

Commentary: Why won't most of Trump's 'court evangelicals' publicly condemn his border policy?

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(RNS) — The United States is facing a crisis in “family values.” This, however, is not the kind of crisis we often hear talked about by the evangelical wing of the Republican Party. Rather, it stems from the Trump administration’s zero-tolerance border policy that separates families at the U.S.-Mexico border.

A few of President Trump’s evangelical advisers who visit the White House and discuss policy matters with him—I describe them as the “court evangelicals”—have condemned the policy that separates children from their parents. But most others have failed to criticize it publicly. Their general silence sheds light on how conservative evangelical leaders have come to define and limit “family values” in the past 40 years.

Franklin Graham, head of Samaritan’s Purse and prominent Trump supporter, called the policy of separating families “disgraceful.” Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, who has expressed his disagreement with Trump on immigration in the past, signed a letter of evangelical leaders criticizing the policy. And Ralph Reed, founder of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, this week called the policy “heartbreaking and tragic.” Even still, most court evangelicals have not publicly addressed the crisis. If the separation of children from their families is not a family values issue, then what is?

We don't know if these leaders are counseling Trump behind the scenes, but as the national outcry has risen against the policy, some of the prominent court evangelicals seem to be fixated on other topics.

James Dobson, the leader most responsible for the Christian right's "family values" agenda, tweeted last week: "Dear God, no matter what our family circumstances, let us never waver from our charge as parents. Help us to be worthy of Your trust in us to lead and love our kids." Fair enough, but how do you fulfill your parental responsibilities when the federal government is taking your kids away from you?

Pastor Mark Burns, one of Trump's strongest surrogates among conservative evangelical African-Americans, wrote, "Some don't want to admit it, but President @realDonaldTrump is the Best thing for Minorities & people of color because he creates Opportunity and Access to Success." I am not sure a Mexican immigrant on the border would agree.

And Robert Jeffress, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, a Fox News contributor and one of Trump's earliest evangelical supporters, is tweeting about his upcoming sermon titled "America Is a Christian Nation." Instead of championing Mexican children on the border, he is in a fight with the city of Dallas over the removal of a billboard advertising the sermon. Does a Christian nation do what the Trump administration is doing on the Mexican border?

It is worth contrasting the silence of these evangelicals with the position of the Catholic Church. In a formal statement on the separation of immigrants from their families at the border, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in no uncertain terms condemned the Trump policy and called it "immoral." The National Association of Evangelicals and many evangelical denominations, including the Southern Baptist Convention, have also criticized the policy.

Why don't the evangelicals who are the closest to the president—Paula White-Cain, Dobson, Burns, Jeffress and others—have the moral clarity to publicly say something?

As historian Seth Dowland has argued in his book, "Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right," conservative evangelicals built a political brand on the defense of a traditional approach to the family that includes the authority of husbands over wives, the rejection of gay marriage, and opposition to abortion.

In 1977, Dobson founded Focus on the Family, an evangelical organization committed to "nurturing and defending the God-ordained institution of the family and promoting biblical truths worldwide." Dobson retired from Focus in 2003, but he continues to host a daily radio program devoted to social and political issues.

Today, the Family Research Council, a Washington lobbying arm founded by Dobson in the early 1980s and once affiliated with Focus, continues Dobson's legacy. Gary Bauer, who ran for U.S. president in 2000 on a family values platform, was the FRC's first president.

The current FRC president is Tony Perkins, a Trump supporter and one of the court evangelicals. Perkins is perhaps best known for saying that Trump should get a "mulligan" for his alleged affair with adult film star Stormy Daniels.

It is hard to measure the impact that Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council have had on the way conservative evangelicals vote, but many evangelicals take marching orders from the leaders of these institutions and their array of published voter guides.

Trump's conservative evangelical supporters could take a lesson here from the Catholic bishops, who represent a church with no political affiliation and no connection to a nation. They are able to speak with a prophetic

voice on this issue. When political leaders separate family members, no matter what nation or political party they represent, it is reprehensible and un-Christian.

The court evangelicals, on the other hand, have hitched their political wagons to Trump and, in the process, are incapable of speaking with moral authority without offending the president and losing their access to power.

These conservative evangelicals are sending a clear message: We love family values, but we love America and Donald Trump more.

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