Epsilon Theory

Men of God in the City of Man, Part 1: Virus

June 30, 2023

AI in the City of God is a gift of unsurpassing power for those who would illuminate the world with the Spirit of Man and the good works of **Make/Protect/Teach**.

AI in the City of Man is a tool of unsurpassing power for those who would snuff out the small-l liberal virtues and small-c conservative virtues alike in their unceasing struggle to achieve power for power's sake.

Who wins?

Oh, the City of Man always wins here in the world-as-it-is.

An AI in the City of God**, Epsilon Theory (4.11.2023)**

There were a dozen or so, I think. Give or take.

They started their work around the same time, at the turn of the 21st century, a handful of similar independent laboratories across the United States engaged in dangerous and highly specialized research. These were not secret operations by any means. Neither were they especially well known. They were small, unaffiliated and largely unregulated.

Most of the laboratories had some connection with one or two of the others. They shared notes. Executives at one might sit on another's board or advise them on various matters, sometimes important, sometimes trivial. But there was no hierarchy, no ordered structure by which one directed the other or held the others accountable. So similar was their work and so shared their vision, however, that an outsider would never believe it to be decentralized. So effective was the work product that an outsider would never believe it came from these labs on the fringe, thinly resourced and barely acknowledged, even when their work was carried on by their massive peer institutions.

That work? The purposeful design and modification of viruses. Gain-of-function research.

This work may sound evil on the surface, and yes, their work resulted in many evils in the end. But in the beginning, I think, these mad scientists paved their research paths with good intentions.

Since they were decentralized, it is not possible to perfectly summarize those intentions. But at a very high level, we can say that they sought to use segments of RNA from the most ancient, virulent and contagious viruses encountered by humanity and to attach them to instructions designed to bring about beneficial rather than adverse changes in infected humans. In other words, they sought to produce exceptionally contagious viruses of *good.*

And it worked. Boy, did it work. The contagious part, anyway. The *good* part, not so much.

Since using a modified virus to spread positive effects is an old sci-fi trope by now, was the failure the result of plain scientific hubris? A bit of the old Dr. Ian Malcolm didn't-stop-to-think-if-they-should? Was it just bad luck? Was it the result of the interference of others?

Hard to say. It's not an exact science.

I mean, virus research is, or at least it ought to be. But this isn't a story about actual virologists, literal viruses or the circumstances of their potential escape from bioweapons laboratories conveniently located near exotic animal wet markets.

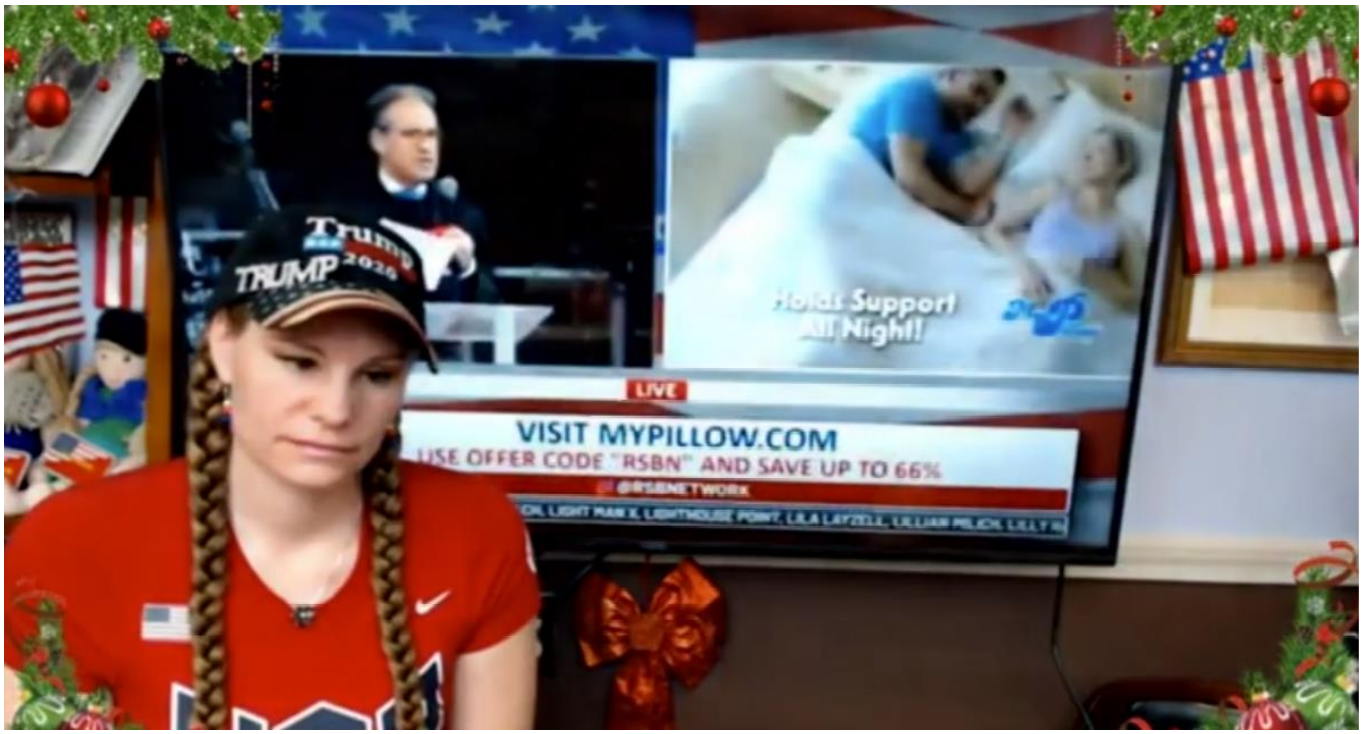
It is a story about memes.

