



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE

NORTH CAROLINA STATE CONFERENCE

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North Carolina NAACP: Religious Leaders Forum

**From One Born Again Evangelical to Another:
An Open Letter to Rev. Franklin Graham and the Evangelical Christian Community**

"Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." John 13:35

"You have heard that it was said, 'love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in Heaven." Matthew 5:43

*To all in the U.S., who are loved by God and called to be saints.
Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Dear Rev. Graham,

As your North Carolina sisters and brothers in Christ, we hope that these words find all things well with you and your family.

We acknowledge your recent apology for questioning the faith of President Barack Obama. As we were preparing this letter, the newspapers reported that you had issued an apology to the President for "any comments I have ever made which may have cast any doubt on the personal faith of our president." According to these reports, you apologized "to him and to any I have offended for not better articulating my reason for not supporting him in this election." You apparently went on to say that you could not support him because his position on abortion and same-sex marriage were in "direct conflict" with Scripture.

You encourage us with this apology. Few people find it easy to critically examine our own language and motives, even though most of us know that we do not always fully understand ourselves. Surely the

Bible teaches that we are all made of earthly clay and now see but through a glass, darkly, but one day face to face. This gives us hope that our letter, even in this political season, will point toward a more positive and permanent dialogue in our common faith community.

It seems to us that your apology is helpful and yet narrow and almost grudging. And we feel a reluctant confidence that you and many other Evangelicals will continue to disparage President Obama and the faith of other Christians through a critique that pushes him and many of us outside the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith.

It is not your inclination to criticize that concerns us. Like you, we believe that our Christian faith calls us to critique the powers and policies of our society through the lens of Christian ethics. **Many of the things for which you and other Evangelicals have assailed the President for doing are not anti-Christian; they are at the very heart of Christ's work among us!** President Obama's faith was formed in a prophetic Christian tradition that certainly resonates with our own traditions, experiences and Scriptural readings. In [Dreams from My Father](#), he writes of the first stirrings of his Christian faith: "...at the foot of that cross... I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories-of survival and freedom and hope-became our story, my story... at once unique and universal, black and more than black." This vision came to him at a predominantly African American church in Chicago but it built on the work of a white mother who raised him on "the recordings of Mahalia Jackson" and "the speeches of Dr. King," and on white grandparents who instructed him in the Gospel that pulls us together and points us toward higher ground.

If you would extend to your brothers and sister in Christ the benefit of the doubt for a moment, does it surprise you that we experience these constant attacks on our president's faith not just as assaults on the President Obama but as an assault on the fundamental Christian faith that has helped to shape the moral conscience of our nation? **This faith tradition has historically helped America address issues such as slavery, lynching, segregation and discrimination, economic injustice, and caring for the material needs of the poor.** While we are on the subject of caring for those our Lord called "the least of these," we celebrate your witness as president and chair of Samaritan's Purse. And on the issues of discrimination, we also celebrate the ways in which your father, many years ago, tried to lower the barriers in the church in the South and recently acknowledged his belief that racism was the worst sin he had witnessed during his lifetime. Perhaps if the President's actions are viewed through the lens of the prophetic tradition instead of through a lens of suspicion and Otherness, you and other Evangelical Christians could see the hand of God at work in his life in the same way that we have seen it at work in your life.

In this fragmented age, President Obama declared to the world in his inaugural speech that "the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself." Do you not hear some of the vision of the Gospel in these words? We do not nominate him for sainthood here, but the Nobel Peace Prize offers some small testimony to the ears with which the world has heard his trumpet of conscience.

We can no longer engage in the kind of divisive politics that pit Christian against Christian and further divide the body of Christ over who has the right to define the boundaries of Christian identity. As Jesus himself said, "Whoever is not against us is for us," noting that the faith of Christ was not limited to the few who walked with him; those who trust in Christ transcend identity based groups and human defined boundaries. It has always been so; it continues to be so. To presume the right to delimit those who can

call on the name of the Lord was not acceptable to Jesus then and is not acceptable in the church universal today.

