

Evangelical leaders urge Trump to condemn the alt-right

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Some prominent Southern Baptist leaders and other evangelicals wrote a letter to President Trump calling on him to do more to condemn white supremacists—a particularly strong critique from a constituency that voted for him in overwhelming numbers.

“We request upon you to join with many other political and religious leaders to proclaim with one voice that the ‘alt-right’ is racist, evil and antithetical to a well-ordered, peaceful society,” reads the letter first published by CNN.

The signers—including Southern Baptist Convention President Steve Gaines, former SBC President Fred Luter, and prominent African-American evangelical leaders T.D. Jakes and Tony Evans—reproach Trump for failing to speak out against the so-called alt-right.

“This movement has escaped your disapproval,” the letter reads.

Without naming names, it further states: “It concerned many of us when three people associated with the alt-right movement were given jobs in the White House.”

Aftermath of Charlottesville

The letter comes more than a month after one person was killed and 19 hurt when a speeding car driven by a white supremacist slammed into a throng of counter-protesters in Charlottesville, Va. Two Virginia State Patrol troopers were killed in a helicopter crash as they were responding to

the clashes.

While Trump initially condemned the violence and renounced “white nationalists, white supremacists, the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis and other hate groups” he later said there were “some very fine people” on both sides of the demonstration.

A black pastor and a white seminary executive—both Southern Baptists—drafted the letter. Dwight McKissic, pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, and Keith Whitfield, vice president for academic administration at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., wrote and revised the letter with feedback from other signers before sending it Sept. 28.

Danny Akin, president of Southeastern, said he was glad to sign on when asked.

“I believe that God created all persons in his image,” Akin said. “Any inkling of racial superiority with any ethnic group I find totally distasteful, unacceptable and contrary to the very nature of how God made human beings.”

Do more to unify the nation

The letter concludes by imploring Trump to do more to unify a fractured nation.

“Our country desperately needs unifying leadership again,” their letter reads. “We need you, President Trump, to lead us in such an effort. America needs your voice and your convictions to defeat racist ideologies and movements in every form that they present themselves. America is profoundly fractured and divided. We are praying, and call upon God’s people to humble themselves and pray that you would take the bold and

moral step to denounce the alt-right.”

Ed Stetzer, a Southern Baptist and the executive director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College in Illinois, said Southern Baptists may have overwhelmingly voted for Trump, but they dislike his association with white supremacists.

Stetzer pointed out at the SBC’s annual meeting in June, the denomination adopted a statement denouncing “alt-right white supremacy,” calling it “antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

“You can’t get Southern Baptists to agree on the color of the carpet,” Stetzer said. “When they actually agree on the alt-right being specifically denounced at an annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, that’s pretty united.”

Some remain conspicuously silent

Still, two prominent Southern Baptists in Dallas who have been uncritical champions of the president—Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist and Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church—were not among the signers.

In fact, none of Trump’s evangelical advisers—who have met with the president on numerous occasions and, with the exception of one member who stepped down, have shown unwavering support and confidence in Trump—signed the letter.