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President Donald Trump delivers remarks at the 2020 National Prayer Breakfast Feb. 6 at the Washington Hilton in Washington, D.C. (White House/Joyce N. Boghosian)

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What does it profit a person if he should gain all his political wishes but then lose his soul? Most of us answer, "Quite a bit, really," especially if we can throw religious believers under the bus for their political views.

I've become known as "that evangelical who called for Trump's removal from office" for an editorial I wrote as editor-in-chief of Christianity Today on Dec. 19. In the circus of American politics, I became the freak show for a few weeks, a conservative evangelical who condemned the behavior of President Donald Trump in front of God and everybody. It shows that the mainstream media was, again, woefully out of touch with religion in America, as a number of prominent evangelicals had been saying this for some time. I was a late-comer to the party, but apparently saying it as editor-in-chief of a leading evangelical magazine the day after the House impeachment hearings concluded — well, timing is everything in news.

I've continued to survey how religion flows through the political landscape as a river meanders in an open plain, suddenly bending sharply left and right in response to geological forces. I've come to believe that not only is Trump morally unfit for office (as I argued in my editorial), but also whether many Americans are morally fit for citizenship.

What sparked my thinking afresh in this vein was the reaction to Trump's prayer breakfast remarks about the faith of Utah Sen. Mitt Romney and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

"I don't like people who use their faith as justification for doing what they know is wrong," he said apparently referring to the former, and referring to Pelosi, "Nor do I like people who say, 'I pray for you' when they know that that's not so."

In mere seconds, Trump managed to disavow two central commands of Jesus: to love our enemies and not to judge.

Liberal outlets, and some conservative, were scandalized that Trump would do such a thing, especially at the National Prayer Breakfast. But the remarks didn't surprise me in the least because I knew from whence they came.

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Trump has for some years now surrounded himself with conservative evangelicals of an ideological bent, and if anyone has taught him to question the faith of his opponents, it would be this group.

For example, Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, is one of the most vocal evangelical cheerleaders for Trump and sits on Trump's evangelical advisory council. On a Fox radio show in the middle of the impeachment hearings, he said of the Democrats, "Apparently the god they worship is the pagan god of the Old Testament Moloch, who allowed for child sacrifice."

And in response to a remark of Pelosi — that she was prayerful as the House continued its impeachment inquiry into Trump — Jeffress called her "sanctimonious."

Or take a September 2019 article in the conservative Mad World News. The author profiles recent remarks by Franklin Graham, and then summed up the views of a large number of conservative evangelicals:

> Franklin Graham is standing up against the same Democrat thugs who are out to destroy the president and America as we know it. He recognizes the Democrats have lost all sense of God and are now the evil force driving Godless policies in America. You can no longer be a true Christian and vote for any Democrat.

This derision of the religious faith and posture of Democrats can be found everywhere in Christian conservative media. As an article on the American Family Association website put it:

> Can any Christian, in good conscience, vote for a party that believes in murdering babies up to the moment of birth, a party that openly despises God, and a party that openly despises the flag and the nation the Founders created for us?

Yet what most scandalized liberals don't recognize is that, at least in part, conservative Christians are reacting against liberals who have questioned the sincerity, as well as the sanity, of conservative Christians. As Matthew Hutson pointed out in a 2017 article in Politico:

> The political left might consider itself more open-minded than the right. But research shows that liberals are just as prejudiced against conservatives as conservatives are against liberals.

Damon Linker, of The Week, goes further in "Why Do So Many Liberals Despise Christianity?" And argues:

> The problem is not just the cavalier dismissal of people's long-established beliefs and the ways of life and traditions based on them. The problem is also the dogmatic denial of the beauty and wisdom contained within those beliefs, ways of life, and traditions.

