

*CNN This Morning*

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MALE TRUMP RALLY ATTENDEES [in *New York Times* video]: Let's go Trump!

*NEW YORK TIMES*'s MICHAEL BENDER [in *New York Times* video]: One of the more striking ways we see this impassioned loyalty from Trump fans is at the end of his rallies, where there's a sudden shift in tone, where it goes from very high energy into almost a solemn church like atmosphere.

FEMALE TRUMP RALLY ATTENDEE [in *New York Times* video]: Let's go Trump.

BENDER [in *New York Times* video]: The net effect here is Trump has turned the Republican Party into something resembling the church of Trump.

KASIE HUNT: Church of Trump. A news story in *The New York Times* showcasing how many Trump rallies are looking less like campaign events, at least at the end, and more like a church service. *Times* reporter Michael Bender, you saw him there, writes this of the atmospheric: "Soft, reflective music fills the venue as a hush falls over the crowd. Mr. Trump's tone turns reverent and somber, prompting some supporters to bow their heads or close their eyes. Others raise open palms in the air or murmur as if in prayer. In this moment, Mr. Trump's audience is his congregation, and the former president their pastor as he delivers a roughly 15—minute finale that evokes an evangelical altar call, the emotional tradition that concludes some Christian services in which attendees come forward to commit to their savior." My panel is back. I'm going to set aside — I'm going to — hasn't — let's set aside the golden calf for a moment — [LAUGHS] — Matt Gorman, but it — this is something that we are seeing increasingly on the campaign trail, but also just kind of in our zeitgeist in the way that the former President is reaching out to Christian voters. Tim Alberta tackled this in *The Kingdom and the Power and the Glory*. What do you see here in these crowds, in the way that Trump is doing this? It is actually different from what he did in 2020 and 2016.

MATT GORMAN: It's a little bit different. You're right. I mean, look, a lot of what Bender described does resonate a little bit spending a lot of time, especially out in Iowa, in other areas. Like, that's very normal what you'd see in these sorts of events where they're the evangelical audiences. It really is. I think number two is, one thing we're not talking about — look, I've sat on this set many times and talk about how on a lot of issues Republicans are on defense on social issues and when it comes to abortion in the like, but there are issues where we feel on offense. You know, when Trump says Election Day is going to be a day of Christian visibility, when we talk about trans issues and sex changes for minors and women's sports, those are issues and social issues where we feel like we are playing offense on and I think there is a little bit of walking with a forward foot on some of these things. You're going to be hearing a lot more about those sorts of social issues in the months to come and maybe less about abortion.

HUNT: I'm going to play that in a second, but I think my question for you is, why is it that people view Trump as a seemingly — or treat him like a seemingly Christ-like figure when — I mean, the Bible specifically says like you're not supposed to do that?

GORMAN: I think that — I think it's a little bit different. It personifies itself differently with Trump than others, but I do think though —

HUNT: Because you worked for another candidate —

GORMAN: I worked —

HUNT: Tim Scott, a very promising Republican.

GORMAN: — yeah.

HUNT: I mean he is not treated this way. Most politicians —

GORMAN: I wish he was, but — I mean, I might not

HUNT: — I can't find any that are treated this way.

GORMAN: — be here. I might not be here.

HUNT: — I can't find any other politician that are treated this way.

GORMAN: But I will say this though, in a — in a secular sort of way, not in an evangelical directly away, you saw Obama treated like this.

TOLUSE OLORUNNIPA: Oh, no.

GORMAN: He — it was — yes, absolutely. Absolutely. There was a sort of — people — not an — not an evangelical, religious way.

HUNT: Wait, we need a shot of Karen's face. Sorry.

GORMAN: But, look, I will say this, when you are president of your party and you're a leader of your party, there is among — a base where it is a social — it is a secular deification in a way. It is. Yes.

KAREN FINNEY: Look, I think, as you pointed out, Tim talks about at great length in his book —

HUNT: Tim Alberta, yes.