We the undersigned are gravely disturbed and strongly compelled to respond to the questionable moral litmus test that you used in your publicly televised Morning Joe interview on 21-Feb-12 to identify Republican candidates as Christian. **As clergy and religious scholars in your home state of North Carolina, we call on you and other evangelicals to join us at the table for a serious and in-depth theological and biblical conversation. We are appalled then and now by the venomous insinuation that a sitting Democratic President who cares deeply "for the least of these" is Christian in name only. We are dismayed that you also identified the President as a Muslim sympathizer, which in this political climate is easily taken for coded language for terrorist sympathizer. In so doing, you are deliberately inciting suspicion, division, political destruction and hate.** No matter what the offense, nowhere in biblical law or Jesus' teaching is permission given to promote hatred. We, therefore, affirm the teachings of Christianity widely accepted throughout Christendom and condemn your partisan remarks as heresy. The persuasive power of your words and the influence that you have had over large sectors of our faith community indicate a need for something much larger than a momentary apology. **A sincere apology must lead to a broader conversation that engages the public conscience and leads us toward atonement, repentance, reconciliation and a renewed mind.** Let us come together and find our way forward as one body in Christ.

Our Hebrew Scriptures instruct us to "reprove your neighbor or incur guilt yourself" (Lev. 19:17). Therefore, in a spirit of brotherly love and correction, we ask you to examine yourself and to cease arousing unwarranted suspicion regarding President Obama's Christian faith. **Given the history of American Christianity, we see such attacks as rooted in a racialized ideology which views the faith of African-Americans as less orthodox than the faith of our Caucasian sisters and brothers. To constantly refer to the president's faith, and that of other African-American Christians, as exotic or wholly other perpetuates racist assumptions that denigrate Black people. This practice drives an ungodly wedge between those whom Christ has called.**

The mockery of the faith of African-Americans has its theological roots in the religion of European and U.S. slave-masters. It was born of a twisted brand of theology that has legitimated the dehumanization and systematic abuse of Africa's descendants and the plunder of her resources since the 1400's. On our shores, from the 17th to the mid-20th centuries, the slaver-holder's religion offered divine sanction to godless activity. It declared Africans to be wicked and primitive Others. It taught its practitioners that it was the God-ordained responsibility of White Christians to govern the bodies and souls of those they disenfranchised. This arrogance flourished with impunity and had dire consequences for authentic Christian faith. This arrogance empowered white preachers to declare that those whom they enslaved did not have a soul to be saved. Without seeing any theological inconsistency in their actions, this arrogance allowed white preachers and their church members to claim to be Christian on Sunday and to cut off body parts of enslaved Africans on Monday. This arrogance gave rise to America's original sin of racism. It is perpetuated in the continued view of African-Americans as morally and intellectually inferior beings-neither wholly American, nor wholly Christian. Rev. Graham, comments like those which you made diminish the prophetic faith tradition in which our faith is planted. Those who hold and express such views take us backward as a nation rather than forward. We ask you Rev. Graham, your allies, all preachers, Christians, and fellow citizens to examine the historical record^[1] and to reject the distorted theology of the slave-holder religion once and for all.

The biblical prophets and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ viewed injustice, poverty and the absence of social consciousness as the greatest moral concern of the faith. Please look again at passages such as those found in the biblical prophet Jeremiah "For scoundrels are found among my people; they take over the goods of others, they set a trap; they catch human beings, they have become great and rich...they do not defend the rights of the needy....shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this?" Jeremiah 5:26-29.

Or, Isaiah 58:3-9

'Why do we fast and you don't look our way?
Why do we humble ourselves and you don't even notice?'

³⁻⁵"Well, here's why:

The bottom line on your 'fast days' is profit.

You drive your employees much too hard.

You fast, but at the same time you bicker and fight

You fast, but you swing a mean fist.

The kind of fasting you do won't get your prayers off the ground.

Do you think this is the kind of fast day I'm after:

a day to show off humility?

To put on a pious long face and parade around solemnly in black?

Do you call that fasting, a fast day that I, God, would like?

⁶⁻⁹"This is the kind of fast day I'm after: to break the chains of injustice,

Get rid of exploitation in the workplace,

free the oppressed,

to cancel debts.

