

Charlie Kirk (and too many others, too many more)

What follows is a presentation I made at our weekly Adult Discussion class at Greenfield Hill Congregational Church, in Fairfield, CT. We call the class “Religion in the News”. The life and work, the murder and aftermath of Charlie Kirk are clearly “religion in the news”.

In writing I tried to anticipate every question, concern, and issue that might already be percolating, to provide the fullest presentation that I am able to provide. Which is a gentle way of warning you: this is long!

We had a lively and far ranging discussion afterward. I welcome your response of any kind. That is how I learn.

My contact info is drowe@greenfieldhillchurch.com or 203-521-7503. In Christ’s Peace,

David Johnson Rowe

Charlie Kirk: and too many others, too many more.

Toward the end of Charlie Kirk's too short life he embraced a deeper commitment to Sabbath observance. In addition to his own evangelical Christian Sunday worship life, he told a Rabbi friend that he was beginning to observe self-imposed restrictions during the Jewish Sabbath, particularly refraining from social media from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown.

Whenever talk turns to Sabbath observance in the USA, or to the lack thereof, we end up talking about New England's old time "Blue Laws" that prevented the ubiquity of today's Sunday morning sports, and the full range of business openings from malls to supermarkets to liquor stores. "It didn't used to be that way," the elders among us lament as grandchildren miss Sunday School for soccer games, and adults use Sunday mornings for errands and shopping, and cheering on their soccer prodigy.

With every such conversation I am asked the same question: "don't you think God is angry with us" for giving up on the 4th Commandment, to enjoy a Sabbath rest just as God did after the arduous work of creation?

"No," I always say, "not angry. Disappointed." Jesus even said God made the Sabbath for us, not for God's own benefit. God is disappointed that we won't grasp the value of keeping one day different from all others. No hassles, no traffic jams, no standing in line, no shopping. Just family time, downtime, change of pace, rest, respite, maybe even some quiet. For our own benefit, Jesus emphasized! We have six days a week to do as much rat racing as we choose, why ruin Sunday by making it just another day, same old same old?

Yeah, God is more disappointed than angry. Disappointment, by the way, is not a lesser feeling.

God watches Charlie Kirk get gunned down. Not long after four Minnesota State politicians and spouses were shot, two killed. Not long after two Israeli diplomats were murdered outside Washington, DC's Jewish Museum. Not long after this, that, or the other horrific event riveted our attention for days, at least hours, until some other horrific event grabbed us by the throat. The sad truth is that Kirk's murder caused Americans to lose sight of yet another school shooting the same day in Colorado; and together they weakened America's focus on 9/11. We can only take in so much, it seems, and I know it is true for me. Is God angry? No. Disappointed, I am certain.

To say that God is disappointed in no way minimizes God's response. Or ours. Anger is easier, a knee jerk response. Revenge is easier, it is such a visceral response. You don't have to think about anger or revenge. They come naturally. Disappointment is personal, the result of thought, the weighing of expectations and hopes versus ugly reality. Disappointment recognizes that we expected more and had a right to expect more. We may have invested time, money, love, prayer, effort hope, faith, patience, time – in a person, a cause, a relationship, a project. And it, they, fail us. We are disappointed. That's big.

In one of my short stories there's a key part that I base entirely on my own mother's "look" of "disappointment". My formative years leading up to young adulthood were filled with violation and rejection of our family's values and standards. But from my mother I never remember anger, resentment, bitterness, not even punishment. But that "look of disappointment," that knowledge that I had let her down left me wishing for some anger, to be grounded, some sort of punishment. That would let me know that I had paid off my debt, that mom and I were square again. But disappointment was unspoken, it lingered, it was intimate, there was no way out. Even forgiveness doesn't wipe away disappointment. We have a special adjective for disappointment: bitter. Bitter disappointment.

Charlie Kirk's murder was a bitter disappointment to God. All our inhumane treatment of one person by another, one group by another, everything that cheapens life, that coarsens life, that vulgarizes life, that steals life away, all that is a bitter disappointment to God.

God created us for his pleasure. You might choose a better word, less divinely egotistical. But lacking other explanations, it seems that God wanted to create something, something God could enjoy, engage with, take pride in, give a tangible sense of accomplishment.

As a writer, however unaccomplished, I've dabbled in several genres: books, essays, White Papers, fiction, biography, religion, poetry, and now podcast scripts. All this in addition to 57 years of sermons akin to a weekly term paper.

I often say that poetry is the most intimate form of literature. You write a poem first and foremost for yourself. If you like it, you have already won your Nobel Prize for Literature. If anyone else likes it, that's a bonus.