FINNEY: — Tim Alberta, this fusion that has happened in the evangelical movement to the point

that at his father's own funeral he was getting attacked for things he'd written about Trump, right, this fusion. And what you're seeing, I think Trump understands, and this is where I do think it's similar to 2016. In 2016, he understood that there was a cadre of voters who were afraid of a changing America and he understood that, by demonizing and othering black and brown people and immigrants — right — that that was a way to galvanize that base. This time, I think what he understands is that his popularity in the evangelical movement — right — they would say, he's not perfect, but he's fighting for us, right? And so, that's why he — they're willing to accept — a lot of us would say, well, but he's had divorces and all these things, how do they —

HUNT: Sure. Sure.

FINNEY: — but I think they understand, they think he's fighting for them and it's become part of identity and I think he's understood that. So, other — the second thing I would say is, what's frightening about it is, as we've seen, the — he is also using very violent rhetoric. And it makes many people feel less safe. He — he's also using — again, he's perverting the words of God and Jesus. Jesus did not prelate (ph). He did not preach, you know, divisiveness.

HUNT: Well, he has said in the past that his favorite Bible verse is an eye for an eye, which is firmly in the Old Testament, not the New.

FINNEY: Right. Correct.

HUNT: So, I want to show you what — to Matt's earlier point, he did talk, Donald Trump yesterday, about Trans Visibility Day and Easter Sunday coinciding this year, not every year, but this year. Watch.

DONALD TRUMP: And what the hell was Biden thinking when he declared Easter Sunday to be Trans Visibility Day? Such total disrespect to Christians. And November 5th is going to be called something else. You know what it's going to be called? Christian visibility day, when Christians turn out in numbers that nobody has ever seen before. Let's call it Christian visibility day.

HUNT: Okay, so wait a second, these guys are arguing while we're watching —

FINNEY: Sorry.

GORMAN: — sorry, sorry, sorry.

HUNT: No, do it on TV now.

FINNEY: And you can see that they were — that — in the Iowa caucus we did see that that — the ad that we've played here before, that was likening the birth of Trump to the birth of Jesus — right — where he literally compared it —

HUNT: Right.

FINNEY: — there have been evangelicals who have said, Okay, that's too far. And Tim Alberta, in his book, talks about how some in the evangelical movement have — had — are uncomfortable with this fusion and perversion of the teachings.

HUNT: Matt, do you agree?

GORMAN: No, because, look, like I —

FINNEY: Of course not.

GORMAN: — look, I — no, no —

FINNEY: You're a Republican. Why would you agree with me?

GORMAN: — of course not. But like — but I think the ad in the Republican primary, where there's a trust among Republicans is a little different. When you get to a general election, that — that choice will fuse. I don't think you're going to see Biden evangelical votes in Iowa suddenly gaining steam here. Look, he's not going to —

FINNEY: Yes, but I think they could not vote for him.

GORMAN: — he's not going to lose — he's not going to lose any votes off that. You know, I think it's — that's a winning issue for us?

HUNT: You don't think he's going to lose any votes off that?

GORMAN: Absolutely not. Absolutely not. That is a winning issue for him and press that advantage if you're Trump.

FINNEY: So you think suburban women — let's go back to them —

GORMAN: Yes.

FINNEY: — are comfortable with Donald Trump comparing —

GORMAN: Those —

FINNEY: — no, no, no, let me finish —

GORMAN: Yes.

FINNEY: — are comfortable with him — literally saying, I'm your god.

GORMAN: I want to meet those —

FINNEY: I don't think so. Please show me those voters.

GORMAN: — those are suburban women who all of a sudden see that — that one thing, like, you know what, now I'm turned off. They — after almost a decade of this, that's going to break it?

FINNEY: No, it's not just that.

GORMAN: Yeah.