It is a story about words. It is a story about how an unaffiliated, decentralized, superficially uninfluential group of people in the business of telling old stories inserted some of the most ancient, virulent and contagious memes encountered by humanity into narrative viruses that over a period of two decades mutated into forms that would produce symptoms and infect hosts that even the virologists who designed them could never have anticipated.

The virologists in our story are Christian ministers you probably have never heard of. The old stories are Christian stories and American stories, built from the stuff of memes, metaphors and imagery that permeate all human cultures. The carriers are politicians, public figures and people you probably know.

But perhaps most instructively, this is a story about the first, largest and most successful astroturfing – that is, fake grassroots – campaign of the 21st century, conducted with shared strategic vision but practically no direct coordination, relying purely on the power of meme, human susceptibility and the power of the internet and social media to accelerate the promulgation of ideas through overlapping networks. Whatever its purposed original aims, the chief symptom of the most recent mutation of the virus was to form an inexhaustible well-spring of support for an all-out assault on a fundamental, indispensable American institution:

The common knowledge of the validity of American elections.



There are other symptoms of this narrative virus, to be sure. But none of them is nearly so interesting. Certainly not to us, anyway.

In **An AI in the City of God**, we published two examples of the kind of astroturfing efforts of massive social significance for which large language models (LLM) could conceivably act as accelerators: an attempt to astroturf the destruction of faith in the US dollar, and an attempt to astroturf the destruction of faith in US elections. Needless to say, understanding how human hands (mostly by accident, no less) achieved a big part of one of the most concerning sinister use cases of generative AI is worthy of attention. But there's another, even more interesting observation to make about how this virus came to produce this symptom in so many of its hosts, something that should affect our thinking on all uses of AI in the City of Man:

***Nothing* in the original design of the narrative virus has anything whatsoever to do with elections, electoral fraud or electoral integrity.**

While the narrative viruses in this case were crafted and disseminated by decentralized, uncoordinated but strategically aligned human intelligences (with the aid of the occasional social media algorithm), this remains important to anyone giving thought to how generative AI could be used at scale to manipulate public common knowledge, including what we all accept as historical fact. That is, we must understand that the vector for that manipulation will not always be a common knowledge carpet bombing campaign, flooding social media and news-adjacent networks with truthy linguistic formulations designed to change what everyone thinks everyone else thinks in a direct, linear way. Nor will it necessarily take the form of the manipulation of common knowledge that takes place today through major media outlets' embrace of fiat news – the presentation of opinion as fact.

Like the Widening Gyre, the most effective vectors for effective astroturfing campaigns may focus not so much on changing common knowledge but on changing What We Need to Be True**.**

What We Need to Be True means the status quo on which institutions and individuals are dependent. It means the political, cultural and social issues on which we have staked our ego and identity. It means the basis on which we have painstakingly structured how we make money or the way that others define our success. For obvious reasons, changing What We Need to Be True is hard. And yet, that is precisely what happened in this case: the memetic RNA of these narratives didn't target the common knowledge of any host population about elections. It changed what a large host population needed to be true about elections.

