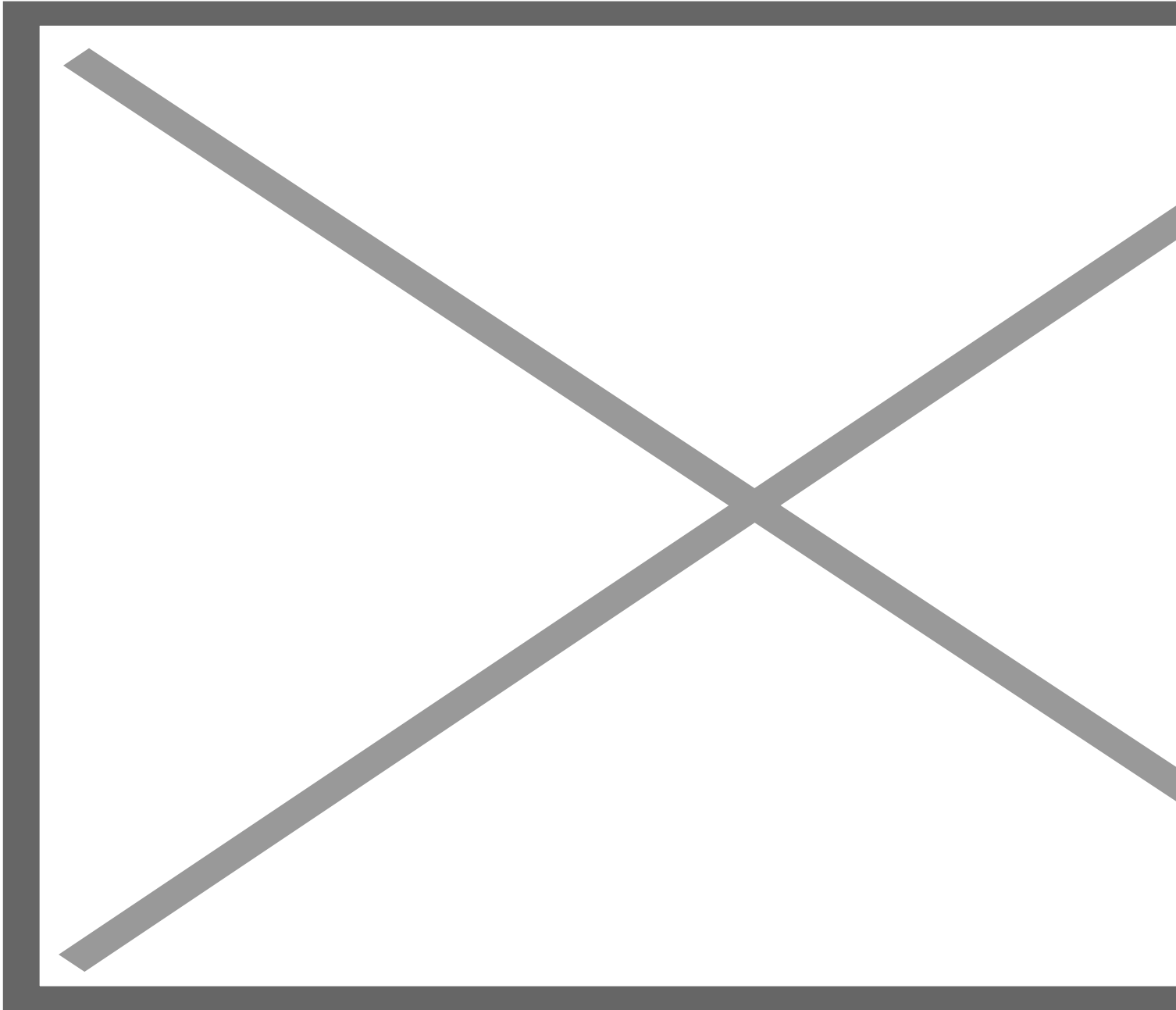


Yes, Charlie Kirk was a missionary

Trump is right about this—but not for the reasons he claimed.

by [David Congdon](#)

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Century illustration (Source photos: Gage Skidmore / Creative Commons)

In the wake of Charlie Kirk's [memorial service](#) on September 21, much of the attention was on Erika Kirk's message of forgiveness for her husband's killer and the sharp contrast with Donald Trump's admission that, unlike Kirk, "I hate my opponent, and I don't want the best for them." Many overlooked what Trump said immediately before this. Kirk, he said, "was a missionary with a noble spirit and a great, great purpose."