Creation is God's poetry. A human being, a dahlia, a sunrise, the Northern Lights, a snowstorm, autumn leaves – pure poetry. A master craftsman at work. Creative genius.

And then an excellent student, raised in a conservative Mormon home, with some compassion for society's outcasts, fires a rifle from 500 feet and kills Charlie Kirk. God's creation is destroyed. God's pleasure is besmirched. God's poetry is ruined. What is our response to living in this continual "little shop of horrors" on any street, in any neighborhood, at any time of day or night?

Shortly after Kirk's murder I went to Prague to write. My dear Czech mentor, Father Tomas Halik, always pushes me to look for "the signs of the times". On this trip to Prague "the signs of the times" again changed my writing plan. Complete strangers offered me their condolences. Complete strangers asked how we Americans put up with such things: gun violence, school shootings, mass murders. Regularly.

While in Prague, I always visit historic Karlov (Charles) University, writing in an area that feels its 1348 roots. At the entrance I grabbed an issue of the university's quarterly magazine. It happened to be the issue dedicated to commemorating the horrific mass shooting that killed 14 students and faculty two years ago.

The issue was filled with heartfelt tributes to each murdered student and teacher, personal thanks from the family to the school, classmates, first responders, messages of hope and unity.

Forgive my crass reaction, but those Czechs aren't used to mass murders and school shootings the way Americans are. We know the protocol. We won't focus on the gun. We won't do anything about mental health. We won't oversee the Internet. But we'll promise to go after The Ford Foundation, and look hard at the "trans" connection.

A week after Kirk's murder our nation joined a massive congregation at a football stadium in Arizona to honor his life. The language, images, and messages of the day said much about faith as practiced and believed in infinite variety. Perhaps the crowning moment, which sent shivers up and down spines across the political and spiritual spectrum, was Mrs. Erica Kirk's declaration of personal forgiveness toward the murderer of her husband.

I've watched much of the funeral service, some of it several times. People have correctly likened it to an old-fashioned "Revival Service". Some saying it reminded them of those old 1950s and 60s Billy Graham Crusades at Yankee Stadium and

Madison Square Garden. There was lots of music, personal testimonies, a stirring central message. There was some pretty surprising Biblical exposition, expressing truly radical Christian Biblical theology by Erica Kirk and Tucker Carlson. Kirk's mentoring pastor gave a classic "salvation" message, complete with altar call, inviting new Christians to publicly stand up and show their faith.

In some ways, the funeral aspect got lost in the evangelistic, revivalist, even celebratory outpouring of the day. The day was more about Jesus Christ, fitting, since Jesus Christ had been increasingly central to Charlie Kirk's mission in the last two years.

Kirk began as the "wonder kid" of right wing politics as an 18 year old, foregoing college to concentrate on politics. What Obama was forever criticized for as proof of his socialist, even Communist leanings, his "community organizing" career, this is what Charlie Kirk did excellently – organizing community around his blend of conservative politics, evangelical Christianity, and youthful engagement. His communities were primarily college campuses.

May I make your head spin? Both were operating out of Christian conviction.

Charlie Kirk's upfront, very public and forceful presentation of Christianity became more pronounced in recent years. But he was part of evangelical Christianity his whole life, through his church life and schooling.

It has been said that his rejection by West Point was a "turning point", no pun intended; that his spot at West Point was taken by someone of another color and gender. Rather than focus on college, Kirk began his organization, built to challenge what he believed were the wrongs, failures, false teachings, and bad professors on college campuses. Politics and the culture may have been the most prominent part of his campus "debate" engagement, but "apologetics" became increasingly important. "Apologetic" is the awkward name for "defense of the faith". It is how people of faith explain themselves, their beliefs and doctrines. It does not mean to apologize!

Kirk's "apologetics" were pointed and razor sharp. I've listened to hundreds of his one-on-one, person to person encounters with mostly other young adults, mostly male. Watching them reminded me of what legendary radio talk show titan Rush Limbaugh always said, "that the purpose of a caller is to make the host look good." Likewise with Kirk, these 30 to 45 seconds snippets are designed to make the other person, his adversary, look defeated and diminished, vanquished by Kirk's quicker,

feistier, tougher, well prepared retorts. It is very much of the time, the era, and the technology of today.

In retrospect, both of his life and death, is it fair to call him a Christian? A martyr? A Christian Nationalist? An evangelist? Probably “yes” to all four. Whether he was a Christian is best decided between God and the individual. But looking to a basic definition of “Christian”, it's clear.

