

June 9, 2020

When will white evangelicals follow Jesus and justice?

By Rev. Dr. Amos C. Brown

In the midst of the great civil rights protests of 1963, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail." It was his response to an open letter written by eight white religious leaders in Birmingham that sharply criticized African Americans for protesting in the streets and attacked Dr. King himself for being an "outsider."

Those white religious leaders were on the wrong side of history then. And their descendants are on the wrong side of history once again, almost six decades later, as our nation comes to grips with the horrific images of blacks being murdered in the streets and their beds by police officers.

As in Birmingham in 1963, the marches in cities and towns across our nation today are not about a single event – the lynching on camera of George Floyd in Minneapolis at the hands of a murderous police officer – but rather the protest of the totality of systemic racism that has poisoned our country since its birth when slavery was enshrined in its very Constitution. Black Americans, along with millions of their fellow citizens of every color, have taken to the streets because it is far past time for this nation to address the inequalities, the injustices, and the violence toward our Black community that have haunted us for 400 years.

Yet the most prominent leaders of white evangelical congregations and universities, people such as Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell, Jr., Robert Jeffress, and others, have responded to these cries for justice not by echoing the words of Jesus but mouthing the words of Donald Trump.

While they say they decry Mr. George Floyd's murder, their real message— just like that of the eight ministers in Birmingham—is that the protesters are the problem, not the historic injustice they demand to be addressed. Rather than calling on their flocks to recognize injustice and stand against the destructive and deliberately divisive rhetoric of the President, these evangelical leaders follow the decades-old script and issue calls for law and order and paint the protesters as thugs, terrorists, and criminals.

Indeed, Franklin Graham applauded the President for holding up a Bible – upside down as a prop -- in front of Saint John's Episcopal Church near the White House, a divisive photo-op made possible only after the White House ordered the violent dispersal of peaceful protesters. Rev. Graham labeled systemic racism, which is a fundamentally political problem, as solely an individual spiritual and moral problem." New laws and more government giveaway programs are not the answer. It's a heart problem, and only God can change the human heart."

Perhaps I should not be as surprised and shocked as I am at this public flouting of the true message of Christianity. The very roots of many of these churches go back to the 1845 Southern Baptist Convention, which split the Baptist church in America strictly along racial lines and forever linked Southern Baptists with slavery. In 1954, when I was a teenager in Jackson, Mississippi, the Supreme Court issued its landmark school desegregation ruling in *Brown v.*

June 9, 2020

Board of Education, these very same "Christian" churches responded by setting up private "Christian academies" in a thinly disguised effort to preserve segregation in education.

And their blatant racism continues to this day. On Monday, Jerry Falwell, Jr., President of Liberty University (founded as a whites-only institution by his arch-segregationist father) had to issue a public apology for posting on his personal Twitter account a mock-up COVID-19 facemask featuring the deplorable yearbook photograph of what some claim is Virginia Governor Ralph Northam in blackface along with a classmate in a KKK hood. Falwell's tweet was so offensive that the university's own head of diversity resigned in protest.

Rather than following the precepts that Jesus laid down in the Gospel, many white evangelicals leaders and their followers have shown their greatest love is not for their fellow man (and women), but for racist policing, nationalism, and materialism, both of which serve to protect their white privilege. Despite my entreaties to them and those of many other ministers in the Black community and beyond, there remains an appalling silence on the part of these white evangelical leaders when it comes to demanding an end to injustice, racism, and militarism. Rather than call out the White House for its unceasing efforts to stoke the fires of racism, they add fuel to the fire.

Make no mistake: This is a deliberate choice by so many so-called religious leaders that belies their claims to Christianity. Rather than deliver the Christian a message of love, of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, or helping the poor, their rhetoric continues to prey on the fears of their own congregations by painting those seeking justice as the enemy, while supporting the true enemy of justice in the Oval Office.

The growing protests in our nation are the visible signs of a gaping wound in the body politic that must be healed. And I have faith that as millions take to the streets today -- and as they must take to the voting booth in November -- we can and will heal. Yet, how much faster would we heal this 400-year-old wound if those who claimed to be Christians followed the words of Jesus!

I implore my brothers and sisters in the ministry, and every member of their congregations, to examine their consciences and their Bibles, and to remember the words Dr. King wrote from the Birmingham Jail: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Stand with us. Stand against injustice. Most importantly, stand against those in power in Washington who would use division to tear us apart at the time we most need to come together. Again we should hear the words of Dr. King, "If you don't learn to live together and brother and sister, we shall perish as fools.

The Rev. Dr. Amos C. Brown is Pastor of the Third Baptist Church of San Francisco, the oldest Black congregation in California; Civic Advisor and Political Consultant to Jerry Young, President of the National Baptist Convention, USA; and President of the San Francisco NAACP Branch.