Was that population largely conservative? Republican? Obviously. Was it, as many have written, disproportionately tilted toward evangelical Christians? Duh. But the story is a lot more complicated than that.

Alas, it is a story that cannot be told in full here.

Which is a shame.

After all, the conceit upon which we have framed our relationship with generative AI (and with one another in an generative AI-affected world) comes from Augustine's *City of God*, the ur-text when it comes to considering the intersection of the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of men. I suppose that the real ur-text would be the New Testament, but if the last decade has taught us anything, it is that "*My Kingdom is not of this world*" is apparently too nuanced and inscrutable a statement for any of us to take at face value. So I guess we'll give it to the man from Hippo. Unfortunately, the evolution of this idea from Augustine to Luther to Calvin to Kuyper has plenty of ink to its name already. So, too, does the unbroken chain of various strains of Christian nationalism in the United States, both malignant and benign, over the past 400 years.

Some of that ink is interesting but not always useful. David French, for example, whom I admire and often agree with, was among the first to correctly call out the role of "white evangelicals" in the January 6th capitol riot, but is focused on the rise of Trumpism more broadly. The same could be said for **Kristin Du Mez**, whose earnestness and efforts I also admire, even if I find myself disagreeing with her conclusions more often than not. Outside of these better-than-average examples, much of modern writing about Christian nationalism is focused on either **ludicrous bogeymen** (e.g. These evil people engage politically based on opinions they derive in part from their faith! Shame!) or strains of Christian nationalism that have existed for decades, without much effort to explain why they suddenly became attached to Stop the Steal, COVID trutherism and Q-adjacent **conspiracy nuttery**.

There is one scholar whose work on the topic I think is vastly underfollowed – that of Dr. Matthew Taylor, from the Institute for Islamic, Christian and Jewish Studies (ICJS). If you want to understand the nuts and bolts of the broader story, its players and its chronology, invest a week of your commuting podcast time in his **five-part**

Charismatic Revival Fury podcast. If you want research and hard data with a bit less story-telling around them, I also recommend the work of **Paul Djupe**, the Head of the Data for Political Research at Denison University. If you want well-sourced, scholarly data on quotes, timing and other specific from involved players and are willing to tolerate some excessively sympathetic context at times, the work of **Jim Beverley** is similarly useful.

But this essay series won't be about "Christian nationalism", mostly because, as I said, it has attracted enough ink. Also, in part, because I think it's mostly a dumb thing to write about. What the New York Times means by the term could not be more different from what **Stephen Wolfe** means by the term, which could not be more different from what **Sean Feucht** means by it, which could not be more different from what **Patrick Deneen** means by it, which could not be more different from the opinions of tens of millions of ordinary Americans, who think a nation is a thing, have some preferences (like literally everyone else) about its dominant cultural values and who are kind of wondering why everyone is screaming at them. Writing earnestly about Christian nationalism in 2023 is little more than an invitation for people to put words in your mouth or accuse you of putting words in theirs. So, no, this is not a story about Christian nationalism. But this is also not a story about elections, election fraud claims, churches, ministers or politicians, either. This is not a story about a series of events.

This is a story about language.

This is a story about how the right words in the right environment can change everything.