To be a Christian is to accept to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, acknowledging that God has extended “amazing grace” – forgiveness – to any and all who follow Jesus. Whether one is or is not truly or fully Christian is best left between God and the individual. There are clearly many kinds of Christians, many of whom do not accept other Christians as Christians. It may be some belief or behavior that causes us to think, “how can that person call themselves a Christian?” That's why the final judgment, literally, is best left to God.

Can Kirk be called a “martyr”? A martyr is someone who is willing to die for, and is killed, or made to suffer, for their beliefs. You can be a martyr for a cause, or a belief. It is the people who agree with the victim that determine whether someone can be considered a martyr. The Hamas/Palestinian men who killed 1,200 innocent people in Israel are each called a “martyr”. Many Christian saints began as martyrs, beginning with Peter, Paul, and Steven. Many civil rights heroes were martyrs. If you die for your beliefs, people who agree with you will call you a martyr. By any definition, Kirk was a martyr. Defying opposition and threats, he willingly faced any and all comers. And he was killed for his beliefs.

Because Kirk's videos are countless and ubiquitous, you can find most anything he said. Just on Thursday I saw a clip during which he denied he was a “Christian Nationalist”. But he was slick about it. My guess is that he knew “Christian Nationalist” is a baggage-heavy term, so he offered a correction. “I'm a Christian and a Nationalist,” he added. OK, I thought to myself.

“Christian Nationalism” is what it sounds like: the belief that America was, and should be again, a Christian nation. That would be a nation run by some agreed upon set of overtly Christian values, principles, teachings; drawing its legitimacy and authority from Christian/Biblical teaching. Christianity and Christians would have “pride of place”. Kirk surely sounded as though he aimed for all of that.

While I'm on this, we may as well delve into two theories central to Christian Nationalism and close to Kirk's faith.

The “Seven Mountain Mandate” is the path and process to Christian Nationalism. With the Biblical idea that God's people are to have “dominion over all the earth,” Christians must seek to not only participate in, or influence, but dominate, control the seven main areas of a nation's life: religion, government, media, education, culture, entertainment, and business. In short, Christianity as faith and practice should permeate every aspect of American life.

Akin to the “Seven Mountain Mandate” is the “Two Kingdom Theology”. That neatly divides the world into two realities: God's world, and not God's world – and they are forever at each other's throats. The end result is a truly militaristic tone to “spiritual warfare”, the battle fought by God's people against the forces of evil. Two of my favorite hymns growing up captured our zeal to see ourselves as God's crusaders: “Onward, Christian Soldiers” and “Follow the Gleam”. Christian militarism is rooted in Ephesians 6:10-12. There, St. Paul tells us to “put on the full armor of God... take your stand against the devil's schemes... against rulers, authorities, the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil... therefore put on the full armor of God ... with the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the boots of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the spirit – God's word.” In short, be ready to battle.

This was Kirk's ethos, and that of much of today's evangelical Christianity. It perhaps seemed a more obvious war when the perceived enemy was militant Islam that literally was at war against America, the West, and Christianity. The war strikes closer to home when the enemy is liberalism, or western culture, or college life, or secularism.

One of the oldest guidelines for waging war is to own the high ground. Dominating the Seven Mountain-Range Mandate would do that.

Charlie Kirk was the latest in a long line of street preachers and soapbox speakers. Old Testament prophets like Isaiah gathered crowds in the marketplace to deliver God's message of doom and deliverance. St. Paul used the Agora in Athens to introduce Jesus in a town that included a temple “to the unknown God” (Acts 17:22-29). My New York City days crossed paths with countless preachers in and around Times Square and Port Authority, holding a mic in one hand and a Bible in the other, inviting people to stop, listen, respond. In downtown London, Edinburgh, and Central Park I have listened to people literally standing on a soapbox, goading

passerbys with provocative statements and questions to earn an audience and gain a response.

Here in Connecticut, Cliffe Knechtle has set up his soapbox and film crew on college campuses for decades. Finding a prominent campus crossroads like Beinecke Library Plaza at Yale, Knechtle naturally invites questions about faith and religion in general, Christianity and the Bible in particular, theology and doctrine included. His style is earnest and pleasant, intense and yet welcoming. His website states “Cliffe loves to converse with skeptics and truth seekers to explore the tenants (sic) of Christianity.”

Interestingly Knechtle recently appeared on Charlie Kirk's podcast. Being two generations older, Cliffe Knechtle's tone is more inclined to be professorial and tutorial, almost grandfatherly. Kirk was only 31, with the hallmarks of his age and generation, though unusually self-assured. He was aggressive, pointed, more in your face, more of a provocateur than a debater.