As if to reinforce the point, Trump used the language of mission twice more in [his speech](#). "Money was never his thing," Trump said. "He was always in it for the mission, as he liked to say, even back then, 'We have a country to save.'" He later observed, "The more success Charlie had, and he was getting more and more successful, the more dangerous his mission became. On campuses all over the country, his quest for open dialogue was met with menacing hate."

Trump may have been inspired to use these words because, two days earlier, Cardinal Timothy Dolan told the hosts of *Fox & Friends* that Kirk was "a modern-day Saint Paul. He was a missionary. He's an evangelist. He's a hero." Dolan's statements drew criticism from Catholics who were [embarrassed](#) by the now-retired prelate.

But Dolan and Trump are right about this. Kirk was indeed a missionary—and that's precisely the problem.

For most of Christian history, mission was carried out by the spiritual elite, those select few who were called, whether by God or their bishop, to be messengers of the gospel. At first, these messengers were apostles like Peter or Paul, who understood their commission to come from Christ himself. In the late antique and medieval eras, the church's mission was predominantly carried out by monks and mendicants.

Scholars of mission often call this period the "Christianization" of Europe, referring to a process in which missionaries sought to convert local rulers, who then forced their subjects to convert under threat of death. Religious freedom, of course, did not exist then, nor did the modern revivalist idea of the individual confession of faith as the *sine qua non* of salvation.

The Reformation occurred against the backdrop of European colonialism, and priests were sent forth as the religious arm of imperial power. In most cases, these missionaries served to provide a divine stamp of approval for the burgeoning transatlantic slave trade. Bartolomé de las Casas, in a rare exception, came to advocate on behalf of the Indigenous population and argued on behalf of the full humanity of Native people. The alternative view, widely held at the time, was that Indigenous peoples were subhuman and subjugated to imperial rule for their own good. Such attitudes persisted for a very long time, even after slavery was abandoned.

Most people trace the modern missionary movement to William Carey, whose 1792 tract *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* is often seen as the launching point for the explosion that occurred in what historians call the "great century" of Christian mission. It is no accident that this century was also the great century for European colonialism, as the colonial powers vied for control of the global South.

Carey's work was notable for making the argument that the Great Commission of Jesus—most famously the version found in Matthew 28:19–20, where Jesus says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you"—still applies to Christians today, and not just to some Christians but to all. But Carey also argues that the "uncivilized state of the heathen" ought to compel Christians to engage in this mission. "Would not the spread of the gospel be the most effectual mean[s] of their civilization?" he asks. "Would not that make them useful members of society?"

In 1873, the esteemed Oxford philologist Max Müller gave an influential lecture on missions at Westminster Abbey, in which he argued that Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity were the only three missionary religions, in contrast to the dead or dying religions of Judaism and Hinduism. The future of the world would be decided in the missionary struggle for global dominance. “Between these three powers,” he said, “the religious battle of the future, the Holy War of mankind, will have to be fought, and is being fought at the present moment.” This talk of a global holy war was mainstream and unexceptional among church and political leadership at the time.

The United States announced itself as an imperial power with the Spanish-American War of 1898. As a result of this conflict, the US gained control of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, and it annexed Hawaii at the same time. Christian leaders jumped at the opportunity to connect missionary work with the spread of Americanism. The head of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1898, Wallace Radcliffe, wrote a piece in the inaugural issue of *The Assembly Herald* titled “Presbyterian Imperialism,” in which he declared, “I believe in imperialism because I believe in foreign missions. . . . The Church must go where America goes.”

The brazen support for American imperialism among mainline Christian leaders at this time eventually imploded in the wake of the world wars. Changes in social and political attitudes among mainline Protestants led to a disavowal of the missionary movement in favor of the ecumenical movement and the politics of postcolonialism. In their place, evangelicals emerged on the scene in the late 1940s to assume the mantle of global Christian mission. The rhetoric of a global holy war—against communism, the civil rights movement, or today, “Woke”—remained prominent among fundamentalists.