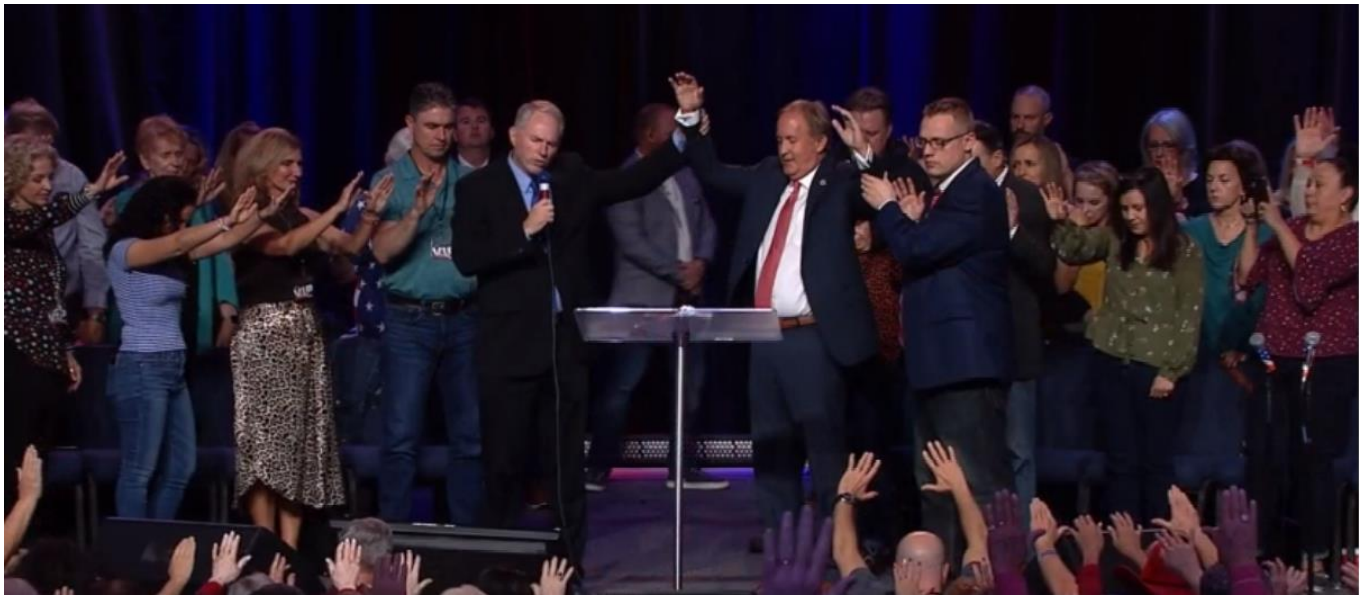
However, if we would understand how the right words can change everything, there will be few more interesting case studies than the narrative virus that culminated in attacks on the integrity of American elections. To understand *that*, we must understand the memes underlying its construction, many of which are shared with a particular strain of Christian nationalism. We must understand the people responsible for its design, many of whom are associated with a particular strain of Christian nationalism. And we must understand the mechanisms by which it was transmitted, many of which are deeply integrated into a particular strain of Christian nationalism.

But before we explore the construction of the virus, its designers and its transmission, I think it is far more instructive to look first at its chief *carriers*. Is there a trait they all share, not some bias from the general population, but something peculiar or idiosyncratic?

Look, yes, nearly all of the people and institutions leading the public promotion of the idea of a *stolen election* in 2020 are conservative. Nearly all of them are Republicans. Most are Trump fans, or at the very least think he was the best of a bunch of bad options. They skew heavily evangelical. And yes, a lot of them are white. Hooray, I've just described 40-something percent of the country. Unless you just want to score tribal points more than you want to understand how the hell this happened, that's not interesting. That's not useful.

What IS interesting, what IS useful is that nearly every one of the ring-leaders, the lawsuit filers, the rally coordinators and elected officials involved in the electoral fraud campaign has been integrated – willingly or grudgingly – into the language and practices of a quirky frontier of each of those categories:

American-style, spirit-filled charismatic Christianity.



Ken Paxton having hands laid on him by a range of anti-vaxxers, election truthers, MLM podcast hosts, Q-adjacents and charismatic worship leaders at the Charisma News-sponsored Reawaken America conference in San Antonio, Texas after delivering a speech on election integrity and Stop the Steal on November 12th, 2021.

Human discomfort can be graded on a continuous scale, I think.

If watching a bad American Idol audition is a 1 and a sex scene kicking off while you watch a movie with your parents is a 7, to an old school southern Baptist, being forced to raise your hands and have hands laid on you to receive an "anointing" from apostles and prophets would top out the scale. The man in the middle there is long-time Prestonwood Baptist member Ken Paxton, Attorney-General of the State of Texas. As you may recall, he was the primary author of the short-lived lawsuit which sought to prevent the certification of electors from four states in December 2020. As you almost certainly recall, he is now the subject of **impeachment proceedings** for allegations of bribery, dereliction of duty and obstruction of justice.

