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# Trump Ignites a War Within the Church

After a week of Trumpist mayhem, white evangelicals wrestle with what they've become.



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“Over the last 72 hours, I have received multiple death threats and thousands upon thousands of emails from Christians saying the nastiest and most vulgar things I have ever heard toward my family and ministry. I have been labeled a coward, sellout, a traitor to the Holy Spirit, and cussed out at least 500 times.”

This is the beginning of a Facebook post from Sunday by the conservative preacher Jeremiah Johnson. On Jan. 7, the day after the storming of the Capitol, Johnson had issued a public apology, asserting that God removed Donald Trump from office because of his pride and arrogance, and to humble those, like Johnson, who had fervently supported him.

The response was swift and vicious. As he put it in that later Facebook post, “I have been flabbergasted at the barrage of continued conspiracy theories being sent every minute our way and the pure hatred being unleashed. To my great heartache, I’m convinced parts of the prophetic/charismatic movement are far SICKER than I could have ever dreamed of.”

This is what is happening inside evangelical Christianity and within conservatism right now. As a conservative Christian friend of mine put it, there is strife within every family, within every congregation, and it may take generations to recover.

On the one hand, there are those who are doubling down on their Trump fanaticism and their delusion that a Biden presidency will destroy America.

“I rebuke the news in the name of Jesus. We ask that this false garbage come to an end,” the conservative pastor Tim Remington preached from the pulpit in Idaho on Sunday. “It’s the lies, communism, socialism.”

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The violent Know-Nothingism, which has always coursed through American history, is once again a torrent, threatening more violence in the days ahead.

On the other hand, many Trump supporters have been shaken to the core by the sight of a sacrilegious mob blasting Christian pop music and chanting “Hang Mike Pence.” There have been defections and second thoughts. The Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, who delivered a prayer at the Trump inaugural, told his congregation Sunday, “We must all repent, even the church needs to repent.”

The Trump-supporting Texas pastor John Hagee declared: “This was an assault on law. Attacking the Capitol was not patriotism, it was anarchy.”

After staying basically level for four years, Trump’s approval ratings dropped roughly 10 points across several polls in a week. The most popular piece on the Christianity Today website is headlined, “We Worship With the Magi, Not MAGA.” In the world of secular conservatism, The Wall Street Journal editorial page called on Trump to resign. Addressing Trump supporters, the conservative talk show host Erick Erickson wrote, “Everything — from the storming of the Capitol to people getting killed to social

networks banning you to corporations not giving you money — *everything* is a logical consequence of you people lying relentlessly for two months and taking advantage of American patriots.”

One core feature of Trumpism is that it forces you to betray every other commitment you might have: to the truth, moral character, the Sermon on the Mount, conservative principles, the Constitution. In defeat, some people are finally not willing to sacrifice all else on Trump’s altar.

The split we are seeing is not theological or philosophical. It’s a division between those who have become detached from reality and those who, however right wing, are still in the real world.

Hence, it’s not an argument. You can’t argue with people who have their own separate made-up set of facts. You can’t have an argument with people who are deranged by the euphoric rage of what Erich Fromm called group narcissism — the thoughtless roar of those who believe their superior group is being polluted by alien groups.

It’s a pure power struggle. The weapons in this struggle are intimidation, verbal assault, death threats and violence, real and rhetorical. The fantasyland mobbists have an advantage because they relish using these weapons, while their fellow Christians just want to lead their lives.

The problem is, how do you go about reattaching people to reality?

David French, the conservative Christian writer who fought in the Iraq war, says the way to build a sane G.O.P. is to borrow a page from the counterinsurgency handbook: Separate the insurgents from the population.

That means prosecuting the rioters, impeaching the president and not tolerating cyberterrorism within a community or congregation.

Others have to be reminded of the basic rules for perceiving reality. They have to be reminded that all truth is God’s truth; that inquiry strengthens faith, that it is narcissistic self-idolatry to think you can create your own truth based on what you “feel.”

There will probably have to be pastors and local leaders who model and admire evidence-based reasoning, wrestling with ideas.

On the left, leaders and organizations have arisen to champion open inquiry, to stand up to the cancel mobs. They have begun to shift the norms.

The problem on the right is vastly worse. But we have seen that unreason is a voracious beast. If it is not confronted, it devours not only your party, but also your nation and your church.

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