

Commentary: Divided evangelicals must counter fear with facts

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Seventy-six percent of white American evangelicals supported President Trump's recent executive order temporarily banning travelers from seven predominantly Muslim nations as well as all refugees, according to Pew Research. Fifty-nine percent of all Americans disapproved of the order.

The strong evangelical support for Trump's action is telling in light of a recent letter sent to him and Vice President Mike Pence from 500 evangelical leaders who condemned the executive order.

The letter was signed by Tim Keller, author and pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church; Richard Mouw, former president of Fuller Theological Seminary; Max Lucado, author; Bill Hybels, founder of Willow Creek Community Church; and Shirley Hoogstra, president of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities; to name only a few of the prominent evangelicals who endorsed its message.

Christian responsibility

The opposition of these evangelical leaders stems from what they believe to be their Christian responsibility to care for the poor and oppressed and to follow Jesus' command to "love our neighbor as ourselves." As the letter notes, "Jesus makes it clear that our 'neighbor' includes the stranger and anyone fleeing persecution and violence, regardless of their faith or country."

The fact so many mainstream evangelical leaders opposed Trump's order,

while 76 percent of their followers supported it, is further evidence of the way politics—particularly the Trump candidacy—divided American evangelicalism. It also might suggest few evangelicals in the pew are following the biblical exhortations of their pastors. They just might be turning to Trump or one of his ministerial supporters for advice on this front.

This is not the first time in American history when calls for unity among believers have been undermined by politics.

The American Revolution brought division to 18th century Christian churches. The issue of slavery split Protestant denominations in the years leading up to the Civil War. In fact, evangelical Christians can be found on both sides of nearly every major political and social issue in U.S. history. They seldom have spoken to American culture with a unified, prophetic voice.

But 76 percent is a larger number of evangelicals. It almost parallels the 81 percent of voting evangelicals who pulled the lever for Trump in November. The evangelical grassroots support of Trump's travel ban sheds light on two serious problems with the movement today.

1. Fear

Jesus counseled his disciples to “not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). The Apostle John had similar advice: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

Fear is a natural response when human beings sense danger in their midst. Trump plays to these fears when he warns of imminent terrorist attacks from foreign Muslims. His campaign for the presidency was successful at least in part because he manipulated fear for political gain and glory.

Yet if I read the Bible correctly, the kind of fear Trump flames is not an option for Christians. Or at the very least, this kind of fear is not a biblical reason for failing to show hospitality to the stranger or care for the poor and the oppressed.

The fear of American evangelicals also is misplaced. It is enhanced by the evangelical movement's second significant problem.

2. Anti-intellectualism

The fear Trump has instilled in 76 percent of U.S. evangelicals is based on weak evidence.

For example, most of the terrorist attacks that have occurred on American soil in the last 15 years either have come from ISIS sympathizers born in the United States or those who came to America from a nation not included in the recent travel ban.

Fear can be exacerbated by false information. And good information can alleviate fear.

Trump is building an entire immigrant policy around a few isolated cases of undocumented immigrants who have come to the United States illegally and committed terrible crimes. The overwhelming majority of immigrants and refugees who come to the United States are productive members of society.

These are facts. They are backed by statistics, data and evidence.

Refugees coming to American shores already are heavily vetted. While it is always possible for a lone wolf to commit a terrible crime—as we have seen, sadly, of late—Americans have been relatively safe from foreign terrorism since Sept. 11, 2001.

Again, these are the facts. They are backed by statistics, data and evidence.

And as long as we are at it:

- Barack Obama is not a Muslim. And he was born in Hawaii, not Kenya.
- Millions of undocumented immigrants did not vote illegally in the November 2016 election.
- Muslim refugees in Bowling Green, Ky., did not stage a massacre of white people in 2011.
- There was not a Muslim terrorist attack in Sweden.

These are the facts. They are backed by statistics, data and evidence.

It is time for my fellow evangelicals to take seriously what the Founding Fathers of this nation called an “informed citizenry.” Better yet, it is time to counter fear with facts—a necessary starting point for worshipping God with our minds.

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