Yanking on poor Ken's right hand is Dr. Richard Bartlett, who was briefly in the news as the doctor who claimed inhaled budesonide was the silver bullet for COVID-19. Paxton's left hand is being held aloft by the organizer of the Reawaken America conference series, a former wedding DJ turned "**the COVID vax is creating a new species of human from luciferase, the Mark of the Beast and Epstein's DNA**" podcaster by the name of Clay Clark. Oh sure, things have changed in the Baptist church in the last 25 years. You'll see clapping and hands in the air, at least at some. You'll hear electric guitars and drums, too. But if you *really* know old-school southern Baptists, the heart and soul of what media would call "white Evangelicals", you can feel Paxton's pain simply by looking at the photo.

For the rest of you, I feel like some explanation is warranted.

When people use the phrase "evangelical" in reference to Christianity, they can mean a lot of different things. To many in Europe, the word is functionally interchangeable with "Protestant." Here in the states, if a media outlet writes it, the phrase means "terrible white people who can be safely blamed for everything bad that happens in the world." If it's anyone else, the term generally refers to churches that are doctrinally (if not necessarily politically) conservative, which means they tend toward beliefs like Biblical inerrancy and literalism…but, um, not

always. It usually *doesn't* mean Protestant churches that are in mainline denominations, that is, except for lots of Baptists and some Methodists. And, I mean, even some Episcopalians if you're in the right state. Uh, and a lot of Presbyterians, too. Also, depending on who you're asking, the charismatics and Pentecostals may or may not be included as a subset or be shunted off into their own figurative and sometimes literal tent. And there's an experiential component to distinguishing evangelicalism, in the "relationship with Jesus" vs. "religion" sense, but maybe not as much experientialism as in Pentecostal churches.

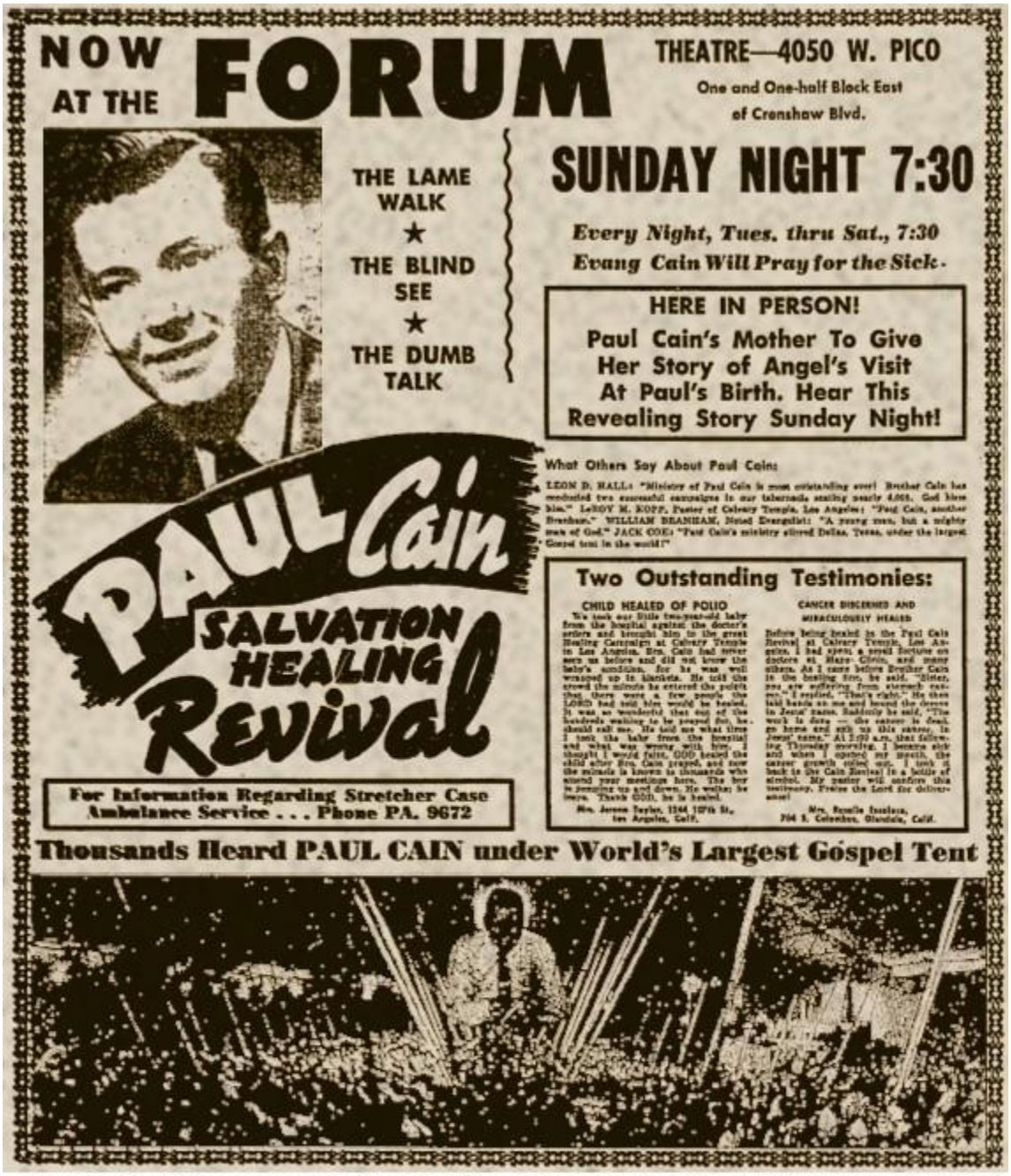
OK, I feel like I'm doing a crap job explaining this, so forget everything I just said and use this rule of thumb: if an American Christian willingly says "Yes, absolutely!" to the question "Are you a born-again Christian?" then they're evangelical. If they cringe and grudgingly say, "Yeah, I mean, I guess so, but can you clarify what you mean?" they're probably a non-evangelical, mainline Protestant. If they say, "What the hell are you talking about?" they're Catholic.