FINNEY: What that shows is someone who will do anything to win, who has no boundaries, who has no sense of decency, who has no sense of what's appropriate, what's not appropriate. He will do anything to win. If it means comparing himself to God, that's what he'll do and I do think that falls into a narrative that we started to see, particularly amongst suburban women, in South Carolina, by the way, these were Rick — these were Tim Scott voters who said, I'm not comfortable with that. They literally would bring him up in focus groups that I did.

GORMAN: Yeah.

FINNEY: And they would say, we're not comfortable with the meanness, we're not comfortable with the nastiness, we're not comfortable with the way he's idolized.

GORMAN: Yeah, sure. Again, we — I think we've been having the same conversation for a decade. Like, again, we talk about meanness. This is the same sort of thing that Hillary Clinton talked about. I just suddenly wonder that, you know, suddenly, in the year 2024, after Donald Trump's been on the — for — this for a decade that people are going to wake up and be like, you know what? Now he's too mean. You know what? I was going to vote for him, but, you know what? That one thing, no. This thing is big.

FINNEY: That's not what I'm saying, though.

GORMAN: That — that —

FINNEY: You're not even taking on my central argument. But that's okay.

GORMAN: — but that — that's my point. But, like, again —

FINNEY: But that's — okay, so you're not refuting my point though.

GORMAN: — but, again, I think what you're — well, what I heard is that suddenly suburban housewives —

FINNEY: No.

GORMAN: — in your words, are going to wake —

FINNEY: That's not what I said.

GORMAN: — are going to say that — that. That's not the case.

FINNEY: What I said is that is that kind of language, that kind of behavior is yet another thing that people say that goes too far, that's too much, I'm not comfortable with that in the White House with his finger on the — on the trigger for the nuclear codes.

HUNT: I mean, look, I'm really enjoying this back-and-forth between the two of you, so Toulouse and I are just over here chilling, but I do — I will say, Karen, I mean — I — when you look at the imagery that these people wear and the things that they do at these political rallies —

FINNEY: Yeah.

HUNT: — I mean, in some ways, it favors what Matt is saying here, that there are so many people that — that — the way that Trump is treated is just totally different than other political candidates. I don't know if I take your point about — I get people got — were very excited about Obama —

FINNEY: No.

HUNT: — but it was secular —

GORMAN: Yeah?

HUNT: — and political. Like —

FINNEY: It was hopeful. It was less about grievance and retribution and it — but it was — with Obama, it was hopeful because what it — hold on —

GORMAN: Yep?

FINNEY: — because of what people felt — I know you'd love to interrupt me — but of what people felt like —

HUNT: — no, no, like, we're all good. Everyone's good.

FINNEY: — and said about the country, that maybe we had moved to a place where this was possible. I think what you see in Trump, though, is more of a grievance narrative and more — and I think that — that's any —

HUNT: Well, that's definitely objectively true that it's grievance versus — I mean hope and change is not the same —

FINNEY: Yeah.

HUNT: — as what we had there.

FINNEY: — and I think it shows, frankly, a fracture within the Republican Party, within the evangelical movement about what's — with Trump.

HUNT: Yeah. [TO GORMAN] Quick last word.

GORMAN: Really quick. When you can be — presidents of — popular presidents of parties — of — of parties always have a certain cult of personality around them. Always. It's always — it manifests itself differently. Republicans who talk about Ronald Reagan. Like, let's not act like this suddenly — the Trump this, like, oh, my gosh, why are people in our base suddenly like, "I like Trump" in a different way?

HUNT: Yeah, but the shoot — you know, his — I could shoot people on Fifth Avenue and my base would still be with me. There is something about him —

GORMAN: There — there — yes, that — that is a different — totally different presentation of it.

HUNT: — that is different from Reagan and Obama and —

GORMAN: I agree with that. Yes. I agree with that.

HUNT: So, anyway, we're trying to dig into that. All right, I have a feeling we're going to have this conversation a lot from — between now and November.