Or Luke 4

God's Spirit is on me;

he has chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,

Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and

recovery of sight to the blind,

To set the burdened and battered free,

to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

Prophetic passages such as these that inform the faith of our President also are foundational to the faith of African- Americans and many other Christians. We collectively share a tradition built on God's Love for the "least of these" and recognize that God's intimate concern for Justice is born of God's desire that all of God's people are cared for and that none of them should suffer due to the active hatred or callous indifference of others. **We call on you, Rev Graham, to expand and deepen your theological understanding of the Bible. Too often your rhetoric is symptomatic of a compromised Christianity that actually supports the kind of injustice, greed, and excess identified by and challenged in the teachings of Jeremiah, of Amos, of Isaiah, and of our Lord Jesus Christ. Such ideology will continue to divide God's children in all their beautiful diversity and to harm our republic.**

Further, Rev. Graham, we also request that you cease the condemnation of Christian engagement with Islam. **Before you publicly condemn our President for having conversations with leaders of hostile**

nations and other faiths, please recall that the name of your organization is Samaritan's purse! Jesus set the example for us by positively interacting with Samaritans, Syro-Phoenicians, and Romans - the vilified and hated infidels of his day. In the parable from which your organization gets its name, Jesus used the account of the hated Samaritan enemy to serve as an example. It validates Jesus' instruction to "love your enemies." It validates the merits of regular peaceful contact with one's enemy.

Yet, you and your allies have castigated the President for contact with Islam. Such castigation of a Christian brother for engaging in dialogue with Muslims defies reason. A multitude of conservative American Christian believers have read Muslim prayers, studied the Quran at private Protestant schools, prayed with local Imams at interfaith gatherings, and visited mosques while traveling abroad. Many faithful Evangelical Christians have had more intense contact with Islam than President Obama has had in his entire life. Their contact with Islam makes them no more Muslim than the political pundit Bill Maher's extended contact with Christianity and his Christian guests makes him a Christian. We call upon you, all Evangelical ministers, and, indeed, all Christians to reject any simplistic public or private discourse that suggests 1) that God loves Americans more than people of other nations; 2) that all Muslims are dangerous extremists; and 3) that Christians who associate with Muslim people have compromised their Christian faith.

In fact, the Most High God, through his son Jesus the Christ, has spoken "I have sheep not of this fold" (Jn 10:16); "blessed are the peacemakers" (Mt 5:9); and "love your enemies" (Mt. 5:43). Jesus spent his time on earth healing the sick (providing healthcare), feeding the hungry (providing social services), and loving outcasts (forming a diverse community that welcomed all of humanity). However, let us be very clear, if you and your allies continue to cast aspersions on the prophetic Christian tradition and the prophetic African-American Christian tradition which pushes this nation to be true to the best of its founding Judeo-Christian ideals for all its citizens, we will continue to make our case as well. We will take to task any person who promotes the counterfeit religious traditions of slave holders as authentic to the gospel of Christ.

We are hopeful that your desire is for reconciliation. We invite you and your other Evangelical allies to join us in dialogue at your earliest convenience. We would like to have a conversation that explores Scripture, our American Christian heritage, and a way forward that celebrates our brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ. Perhaps, if we are all faithful to our common Savior, we can begin to mend not only the tear caused by historical and recent events; but also, begin to live into Paul's assertion that we are no longer Jew or Gentile (separated by race), slave or free (separated by class and social status), or male and female (separated by gender), but we are all one in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Sincerely,



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/s/

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/s/

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/s/

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[1] Frederick Douglass, "Slaveholding Religion and the Christianity of Christ," in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (ed. Milton C. Sernett; Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (Columbus: McGraw-Hill, 2010); Hilrie Shelton Smith, *In His Image, but....Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham: Duke, 1972); Constance Baker Motley, *Equal Justice Under Law* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1998); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

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Founded in 1909, the NAACP is the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. Its members throughout the United States and the world are the premier advocates for civil rights in their communities, conducting voter mobilization and monitoring equal opportunity in the public and private sectors.