Weekend

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The Big Read

# The Antichrist and the New Apostles

## Why many in tech are turning to devout Christianity.

By Julia Black

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**Worship at Epic** Church in downtown San Francisco last Sunday began in a darkened room, on the second floor of a former factory building. The shades were drawn across the tall windows, while colored lights cast a theatrical glow on a band that sounded a bit like Arcade Fire—if Arcade Fire made worship music. A mostly millennial congregation swayed to the harmony, a sea of Apple Watch–clad arms raised to the heavens.

This was a special moment for Epic Church and its congregants, the opening of a $12 million space—just down the street from the headquarters of Pinterest and Airbnb—acquired two years ago to accommodate a flock that has ballooned to nearly 1,000 people every Sunday. Epic's pastor, Ben Pilgreen, couldn't have been more pleased. "We really feel called to this particular place and its people," he said a few days later, reflecting on the opening day's turnout.

I attended the services as a guest of two of the more prominent people within Epic: Trae Stephens, the Founders Fund partner and Anduril co-founder, and his wife, Michelle Stephens, chief revenue officer at Felt, a healthcare software startup. "People think church is just for the poor, the marginalized, the visibly in need, but the highly rich and famous are just as much in need," Michelle told me. Then she paraphrased a bit of scripture: "It's harder for a rich man to pass through the eye of the needle than for the poor man to see God."

With such a mentality, Pilgreen is glad the Stephenses have assumed leading roles among his flock. "Trae and others that are very respected in that world" have proven to be powerful evangelists for Epic's mission, Pilgreen explained. "We've had people show up to events and end up coming on Sundays because they heard a podcast with Trae."

Epic Church is one of the epicenters of a societal shift among the tech elite: More and more, Christianity has become a growing, constant part in many of their lives. Some of these people are long-time Christians who feel newly emboldened to publicly embrace their faith. Others are brand-new adherents. Together, they've formed a movement with real breadth that does not have roots in any one Christian denomination. It spans the country, fueled by a swirling mix of different proponents.

Traces of this "sea change," as one tech Christian described it to me, exist in nearly every echelon of the industry—from the newest startup scenes to the rooms filled with the industry's titans.

The defense tech founders in El Segundo, Calif., for instance, have adopted a form of muscular Christianity, linking patriotism, masculinity and athletic discipline with religious moral character. Meanwhile, Peter Thiel has been on an ongoing, one-man speaking tour about the Antichrist, which he warns is most likely to come in the form of a one-world government. And Elon Musk, who has risen to become the industry's most influential figure, appears to have ditched his longtime agnosticism: In September, he published a poem on X that decried atheism as "an empty space" and concluded thusly: "Maybe religion's not so bad/To keep you from being sad."

"Almost every church I'm aware of is growing in tech—Anglican, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist, Catholic. This is much wider than just a single church, single person. It's much more durable," said Ryan Delk, CEO of Primer, a San Francisco–based education tech company.

That anyone in tech would feel comfortable embracing Christianity marks an astonishing change. As recently as the last decade, adherence to religion was seen as largely anathema within an industry that prided itself on the rational application of math and science to achieve prosperity: After all, who can forget the entire episode of HBO's "Silicon Valley" spoofing tech's dislike for Christianity?

Indeed, Christianity has never been a hallmark of tech's home base—the San Francisco Bay Area. Yet the Bay Area is a part of the country that has been defined by an unquenchable curiosity in spirituality and collective philosophizing, though that has tended to push people more toward hippiedom, Burning Man and body optimization in recent decades.

Exactly why Silicon Valley has grown more comfortable with Christianity and religion defies any one straightforward explanation. Many Christians in tech I spoke to seemingly long for any in-person gathering that could offer them escape from a post-pandemic world where much of life takes place virtually. And many of them hope to escape the same anxieties that enshroud much of America around global instability and economic uncertainty.

Indeed, a recent Harvard University study found that 21% of U.S. adults feel lonely—and, ironically, the majority of those respondents blamed technology, the source of endless screen time and social media use.

The interest in Christianity among some of the technorati comes at a moment when religion has been declining in America for decades. We're just a few decades removed from when the New Atheism movement, partly led by philosopher Sam Harris, sat at the center of our cultural zeitgeist. Just 68% of Americans described themselves as Christians in 2023, according to Gallup research from that year, a dramatic drop from nearly 90% of Americans in the 1990s. Moreover, 80% of Americans think religion is losing influence in the country, according to Pew Research, a high watermark since the organization began asking that question in 2001.

Still, about half of the Pew respondents who said religion was losing influence thought that was a bad thing—and you can see how that might motivate them or others to try to reverse the trend.

Data suggests the trend toward Christianity in Silicon Valley is more than anecdotal. This year, annual Bible sales leapt 22%. A project called Baptize California claims to have baptized 30,000 Californians on Pentecost this year. And in February, Hallow, a prayer app that has raised $105 million from investors including General Catalyst as well as Thiel, became the first religious app to reach No. 1 in Apple's App Store.

