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Banished to the political wilderness, out of power in the White House and Congress, conservatives are struggling to recover their voice. Curiously, though, the leaders who've emerged in the effort to revive the [Republican Party](#) aren't so much political or policy people as they are believers in a dying religion. Lost in the fight over who speaks for Republicans is that so many of them — from Rush Limbaugh and Bobby Jindal to Michael Steele and little Jonathan Krohn — are perhaps best understood as preachers of a church fast losing its membership.

Conservatism today might be thought of not as a set of principles and policies, but as a hollow religion. It clings to the conviction that a free market, an aggressive military, and individual responsibility will (along with banning abortions and homosexuals) solve all our problems and save us from pretty much every evil. This simplistic view of the world has no empirical support. It's based on a leap of faith that one is either willing to take, or not. And for those who've taken the leap of faith, the worse things get, the more strenuously they recite the catechism. They appear horrified at the idea that from cleaning up after

hurricanes to overseeing the banking industry, the federal government might have a major role to play — even as the rest of America believes that “I’m from the government and I’m here to help” doesn’t come from the liturgy of the damned.

Once conservatism is seen as something of a religion — perhaps a fundamentalist one, at that — it’s not surprising that the various would-be saviors of the conservative movement seem more like preachers than politicians. Rush Limbaugh is the dissolute radioangelist, bellowing hellfire and damnation when not popping barbiturates or Viagra. Bobby Jindal is the earnest new vicar, so eager to ensure Americans understand the Word that he talks to us as if we were all in a Sunday School class. And Michael Steele wants to be the man of the cloth in Ray Bans, the guy who makes conservatism cool to a skeptical generation.

But if anyone really helps us understand the current state of conservatism, it is the child preacher Jonathan Krohn. Krohn is the 14-year-old right-wing author who was invited to address the recent Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington. After his three-minute sermon — a passionate defense of conservative principles — he received a standing ovation. [Watch him on Youtube](#) with the sound off, and you recognize the expressions and gestures of a charismatic kid minister, the sort who sometimes makes his way onto an [evening news program](#).

If a child is endowed with certain gifts — energy, inspiration, a certain magnetism — he or she might be able to be a preacher. Perhaps not the wisest or most insightful preacher, but a preacher nonetheless. So it is with Jonathan Krohn. He has learned the conservative catechism and repeats it with the refreshing ardor and conviction of a young believer. But why, one should ask, was he addressing CPAC — supposedly a political group?

In western democracies, we believe that politics requires a measure of wisdom and practical judgment developed over years of experience. We expect our leaders to have principles, but principles forged and tempered by time. We expect, too, that our leaders will be flexible. Politics is nothing if not grounded in the empirical, nothing if not contingent, nothing if not subject to revision and compromise. It requires, too, a knowledge of history

and a keen sense of stewardship developed through maturity — a reckoning with one's own mortality — for it is about shaping the world for the next generation, and the generation thereafter. That's why the Constitution requires that the president be 35 years old (a reasonably mature age back in 1787). In short, politics is for adults, not children.

The dying conservative movement evidently doesn't see politics this way. The preachers of the conservative religion embrace simplified versions of Reagan-era values as Timeless Truths that will surely make the world right again, no matter what experience tells us. And that is why, with the country drifting away from the Republican Party, conservatives have turned to a series of clerics who recite conservative dogma as if reading from holy texts. And why, too, they have ended up asking a mere child to preach back to them what they so desperately wish to hear.

Jonathan Krohn might know how to deliver a sermon. But he is not a political leader. He lacks the wisdom, the experience, the years on this earth to say anything of real significance about politics. And the members of any political movement that would cast him in the role of a leader, even for just a few minutes, should understand: Their tent grows small, and few outside it listen but to shake their heads in disbelief.