If I compare the two, Knechtle is inclined toward, “I'm right, one day you'll understand.” Kirk was more, “I'm right, you're wrong.” Generational divide is my guess. I was the same way. As a 20 and 30 year old pastor I was always right; and my church would be better once they accepted that! As I got older it has been more, “we need to work this out together.”

Kirk had a lot going for him: smiling face, fast mind, quick wit, laser focus, cool look, core convictions, celebrity status, online presence: he was already building an empire of political persuasion. Given his youth, the sky did seem the only limit. Other than evil having its day. And evil had its day.

I was raised with “if you can't say something nice about someone, say nothing.” Especially around the time of death, other than condolences keep your mouth shut, and opinions to yourself.

That's gone by the wayside hasn't it? The glee with which some people greet the latest outrage, cheering on murder and murderer. From the assassinations of Charlie Kirk and the United Health executive, the October 7th massacre of Israelis, the death toll in Gaza in the subsequent war – people find reason to applaud, affirm, or excuse.

Is it that hard to mourn? Commiserate? Empathize? Sympathize? Or keep ugly thoughts to yourself?

I am more forgiving of the anger and despair expressed by those more personally affected by, for example, Kirk's murder. Blind rage is blind and rage, understandable if not agreeable. I do not agree that the world is “evil”, as some said; or that left wing ideology and organizations are to blame and must be shuttered.

Easy, too quick, even lazy answers are similar to the old adage, “if it's too good to be true, it probably is.” Easy answers and quick fixes rarely provide long term, reliable answers. And aren't you as interested, as I am, in long term, reliable answers, something that puts us in a position to learn from and eventually prevent this contemporary crush of personal violence inflicted upon the innocent?

And I am skeptical of the rush to identify identity groups as prime culprits of targeted violence. Kirk's killer? Who's to blame, or what aspect of his identity? His Mormon upbringing? Being academically bright? Or a college dropout? Or training to be an electrician? Or being from Utah? What about being a superior marksman? And much was made of having a “trans” roommate, with a potential romance – is that it?

Only two weeks later, two highly decorated Marine veterans perpetrated mass murders against innocent civilians, one targeting a riverside bar in North Carolina, the other crashing a Mormon church during Sunday worship. Who or what do we blame now? Or how about the anti-ICE sniper who ended up murdering two immigrants that ICE had already targeted? There's a madness afoot, an evil, an irrational violence that manages to connect our gun laxity with the grievance mentality and hair trigger emotions in a mental illness melange that society is not equipped for – not the police, not family, not society.

You already see the silliness of such a game. Except it isn't a game, or silly. The people who thought the Clintons were harboring kidnapped children in a DC pizza parlor, and folks who declared that Obama was the Antichrist were deadly serious. They weren't an “Onion” magazine parody or a Saturday Night Live skit.

Frankly, I want to know the driving forces behind every evil that captivates a person so much that they will perpetuate unimaginable horror. It took me half a day to write that sentence, so every word is weighted carefully, agree with me or not.

It is of little use to guess whether our times are worse, or more violent, or more divided, or crass, or mean spirited than other eras of earlier times. These are our times, and we have a right and an obligation to want them less worse, violent, divided, crass, mean spirited.

These are our times, and we are responsible for how we live them, respond to them, contribute to them, or detract from them.

One of the things about Charlie Kirk was that he had been famous, popular, and videotaped since he was about 18. Most every thought he ever said out loud is readily available. Some of us – me! – would not want everything we ever thought or said in our early years to be readily available. But that's our world.

I'm relatively new to the online world of TikTok and Reels, snippet videos of people saying and doing what they think their “followers” want to hear them say and see them do. Other than knowing that Kirk was popular with young adults and conservatives, especially when they overlapped, my education about him came through these videos. They all seemed to be filmed by his production company and inclined to make him look good. Part of making him look good was to make his questioners look not so good.

By now we are aware of his m.o., his schtick, his game plan. He would show up on college campuses, set up his stage of tent and mic, display his engaging slogan “Prove me wrong,” and take on all comers in brief, one-on-one debates.

Kirk comes across as confident, focused, tolerant in the gracious way of victors, certain in a subtly smug way, and enjoying the give and take.

The young adults who take the mic one by one seem well prepared, often reading their thought-out questions from their iPhone. They're respectful, offering a bit of background, admiring the chance to question while admitting disagreement.

Both sides seem glad, even proud to be sharing the same space. As if they had done something good, noble, right.