So what's a charismatic? Well, it's not a moniker based on their charm. It is simply an extension of the Greek word *charism*, or *gift*. The term is a reference to the emphasis that churches of this tradition place on the "gifts of the spirit", described most fully in 1 Corinthians 12 and, to a lesser extent, Romans 12. Healing, prophecy, words of knowledge, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, yes, but in some contexts also less sexy things like exhortation, service, teaching and mercy. A bunch of churches and denominations take a hard line view based on the very next chapter in 1 Corinthians that the conditions for the cessation of certain of those gifts were met, and that they have *ceased.* These are accordingly often called *cessationist* views. Many others believe they have continued, and are accordingly called *continuationists*. Thirty years ago, we'd have called the former "evangelicals" and the latter "charismatics," but the lines are a bit blurrier these days, for reasons that will sort of turn out to be the whole point of this essay.

For the time being, let's accept that charismatic churches in the United States are, therefore, generally *continuationist* churches within the evangelical tradition. Now, this may have you thinking of Pentecostals and, as my partner from Alabama remarked to me, *snake handlers*, Big Tent Revivals, faith healers and the like. You're not entirely wrong. But because you didn't sign up for a Survey of World Religions class, I'm just going to shortcut the accurate explanation and summarize it like this: 21st century charismatics are a lot like Pentecostals, but generally place less emphasis on the specific gift of speaking in tongues, are less doctrinally uniform and have more ambiguous polity (church-speak for how churches submit to being governed). Your mileage with any single church or minister may vary. Uh, wildly.

For much of the early 20th century, surprisingly, the charismatic movement largely inhabited the mainline denominations, and mostly focused on belief in miracles of *healing*. That is, it wasn't so much what we now call evangelicals, but rather episcopals and even Catholics who traveled to Azusa Street, a multi-year revival that spawned most modern forms of Pentecostalism in America. Many of those local priests, bishops and ministers took back to local churches and parishes a belief that supernatural healings were taking place, that the *charisms* of the New Testament were alive and well.

Where it grew in what we might today call the evangelical church, it was either in the post-Azusa Street Pentecostal denominations like the Assemblies of God, or else in the famous tradition of faith healers and revivals of the 30s, 40s and 50s. Oral Roberts, William Branham, Jack Coe and Paul Cain held huge events around the US and the world that began to overlap with the evangelical church. Certainly there are threads, some bright and clear and some tangled, that would lead you from any of these events to what I refer to as "*American-style, spirit-filled charismatic Christianit*y."



Ad Excerpt from Los Angeles Times April 18, 1953
by Healing and Revival Press 2005

Likewise, you could also find all sorts of seeds and shoots of charismatic practice in the history of frontier revivalism and early Pentecostalism. The entire history of Methodism, for example, is a history of **revival** and movements that have varied between **keeping the door to Pentecostalism barely cracked open**, and rushing headlong through that very same door! But in character, doctrine, organization and temperament, the core of the American charismatic church as we recognize it today really emerged with the Jesus People movement, in 1968 in Costa Mesa, California. At the very least, that was when the growth of the movement truly accelerated.