**If there is** one person at the center of tech's shift toward Christianity, it is billionaire Peter Thiel, a devout Christian who like many many other techno-Christians doesn't publicly align with any one denomination.

Several of the young tech founders and investors I spoke to, from Los Angeles to Austin to New York, told me they had been influenced by direct conversations with Thiel, as well as his frequent talks on religion and his work spreading the ideas of theological philosopher René Girard.

"For me, the logic was super simple. It was: Well, [Thiel] is really smart and interesting. And he's pulling from René Girard, who's really smart and interesting. And both of them are pointing back to the figure of Christ. Shouldn't I look into that?" said David Perell, founder of Write of Passage, a tech-focused online writing school, who has met Thiel a few times.

In Thiel's religious talks, he often warns against identity politics, wokeness and scapegoating the wealthy, while preaching techno-optimism and anti-globalization. He also maintains an almost obsessive fixation on the apocalypse and the Antichrist, a Biblical villain whose arrival signals the end of the world, according to the New Testament, and depicted in movies like "Rosemary's Baby" and "The Omen" as the son of Satan.

These interests can be traced back to Girard, a Thiel mentor. Girard believed "the prophecies of the Christian apocalypse not as something that should be read mystically," Thiel explained in a 2021 podcast, but as the inevitable outcome of a science-obsessed society that has "not fully taken the Christian message to heart."

In essence, when Thiel speaks about the Antichrist—and the Antichrist's possibly imminent arrival in our world—he's not describing the Antichrist as a literal single person. "You can think of it as a type, a system, a person," he said on a Hoover Institution podcast this fall. "It's someone who aspires for world domination, the creation of this sort of one-world state."

Armageddon could come in many forms, Thiel argues: nuclear war, another global pandemic or a destructive artificial intelligence. He believes the most dangerous form of the Antichrist may be a totalitarian, one-world government that censors, surveils and overregulates society in response to these risks.

Thiel has even suggested that Greta Thunberg, the climate activist, could be the Antichrist—again, he's speaking metaphorically rather than suggesting she is the literal offspring of Satan.

"If Greta gets everyone on the planet to ride a bicycle, maybe that's a way to solve climate change, but it has sort of this quality of going from the frying pan into the fire," because he believes cutting back on greenhouse gas emissions could in fact slow economic innovation and cause civilizational decline, Thiel told the Hoover Institution.

When Thiel proselytizes, he likes to dispense little rhetorical riddles, and I haven't been able to stop thinking about one in particular—because of what it seems to suggest about the scope of the mindset he and other tech Christians hold. He posed it to economist Tyler Cowen when he appeared on Cowen's podcast in April to talk about political theology: "The millionaire and the general and the priest: What do they all have in common?"

In referencing those three archetypes, Thiel was describing the coalition of free-market libertarians, defense hawks and religious social conservatives that coalesced in the Reagan years—drawn together partly through a common dislike of communism. And it's hard not to look at the tech elite piling into Donald Trump's new administration as a second coming of those forces.

Thielism can be a mind-stretching form of Christianity, and I think that's part of its allure—especially in a world in which lengthy, digressive, right-leaning podcasts have become cultural cornerstones.

"Seeing a guy as smart and rational as Peter Thiel be, like, 'The Resurrection literally happened—it's real!"…there's a taboo that's being broken," said one person in tech whose newfound interest in Christianity lies largely in listening to Thiel. "It shows that faith is valid and real."

**Yet interest in** techno-Christianity goes far beyond Thiel.

Isaiah Taylor, one of the El Segundo set who founded Valar Atomics, a nuclear energy startup, sees his and his peers' turn toward Christianity as a way to reject the tech status quo—and eschew atheism, which has essentially been tech's de facto spiritual guiding principle.

"I think we had to culturally go through the motions of atheism and get to the bottom of it and be, like, 'OK, this actually is not making sense spiritually to me,'" said Taylor. (He sees the Almighty as a direct influence on starting Valor: "I think God created the world full of abundant energy and we have to unlock it.")

Once a week, Taylor hosts other founders and tech employees in his Los Angeles home for Bible study. He believes atheism "leads to civilizational decline" and thinks rapid developments in AI, space travel and other frontier technologies have made this search for meaning take on a new urgency.

In San Francisco, Michelle Stephens echoed Taylor's thinking when we went for coffee after Epic Church's service. "There's a cultural wave underway driven by discontent with wokeism and atheism," she said.

In addition to her day job, Michelle leads the Acts17 Collective, a nonprofit that aims to evangelize tech leaders, and has hosted events with Thiel as well as Y Combinator President and CEO Garry Tan. The name references a Bible passage about the Apostle Paul's missionary journey through various cities.

