their beliefs and giving them a metaphorical seat at the table. Simply put, evangelicals hate feeling like outcasts, and are quick to uncritically follow those who make them feel accepted, relevant, enlightened.

Eric Metaxas understood this sentiment—the Church’s gnawing sense of marginalization—and knew just how to take advantage of it. Raised in the Greek Orthodox tradition, Metaxas embraced the evangelical movement after graduating from Yale in the mid-1980s.

Unlike many young Christian conservatives who rushed headlong into politics, Metaxas pursued the arts. He authored numerous children’s books; wrote for *VeggieTales*, the Christian cartoon for kids; and became an understudy of Chuck Colson, the former disgraced Nixon aide who’d become born again and later launched the Prison Fellowship ministry. (Metaxas cowrote Colson’s widely distributed “Breakpoint” media bulletins.) Having cultivated deep roots in evangelicalism,

Metaxas branched into secular society. He began hosting live events in Manhattan, known as “Socrates in the City,” that drew erudite crowds for discussions of the finer things over wine and hors d’oeuvres. He wrote a book on the British abolitionist William Wilberforce and followed that project with a biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German preacher who was martyred for his opposition to Hitler. This earned Metaxas an invitation to keynote the National Prayer Breakfast in 2012. By the time he’d finished goading then-president Obama and then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi over the issue of abortion—both of them sitting a few feet away on the dais, television feeds broadcasting the event live—he’d become a singular celebrity on the Christian right. I could see why Metaxas was alluring to people like my mom and dad. Here was a witty and winsome Christian intellectual, sartorially flawless and linguistically fearless, displaying an evangelicalism that seemed immune to caricature. But red flags were everywhere. Metaxas possessed a bottomless appetite for self-promotion. He chased media exposure with voracious abandon, making no secret of his longing to land a Fox News show. At the prayer breakfast, he badgered Obama so insistently to read his Bonhoeffer book that the president finally held it up playfully, providing a photo that Metaxas would spend years milking for publicity. And his grandiloquent style could not conceal questions about the substance: Even as Christian audiences devoured Bonhoeffer, the book came under intense scrutiny from historians who had spent their careers studying the German pastor and ripped many of Metaxas’s analyses and conclusions. Something about Metaxas was off. For a man whose celebrity owed to such a seemingly inimitable and authentic persona, he carried the eerily familiar scent of superficiality.

It was little surprise, then, that Metaxas went all in on Trump's presidency. Having once skewered the Republican candidate and his manifest foibles, Metaxas declared soon after Trump clinched the GOP nomination that Christians "must" vote for him in the general election. As with so many others, this marked a crossing of the Rubicon for Metaxas. Once a passive political onlooker, he now argued that Democratic Party rule would imperil America's very existence. "This is for the survival of the nation," Metaxas pronounced in 2016.

Jon Ward, a Christian journalist, captured the reaction thusly: "Conservatives sent me unsolicited emails of outrage. One email simply quoted from a passage in Metaxas' Bonhoeffer book, where he described Hitler's rise to power: 'The German people clamored for order and leadership. But it was as though in the babble of their clamoring, they had summoned the devil himself, for there now rose up from the deep wound in the national psyche something strange and terrible and compelling.'"

The ensuing debate over what had become of Metaxas traced a well-worn dichotomy. Was he knowingly shedding his principles in the pursuit of fame and influence? Or was he actually convinced that America needed saving and that Donald Trump was our national Messiah?

Both answers may have been correct. Corruption and psychosis are not mutually exclusive. Metaxas had become accustomed to a level of commercial success and spiritual relevance that would be forfeited by opposing Trump's candidacy. But it also did appear as though his views, like those of so many Christians, had become radicalized in the Obama era. This would continue apace into Trump's presidency.

Metaxas went on to defend the forty-fifth president with a convert's vigor. He wrote children's books titled *Donald Builds the Wall* and *Donald Drains the Swamp*. When Franklin Graham remarked to him that citizens protesting Trump's policies were "almost demonic," Metaxas objected to the use of the word almost. At the 2020 GOP convention in Washington, Metaxas sucker-punched a demonstrator who was bicycling around the premises. In a livestreamed David debate with David French—a fellow evangelical intellectual who opposed Trump's reelection—French Metaxas left their Christian college hosts slack-jawed when he responded to French's opening argument by quipping an old Saturday Night Live joke: "Jane, you ignorant slut!"

Given the intensity of this evolution, Metaxas became a predictable champion of Trump's crusade to overturn the election result in late 2020. He promised that people were going to prison—or worse—for rigging the results. He insisted that Trump would stay in office, likening his faith in this outcome to his faith in Jesus rising from the dead. He even booked the president on his radio show and suggested that martyrdom was an appropriate Christian recourse to the crisis at hand. "I'd be happy to die in this fight," Metaxas told Trump on the show. "This is a fight for everything. God is with us."

These antics permanently alienated Metaxas from some longtime friends in the uppermost echelons of the evangelical movement, people who had clung naïvely to a hope that his Trump spell would ultimately break. But, in another predictable pattern, it did nothing to diminish his standing within the Christian conservative community. If anything, his reckless rallying cries only further endeared Metaxas to the multitudes who felt betrayed by their own leaders for not fully backing Trump’s election denial.

This explained why, several nights before I saw Kirk in Phoenix, more than one thousand worshippers greeted Metaxas like a biblical prophet inside the sanctuary of a suburban Seattle church.