They had. Having people think, and think hard, and be challenged, and challenged back – all to the good.

Until someone brings a gun.

There's an old saying that a liberal is someone who hasn't been mugged, yet. The idea is that the liberal hasn't had enough real life experience of the cold, cruel world, and when they do they'll change their tune... and their politics. It's easy to favor cashless bail until your daughter has been assaulted on the subway.

Conversions come lots of ways.

A similar conversion awaits the spiritual rigidity of young Christians. Filled with the newborn fervor of newfound faith, the newly converted want everyone to see the world their way. This isn't just true of young conservative Christians. I've encountered this with young Chabad Jews at Yale, young Hari Krishnas at the airport, young Mormons at my front door, young Muslims in taxi cabs. And this exuberant evangelism isn't confined to religion. The latest yoga trend, the best ever diet, the surefire exercise, the newest online shopping link, the hottest tech device, all bring out the inner evangelist in the new found fan.

For the young Christian, filled with equal measure of Jesus' love and Jesus' love (watch the apostrophe) and their favorite preacher's admonitions, the finger is used to invite and to wag. The view from their perch is neatly black and white.

Until they fall or fail or disappoint. A lapse in personal behavior or moral judgment. A weakness uncovered. A word unfiltered. A sin full blown. A frailty all too human, too common, too public. An unvarnished truth about oneself, revealed in a too clear mirror.

Suddenly, there's nothing more alluring than humility, forgiveness, grace, reconciliation, where the moral high ground has the height of a curb, and one dares not to be holier than thou.

Aging may not necessarily produce maturity, but it offers a lot of wisdom to any inclined to use it. But it is not attractive on TikTok. Umbrage high and low, certainty of the left and right, my way or the highway theologically and politically and socially, mic drop debates, poison pens and verbal daggers as weapons of choice, faux (fake) wars and make believe games – all good for the online internet heroes, carefully edited just so.

That's the world of today's young people, about age 10 to 35 or so. They turn to their iPhone to follow their influencers, who offer up tidbits of politics and religion in easily digestible, barely mouthful sound bites.

Older generations, say, from 40 up, we've got to be aware of this, figure out how to do it, be able to compete – not complain and whine.

Charlie Kirk, bottom line? Good for politics, good for religion, good for Christianity?

Sure.

And I say that based on two learnings from my life.

First, I come from a family of readers. We love books, believe in books, trust librarians, and think of libraries as true sanctuaries, cathedrals of learning. As a parent responsible for four children and two grandchildren, and as a pastor overseeing thousands of children in my life, I very much wanted kids to read. I pushed it, promoted it, rewarded it. And I learned early on that you don't have to push the classics, or Shakespeare, or serious stuff. Just get them reading. Comics? Fine. Graphic novels? Why not? Romance, mysteries, westerns? Good. Just read. They get in the habit, their tastes will expand, mature. Kirk got people in the habit – to think. Kirk got people interested in politics. Good. Interested in religion. Fine. Interested in debate. Excellent. And for those who oppose what he believed, all the better. All the more reason to know your stuff, be prepared, build your own confidence to match his, find your passion to match his, firm up your own beliefs to match his.

And the second learning comes from Saint Paul. Stuck in prison, punished for his faith, likely to be martyred, Paul used the occasion to engage other prisoners. He probably did a “Charlie Kirk” on them, pushing them, probing them, cornering them, out debating them, asking and answering questions.

And the result, according to Paul, is that everyone was talking about Jesus! Sure, Paul admits, some were mocking, some were using religion for their selfish purposes, and some were genuine: genuine believers, genuine seekers. But Paul was glad for all of it, Jesus be praised, no matter how it was used.

Think of the world of advertising. In my lifetime I've heard: “there's no such thing as bad PR... I don't care what they say about me as long as they spell my name right.” And Mr. Sears, of Sears and Roebuck said, “Only half of advertising does any good, but we don't know which half!”

Kirk was really good at PR, marketing, reaching people. My point? Charlie Kirk got a generation thinking about two very, super important things: religion and politics. Or call it faith and action. Or Christianity and government.

We can easily find 200 things he said we disagree with. Or 200 things he said that are offensive. Or 200 things he said that were wrong.

He was 31 when he was killed. Believe me, I've had way more than 200 things that were wrong, or offensive, or people disagreed with, back when I was 30.

That's the fun of exuberant youth, the energy and imagination to be wrong and loud.

But he got a generation engaged. That's a good thing.

Our job, me as an old, old pastor, we as an old, old, old church, we as a super, extremely, old religion... our job is to help shape, nurture, and mature that engagement.