She and her husband, Trae, originally planned to bring their group to 17 cities, including Austin, Miami and New York. But their ambition is growing. Just last month, she and Trae ran two Acts17 events in Dubai and Abu Dhabi: "The Theology of AI and Defense" and "Choosing Good Quests."

The Stephenses are targeting their efforts at technology leaders "because we think that they are the kings and queens of culture that influence society greatly," Michelle told me. And Acts17 encourages them to trade "the temporary—money, fame and power—for building the eternal, the collective, the future."

She recounted long walks she's taken with founders and VCs where they told her, "Man, I've tracked every metric in my body; I've done meditation; I've done low-dose mushrooms; I've gone on a weeklong silent meditation retreat; I have done the God dose on LSD, MDMA, ayahuasca and disassociated my ego, and yet there's this hole." And she and Trae believe Christianity is what can finally solve this feeling of emptiness.

Trae has written and spoken extensively about his idea of which technologies are worthy of a pious founder or investor. In a 2022 Founders Fund blog post, he listed out bad quests, like "10th NFT marketplace," "new addictive algorithms" and "incrementally better sales tool."

Good quests, meanwhile, include "cure for aging," "colony on Mars" and "next-generation energy production." (Unsurprisingly, he feels defense tech falls under this category, too.)

Still, Trae likes to warn against mistaking a calling at work for spirituality. "The saddest, most depressed people I've met in Silicon Valley are the ones who believe that their job is God," Trae Stephens said during a follow-up call with attendees of his Abu Dhabi talk on theology, AI and defense startups. "These imitations of religion are very shallow, and they don't actually give you anything to hang your hat on for really difficult questions of life."

But Trae and Michelle see no problem with mixing religion and work, and Michelle very candidly said she doesn't mind if people use Acts17 events to pitch their startup to her husband. "Go ahead and network," she said. "God used anything and everything to get people to turn that way, so I'm totally OK with that and actually welcome it."

Stephens' firm, Founders Fund, isn't the only place where religious ideals have begun to appear in an investment thesis. Sometimes the inspiration is subtle, as with Andreessen Horowitz's Katherine Boyle, who has said she likes to see a founder have "purpose" and "calling." Sometimes it's more explicit, as in the case of New Founding, a Dallas-based anti–diversity, equity and inclusion venture firm "anchored by a Christian ethic and worldview."

Masha Bucher, founder at Day One Ventures, told me she actively seeks out founders who attend church and finds them to be "more stable, less volatile, more consistent" than nonchurchgoers.

Since visiting the Vatican with some of her portfolio company founders in October, she's started attending Catholic mass every single day. Some of the most successful companies in her portfolio, she said, are led by similarly devout founders.

One of her portfolio companies—Abel, named after Cain's brother in the Old Testament—creates AI-based software for police departments. Why that name exactly? "Abel was the first victim of a crime," explained the company's founder, Daniel Francis. "It's the beginning of the unraveling of the Garden of Eden, and whatever we can do to restore that—to make people feel safe, to make people productive, people feel comfortable in cities—then that's restoring God's will."

**There are signs** that Christianity's viral moment in tech may not be purely organic but part of a concerted effort to bring religion to coastal elites. Epic Church is part of a group called the Strategic Launch Network, a Dallas-based nonprofit founded in 2021 that connects with pastors around the country to plant churches "in spiritually hard to reach cities," according to its website. Strategic Launch has planted nine churches in the San Francisco Bay Area, including one that operates out of the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, Calif.

Team Trump, too, seems interested in bringing religion to the places where money and power are most concentrated—even if Trump's own religious credentials are a bit dubious. Following the election, Lance Wallnau, a Christian nationalist televangelist and friend of J.D. Vance who frequents Mar-a-Lago, tweeted, "The battle lines are clear: The spiritual strongholds in cities like LA, San Francisco, and New York are the next mission field."

The movement is sure to encounter some obstacles when it comes to converting these socially liberal crowds. When I asked about reproductive and LGBTQ rights—two sets of issues held dear among tech professionals (and, one might think, Thiel himself)—Stephens and Pilgreen both told me their churches do not take stances on political issues and swiftly changed the topic.

For now, most religious techies seem content to cherry-pick the parts that work for them. “I’m socially quite liberal,” Francis, the founder of Abel and a practicing Catholic, told me. “I don’t care about gay marriage and I’m actually really specifically pro-choice.” He added, “I don’t care on some deep level what the clergy says.”

Meanwhile, Pilgreen is continuing to fundraise for future projects like his planned Center for Sacred Vocation. He hopes to create a space where people can “come network, find people who are like-minded to start a company,” he told me. “It won’t be just for Christians, but obviously as a church, it will be, ‘Hey, we believe God created work to be a good thing. We want to help you think about how to do that ethically.’”

Don’t want to donate in cash? No problem. Epic Church also welcomes donations made in stock and cryptocurrency.

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