If you saw the recent film Jesus Revolution, you get the gist.

In mid-1968, after a small quantity of doctrinal disagreement and a heavy helping of unproductive church politics, a former Foursquare (Pentecostal) pastor named Chuck Smith found himself at the pastoral helm of a tiny non-denominational assembly they would call Calvary Chapel. Smith and his family also found themselves in the middle of something far more surprising: one of the largest concentrations of hippies south of Haight Street. It was a source of endless fascination for them, so much so that Kay, his wife, once exclaimed while driving past a lumbering horde of these creatures on Main Street in Huntington Beach, "We have to meet a hippie!"

Their opportunity would come soon enough.

The Smiths' daughter Janette was preparing for a date with a young man named John. It being the 1960s, young John was undergoing questioning from Chuck and Kay before the date could / would commence. *Yes, he had experimented with marijuana before. Yes, he was a believer now. Yes, if the situation arose, he could introduce them to a hippie.* The usual questions.

And so Chuck Smith was introduced to a young man named Lonnie Frisbee.

Lonnie was only recently back in Orange County after spending months in various communes in San Francisco, where he had been studying as an art student during the famed Summer of Love. He was handsome, long-haired and endlessly charismatic, described in nearly every piece and memoir as looking very much like he walked directly out of the stories of Christ and his dusty-footed disciples.

It was in that sort of bohemian splendor that Frisbee and his then-wife Connie gave their testimony to the could-not-be-more-different members of the Costa Mesta Calvary Chapel. It was in the wake of that testimony that the people of Calvary Chapel felt uniquely called to minister to this community.

And they did.

The first Calvary Chapel became many. A few years later, through a Calvary Chapel church plant in West LA, another movement called the Vineyard emerged. Incidentally, the Vineyard is the church that I grew up in. Over the next 50 years, the non-denominational charismatic revolution took place.

A Jesus People baptism. Source: Steve Rice, Los Angeles Times

So why does this matter to a story about the damage being done to common knowledge about the validity of American democracy?

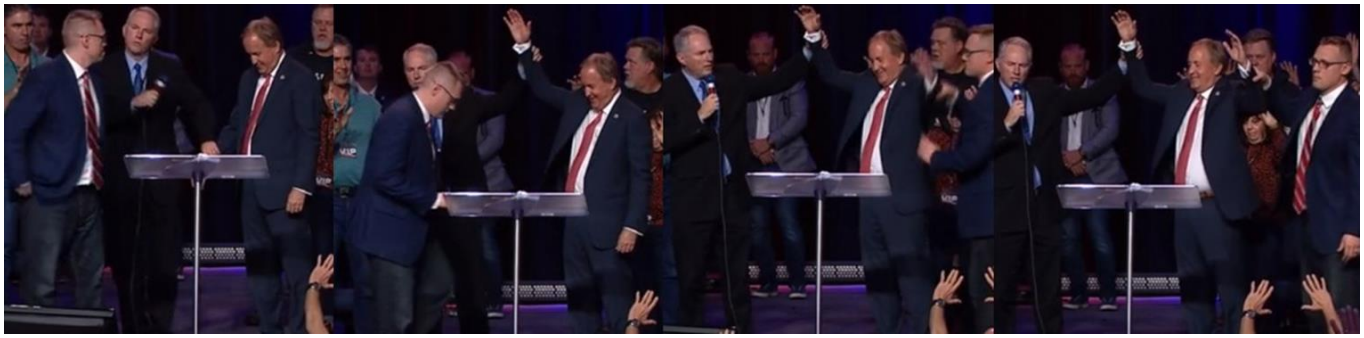
You're about to hear about people prophesying, and about people who believe those prophets heard from God. You'll hear about people who speak in tongues, and others who believe they can translate it. You'll see ministers anointing politicians' and officials' heads with oil. You'll read the language of spiritual warfare and intercession in the

world of angels and demons, of the issuing of decrees and commands to those spirits. You'll hear about people who had explicit visions from God of rallies that would shape and change the outcome of world events. You'll read about people blowing shofars and marching around buildings like Joshua. You'll hear about worship being led which fully integrates these concepts, and high production value television programs which present them on a recurring basis in between news reports and panel segments with self-named modern-day prophets and apostles.