It was Sunday night at Westgate Chapel, a large congregation in the town of Edmonds, Washington. An aging, bald pastor named Alec Rowlands opened the proceedings by confessing to a terrible failure. For many years, Rowlands said, he had refused to engage with partisan political causes. “Basically, I thought if I didn’t say anything controversial, that people who were more sensitive or maybe on the fence would hang around, and eventually the gospel would get to them. Probably what a lot of pastors think,” Rowlands said. “And then, when COVID hit, and we watched the systematic attack on the Church, it really opened my eyes.” Rowlands recalled how he’d repented to his congregation in 2021. But repentance wasn’t enough. He needed to atone. And so “Apologia” was born: Every other month, Rowlands would bring an A-list guest speaker to address Westgate Chapel on a Sunday evening, discussing the overlap of conservative theology and conservative policies and urging believers to get more involved. The guests included Fox News characters and right-wing internet brawlers. But this event in early 2023 was the biggest draw of all: Eric Metaxas.

With his swoop of silver hair, tortoiseshell glasses, and gold-festooned navy sport coat, Metaxas took the stage to a wild standing ovation. Rowlands said it was “a record crowd for Apologia,” and Metaxas did not disappoint. For the next two hours, he and a friend he’d brought along, conservative pundit John Zmirak, roused God’s people with a message of scorching certitude on all things political, cultural, and theological.

It was a race to the rhetorical bottom. Zmirak blamed America’s demise on “RINOs”—Republicans In Name Only—and “the squish Christians” who won’t fight, calling out “the David Frenches of this world” as “the real enemy.” He referred to the vice president as “Camel A. Harris,” then started in on Michelle Obama, calling her “the American Winnie Mandela.” (Nobody in the racially homogeneous audience seemed to mind.) He mocked “crackhead” Hunter Biden and asked if anyone had seen the YouTube video of “the crackhead singing ‘Amazing Grace,’” which he found to be amusing beyond words. He said, with a straight face, “The next January 6 should be open carry.”

Metaxas was less nakedly incendiary and yet, somehow, more disturbing on the substance. He claimed the imprisonment of Americans who stormed the Capitol was part of a deep-

state cover-up, “and by God’s grace, very slowly but surely, the truth is coming out” thanks to the efforts of Julie Kelly. (Kelly, a professional misinformation artist who claimed that January 6 was an FBI inside job, once called Michael Fanone, the Capitol policeman nearly beaten to death by rioters, “a crisis actor.”) Metaxas made at least four direct comparisons to Nazi Germany, arguing that by accepting the government’s policies—on vaccines, for instance—Christians were doing “the exact same thing” they did in appeasing Adolf Hitler. He emphasized again and again, with increasing ferocity, that believers would be “judged” before God for refusing to confront these injustices.

“If you’re in the middle, playing it safe, you are enabling the devil to destroy the culture. There are a lot of good people who have been fooled into silence, and God will deal with them,” Metaxas said. “God will hold you accountable. Because you’re supposed to believe that He has deputized you to be His voice and His hands and His feet wherever you are. The silence in this nation—of the Church—is a scandal.”

He took a late-night-infomercial pause. “And that’s why I wrote this book.”

Sure enough, Metaxas had pegged his Apologia appearance to the publication of a treatise, *Letter to the American Church*. The book encouraged Christians to follow the example of Bonhoeffer—and Metaxas himself—by combating the “regime” that aimed to inflict evil on the world. He echoed the argument made by Kirk: God was using the turmoil of recent years to test American believers. Were they willing to pursue righteousness, even if it entailed persecution and suffering? Metaxas was proud to say that he had done so. (The half dozen members of law enforcement on hand, two of them guarding either entrance of his book-signing event, and another two personally escorting him around the church, was evidence of his supposed persecution, if not of any material suffering.)

Even the most unhinged portions of the conversation failed to faze the people in attendance. Zmirak repeatedly offered casual calls to violence, at one point citing the Islamic fundamentalist takeovers of Middle Eastern societies as a model for how Christians “can take this one back.” Metaxas grew openly conspiratorial as the program wore on, referencing his “friend” Roger Stone’s work on the assassination of JFK, suggesting that Biden’s presidency was not what it appeared, and predicting that Harris would soon be forced to formally assume office.

That none of this nonsense appeared even mildly surprising to the folks at Westgate Chapel reflected the systematic inurement of evangelicals everywhere. Listening to his radio program in the weeks preceding Metaxas’s visit to the church, I had to wonder if it was being produced from inside a padded room somewhere. He compared January 6 to July 4 as a birth of liberty that would one day be celebrated. He hosted Mike Lindell and Jenna Ellis—the former Trump lawyer who was censured by a judge and admitted to spreading numerous falsehoods about Biden’s victory—for “election integrity updates.” He discussed “the underbelly of Hollywood” and “the permanent lockdown” being pushed by global

elites. Metaxas speculated that Biden had been replaced by a body double, encouraging his listeners to study the so-called president's earlobes as evidence of the switcheroo.

None of this stopped a prominent pastor from allowing Metaxas to feed his sheep. None of this disqualified Metaxas from giving religious instruction to a sanctuary full of professing believers. None of this excluded Metaxas from the conversation over the future of American Christianity. In fact, if Charlie Kirk got his way, Metaxas would soon be leading that conversation at an extraordinary scale.