

# Boycotting That Brand of Gospel

Last year I handed civil rights icon John Lewis a copy of his own book—one in a trilogy about his civil rights engagement in the 1950s and 60s. The image on the back cover depicted the colorful illustration of Jesus on a stained glass window inside a church. It had an ugly, white, square void through His face.

“Did that really happen?” I asked Lewis. “Uh huh,” he said, explaining that to get to black parishioners inside the church white demonstrators outside the church threw a brick through the face of Jesus. He told me how the KKK sang “Onward Christian Soldiers” as they marched to Stone Mountain every Labor Day. The most vicious attacks, Lewis said, came from so-called Christians fighting to preserve their privilege and artificial place of superiority, all in Jesus name.

## Throwing Bricks

After this year’s election we feel again the whirl of a “sanctified brick” headed straight for its target—the body of Christ. Racial, gender and faith-based wedges have splintered us, with Donald Trump wielding the ax. That said, more shocking than his victorious campaign, is the tool through which he gained the presidency, the evangelical religious right.

Exit polls estimated 81% of the evangelical vote went to him. Polling had indicated that in the last five years, voters, especially evangelicals, just didn’t care whether their candidate had high moral character anymore.<sup>1</sup> And, any fears other evangelical voters may have had were probably pacified by the endorsement of high-profile evangelical leaders.<sup>2</sup> They gave him their virtuous stamp of approval.

## What Did They See In Him?

President-elect Donald Trump got a pass on his family life by his religious backers. His braggadocio about his ability to force himself on any woman he wanted, slipped under the wire. “[W]hen you’re a star, they let you do it,” Trump had said. “You can do anything,” he said on that infamous “Access Hollywood” video. His brash comments about immigrants, Muslims, Mexicans, African Americans, the disabled and women—eerily similar to the nationalistic rhetoric of Nazi Germany—is celebrated as truth that needs to be articulated. This, apparently is a “truth” many evangelicals support. So, as Trump so aptly predicted, if evangelicals voted, he would win.<sup>3</sup>

“When you look at the issues, he ended up being the dream candidate for conservatives and evangelicals” Jerry Falwell, Jr. opined after the election.<sup>4</sup>

## More Than “Whitelash”

So, I like many, am tempted to conclude that the dog whistling and racial politics simply signal a “whitelash” to America’s first black president. As evidence of this we have witnessed threats to black people, churches and property again. Defaced property bears the tag “Trump Supporter.” It certainly looks as though America’s original sin, racial oppression and the fruit of its poisonous tree—white privilege—are rearing their heads for one final gasp. I’m suggesting that what’s at stake is even more than this,

however. The isms and centricities we embraced for expediency signal complex prophetic implications.

### **Hypocrisy**

It's hypocrisy to tout religion while coalescing with repressive ideas for political gain. In the Bible the apostle Paul criticized the apostle Peter for being a hypocrite. Peter, like Paul, believed that one didn't have to be circumcised to be a Christian, and that all Christians—born a Jew or a Gentile—could fellowship side by side. However, when friends of another disciple visited Peter, he gave his Gentile friends the old brush-off. Paul considered the hypocrisy shameful. "I am a sinner if I rebuild the old system of law I already tore down," he said (Galatians 2:18). Our evangelical brothers and sisters—in spite of disagreeing with racial intolerance—helped rebuild another old system of relating to each other. Truly, laws and walls were key planks in the campaign rhetoric.

### **Evil communications corrupt good Manners**

How unfortunate it is that the person so strongly supported by the faithful also draws the support of the hateful. How can this be? If the faithful don't intentionally attract the hateful, why don't they intentionally and loudly repudiate them? "God knows my heart," you may say, and "I'm not a racist (or just fill in the blank)." Or, "that rhetoric was just used to fire up the base. It's not real." Another gem of the apostle Paul is found in 1 Corinthians 15:33. "Stop being deceived: 'Wicked friends lead to evil ends.'" (ISV\*)

### **Sweet Fruit of Control**

In the story of the crucifixion of Christ it was the priests who baited the crowd to ask for the pardon of the notorious murderer Barabbas rather than Jesus (Matthew 27:20, 21). This move furthered their limited interest in control, rather than the spiritual well-being—salvation—that their people needed so badly. Likewise, the limited interest in control, rather than the evangelical end is at work now.

The union of three factors (1) the blessing of the church, (2) state cooperation and, (3) dominance as part of "God's plan" is a dangerous combination. You may recall, like Peter (see Acts 4:28), that the coalition of church people and government officials effected the crucifixion of Christ. So, that they work together is no guarantee the plan is spiritually sound or God's perfect will for His people. Don't get me wrong. Yes, God is in control. His followers, however, have a certain responsibility to participate with Him in harmony with what He has revealed.

Finally, those of us who belong to groups who've felt the cold chill of oppression, remember that our strength flows not from our own identity but by God's grace and power. Time to return to that in truth. As for those Black Lives Matter protesters about whom so many feel uncomfortable and angry, the fact that they exist at all is a prophetic warning: Our best solutions with a professed but ineffective gospel have fallen short.

No need to solicit me in prayers of unity and healing just yet. I'm scared to close my eyes and bow my head.