Trump framed Kirk in this same rhetorical garb of a missionary sent into hostile territory, surrounded by violent heathen ready to attack him at any time.

Growing up in a family of Wheaton College graduates, I often heard the story of Jim Elliot, the Wheaton alumnus who attempted to evangelize the Huaorani people of Ecuador and was killed, along with his four companions, by a group of Huaorani warriors in 1956. Elliot’s story became famous in large part because his wife, Elisabeth, wrote a bestselling account, *Through Gates of Splendor*, before going on to become a prominent evangelical promoter of purity culture. I often heard members of my family repeat the famous words that Jim Elliot wrote in his diary on October 28, 1949: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” This line has become a mainstay in evangelical literature, especially in works about Christian mission.

Elliot’s story became part of the lore of the persecuted missionary. The dangers of missionary work have long been part of the literature, but the idea of the persecuted Christian became a uniquely powerful image in the 20th century.

In his book *Imagining Persecution: Why American Christians Believe There Is a Global War against Their Faith*, Jason Bruner, a professor of global Christianity at Arizona State University, traces the history of the idea that there is a war on Christianity that unites persecuted Christians around the world in a shared cause and a shared identity as martyrs for the faith. Bruner finds the origin point in the massacre of Armenian Christians in the mid-1890s, which mobilized American missionary agencies. But the idea really took off during the Cold War. In 1966, Romanian Lutheran pastor Richard Wurmbrand showed the scars from his torture at the hands of communists before the United States Senate, after which he formed the organization Jesus to the Communist World, later renamed The Voice of the Martyrs.

Through their carefully chosen language, Dolan and Trump placed Kirk within this lineage of missionaries and pastors persecuted for their faith—leading many on the Christian right to refer to Kirk as a martyr.

Framing Kirk in this way strengthens a narrative that has been politically useful for Trump since he first took office. In May 2017, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, led by Franklin Graham, hosted the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians. In his speech at the summit, Mike Pence—then the vice president—said that “the Christian faith is under siege” throughout the world by “radical Islamic terrorists” who harbor “hatred for the gospel of Christ” and are committing “genocide against people of the Christian faith.” Pence went on to say that “the terrorists will not stop until we stop them. And under President Donald Trump, we will stop them.”

As Pence’s speech makes clear, talk of Christian persecution serves to justify Christians retaliating with full military power. Christian martyrdom becomes Christian imperialism.

Pence has since been replaced by the more militant J. D. Vance, but the overall message of today’s Christian nationalists remains the same as that of the missionaries of old: There is a holy war between the great religious and national powers, and “the church must go where America goes.”

To give just one prominent example, Andrew Torba, the founder of the right-wing social network Gab, and far-right pastor Andrew Isker published the book *Christian Nationalism: A Biblical Guide for Taking Dominion and Discipling Nations*, drawing on the Great Commission as justification for taking control of a nation and forcing its citizens to conform to their version of Christianity.

“Jesus gave us a mission,” they write: “the Great Commission. We are to make disciples of all nations, including but not limited to the United States of America. Nothing and no one should stand in our way of accomplishing that mission in each and every nation on this planet.”

Torba and Isker would have been right at home in the Protestant imperialism of Müller and Radcliffe. They also espouse a more radical version of Müller’s denigration of Jewish faith. Their book is full of anti-Jewish statements, including the claim that Christianity is not rooted in Judaism at all. Isker [has stated](#) that Jews should be treated as second-class citizens.

More recently, Isker painted himself as a victim, or potential victim, of the same violence that took the life of Kirk. In his hometown of Gainesboro, Tennessee, neighbors have [put up a sign](#) saying, “Hate Has No Home Here in Jackson County.” Speaking on a podcast in the wake of Kirk’s killing, Isker characterized the sign as “saying, ‘I hope somebody puts a bullet in your neck.’ That’s what that means.” In a September 11 [post](#) to a Jackson County Facebook group, Isker said “my political opinions are more or less the same as Charlie Kirk’s.” It would seem their views about Christian mission are largely the same as well.

Kirk may indeed be the perfect embodiment of the Christian missionary. Some will see that as a cause to mourn his death. Others will see this as an indictment of the history of Christian mission and the sordid legacy of Christian imperialism.

This article was updated on October 6, 2025, to correctly identify the name of the article by Wallace Radcliffe.