If you are atheist or agnostic or profess to another faith, all of this probably seems deeply weird to you. But the whole reason I am going through the trouble of explaining this is that it is important to understand that ***much of it seems even weirder to most evangelical and mainline Protestant Christians***. I don't mean that at all pejoratively. Call a charismatic or Pentecostal weird and they'll smile. Then they'll quote 2 Samuel 6:22 ("*And I will be even more undignified than this!*") and 1 Corinthians 1:27 ("*But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise"*), then ask if they can pray for you so that you might also become weird.

Despite this, there is a prevailing narrative, almost a tacit assumption at this point, that the subsumption of faith into Trumpism – especially as part of stolen election claims – was some sort of pre-meditated, centralized initiative of a cabal of crusty old white racists from the white evangelical church. A natural by-product of evangelicals getting their tendrils into the GOP over the course of the 80s and 90s, if you will. **It wasn't.** Don't get me wrong. It's absolutely (and very obviously) true that in the end the MAGA ranks were chock full of evangelicals who'd more likely cast a bronze bust of Barack Obama than cast out a demon. But it is critical to understand that both the creators and ultimately the carriers of this narrative virus as it reached the electoral fraud zenith spoke a language that was entirely charismatic-Pentecostal in nature, utterly foreign to most conservative evangelicals in the late 1990s and early 2000s, to say nothing of their mainline Protestant brethren.

To wit, to be a part of the true "election integrity" astroturf movement, Ken Paxton, architect of the last gasp lawsuit against the certification of electors, wasn't called and *physically forced on-stage* to pay obeisance to Donald Trump or to some cabal of ultra-conservative **John MacArthur** clones, but to a stage full of MLM pushers turned election grifters who at some point adopted the patois of charismatic spiritual warriors.



Texas Attorney-General Ken Paxton, southern Baptist, dying inside as charismatics and "own your own destiny by starting an online business!" podcasters forcefully raise his hands to receive the anointing.

But Ken Paxton was far from the only leader of the initiatives who embraced, willingly or otherwise, this fringe charismatic vernacular.

As we meet these people, I think it's important to be clear: I have less than zero animus toward charismatic Christians or their beliefs. These are my people, my friends, my family. They're who I grew up with. I LOVE these weirdos, even if the opportunity as an adult to consider my own beliefs has made all of this seem almost as weird to me as it will seem to you. Don't read this as the old guilt-by-association game. I am not trying to convince you that those beliefs or language make any of these people guilty, bad, stupid, malicious or anything else (although some of these folks end up checking all four of those boxes for other reasons entirely).

I'm simply trying to convince you that the carriers ARE adhering to specific charismatic norms, so that we can then start answering how on earth an edge-of-the-mainstream cultural sub-group ended up in a perfectly overlapping circle with all of the conspiracy theory symptoms of a particular widespread narrative virus.

Where do we begin this nine-part journey?

Join us on Monday, July 3rd for Part 2, where we will explore the carriers of this narrative virus.

DISCLOSURES

This commentary is being provided to you as general information only and should not be taken as investment advice. The opinions expressed in these materials represent the personal views of the author(s). It is not investment research or a research recommendation, as it does not constitute substantive research or analysis. Any action that you take as a result of information contained in this document is ultimately your responsibility. Epsilon Theory will not accept liability for any loss or damage, including without limitation to any loss of profit, which may arise directly or indirectly from use of or reliance on such information. Consult your investment advisor before making any investment decisions. It must be noted that no one can accurately predict the future of the market with certainty or guarantee future investment performance. Past performance is not a guarantee of future results.

Statements in this communication are forward-looking statements.

The forward-looking statements and other views expressed herein are as of the date of this publication. Actual future results or occurrences may differ significantly from those anticipated in any forward-looking statements, and there is no guarantee that any predictions will come to pass. The views expressed herein are subject to change at any time, due to numerous market and other factors. Epsilon Theory disclaims any obligation to update publicly or revise any forward-looking statements or views expressed herein.

This information is neither an offer to sell nor a solicitation of any offer to buy any securities.

This commentary has been prepared without regard to the individual financial circumstances and objectives of persons who receive it. Epsilon Theory recommends that investors independently evaluate particular investments and strategies, and encourages investors to seek the advice of a financial advisor. The appropriateness of a particular investment or strategy will depend on an investor's individual circumstances and objectives.