A near perfect example of this came from Sen. Bernie Sanders at a 2017 confirmation hearing for Russell Vought, Trump's nominee for deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget. (He's now acting director and expected soon to be formally nominated as director). Sanders was upset with something the conservative evangelical had written a year earlier, in a piece that in part discussed Islam. Vought had done nothing more than state what most Christians have believed for centuries, that outside of faith in Jesus Christ, one cannot know God or enjoy eternal life. (To be sure, there has been some nuancing of this in recent decades, especially in the Catholic Church, but there is still an insistence that it is because of what Christ has done that anyone can enjoy life with God.)

Sanders was scandalized, saying, "In my view, the statement made by Mr. Vought is indefensible, it is hateful, it is Islamophobic, and it is an insult to over a billion Muslims throughout the world." He later refused to vote for his confirmation, saying, "This nominee is really not someone who is what this country is supposed to be about."

Sanders not only had no grasp of Christianity (or Islam, for that matter, which similarly condemns those who do not believe in Muhammad), but he made religious faith a test for secular office.

Progressive Christians, not quite kissing cousins to evangelicals but cousins nonetheless, have also gone to town on this theme. The best rhetorical flourish came from writer, pastor, and activist John Pavolvitz. Referring to evangelical Trump fans, he wrote,

No one in the time of Jesus would be calling them Christian.

Not the Romans.

Not the Christ followers.

Most of all, not Jesus…

They may be self-identified Christians, but from the outside the title is suspect.

They aren't "Little Christs"

They aren't "followers of the Way."

They aren't even Evangelicals.

In short, conservative Christians have been despised by many liberals, and it's not surprising they want to strike back.

In other words, attacks on the sincerity and worthiness of another's faith are wielded by the religious right and the religious left. It is the air we breathe in our Christian churches — well, maybe not in worship, but apparently, in Protestant churches at least, during the coffee hour. It's not only Trump's gaffe during the prayer breakfast. It's also our gaffe day in and day out at our breakfast and dinner tables at home and at church.

This doesn't mean that we need to refrain from criticizing troublesome public statements, stances, or actions of the religious in the public square. Such is not only fair game but our responsibility in a democracy.

For example, Robert Jeffress has said some awful things in supporting Mr. Trump — and using the Bible to justify it. For example, after Trump threatened nuclear destruction of North Korea a few years ago, Jeffress opened to Romans 13 to argue that the president has the right to do such a thing. This is wronged-headed on so many accounts: exegetically, theologically and morally.

But I cross a line when I question that person's faith — the state of their relationship with God. I may suspect that a man who propounds such a view could not possibly be a Christian, but since one's faith is held at the deepest recesses of one's being, I can't really see what is going on there. Better to argue with the points at hand and show how they are not only immoral and unbiblical but even sub-Christian. I have enough to be concerned about without wondering about Mr. Jeffress' relationship with his Creator.

This questioning of faith isn't one of a kind. It's just a version of questioning the political sincerity of our opponents. With a sweep of the hand we accuse them of lying or manipulating their base or whatever. It's an easy temptation to succumb to because then we don't have to do the harder work of criticizing the substance of what they've said. Plus we all get wicked delight in condemning others who seem to deserve it!

But if our democracy is to have any future, we need to get out of the business of judging the internal state of others' hearts. Jesus' words apply not just to our private neighborhoods but also to the public square:

> Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged… (Luke 6:35-36; NRSV).

Some public figures may not just be wrong, they also may indeed be wicked by all accounts, and their word and actions need to be challenged in the strongest of terms. But we are wise to remember that the Lord is "kind to the ungrateful and [yes even] the wicked." It is an act of love to criticize the words and actions of wrongdoers. But we cross a line when we claim that in the deepest chambers of their souls, the merciful Father is nowhere to be found.

[Mark Galli is a religion journalist. He was formerly editor-in-chief of Christianity Today and is the author of the forthcoming *When Did We Start Forgetting God?: The Root of the Evangelical Crisis and Hope for the Future* (Tyndale, April 2020).]