

Are (White) Evangelicals Responsible for the Spread of COVID-19 in America?

This is not the first time something like this has happened. A national tragedy occurs, and Christians get scapegoated and blamed. Remember Nero blaming the Christians for the burning of Rome? Today, it is an op-ed writer for the *New York Times* who blames evangelicals for the spread of the coronavirus in America—and that would mean white evangelicals, to be sure.

The *Times*' original headline was bold and provocative: "The Road to Coronavirus Hell Was Paved by Evangelicals" (yet they've since changed the headline to "The Religious Right's Hostility to Science Is Crippling Our Coronavirus Response").

Yes, "Trump's response to the pandemic has been haunted by the science denialism of his ultraconservative religious allies."

According to Katherine Stewart, the author of the article, "Donald Trump rose to power with the determined assistance of a movement that denies science, bashes government and prioritized loyalty over professional expertise. In the current crisis, we are all reaping what that movement has sown."

Is there any substance to her claims?

Stewart quotes prominent evangelical leaders (one of whom is Hispanic, for the record) who downplayed the danger of holding public gatherings to the point of ridiculing pastors who chose to follow the government's guidelines. (My own stance has been quite the opposite, encouraging pastors to comply out of love for their neighbors as well as out of wisdom; see [here](#) and [here](#).)

Stewart also notes that some evangelical leaders in high places in the government have scorned the danger of the virus, outside of church settings.

But where is her evidence that these pastors and leaders influenced Trump's policy decisions? What proof does she have?

To be generous, we could call it specious. To be precise, we could say she has none. A court of law would not even find her reasoning worthy of being called circumstantial.

Specifically, Stewart argues that Trump commonly differs with the experts during his press briefings on the virus. But where is her proof that this is because of outside religious influences rather than Trump simply following his gut? (She acknowledges that he does, in fact, trust his gut.) She also fails to consider that, for the moment, these are just words, while his policy decisions have followed the experts.

She argues that Trump spoke of his hope that churches would be full again on Easter. But how does this prove that he is listening to evangelical voices in terms of science-based decisions? How is this different from his talk about getting businesses back open around that time as well? Why isn't this simply Trump seeking to instill hope?

Stewart also fails to mention, by name, leading evangelical pastors who are close to Trump and who have fully complied with his guidelines. Is that because this doesn't fit her narrative?

As for Trump's actions, it is true that, in the earliest days, he seemed to downplay the danger of the virus when speaking publicly. At the same time, he was combating the hysteria of the media, which would have us believe that 15 millions Americans could die of the disease.

But what of his actions? He enacted the China travel ban in January, to the jeers of some of the left, with former Vice

President Biden calling it “xenophobia.”

As Tom Pappert pointed out on the National File on March 12, “While Democrats in March attack President Donald Trump for not doing enough to end the coronavirus epidemic, the same Democrats were bashing the president’s decision to ban travel from China in January.

“In January, President Trump banned all foreign nationals who were in China during the time of the coronavirus outbreak from entering the United States. Many pundits and health experts have since credited this decision with helping to slow the coronavirus pandemic on American shores.”

To quote Biden directly, “This is no time for Donald Trump’s record of hysteria and xenophobia, hysterical xenophobia, to uh, and fear mongering.”

Yet according to Dr. Anthony Fauci, this ban made a real difference in saving lives. Does Stewart mention that?

It is true that a recent Pew Research poll found that, “Most white evangelicals don’t think COVID-19 poses a major threat to Americans’ health.”

But again, what does that have to do with life and death policy decisions that the president is making? Where are the evangelical ministers standing with him at his daily press briefings? And what of the large number of leading scientists who themselves are conservative Christians, like Katherine Hayhoe?

According to the Washington Post, she is “both an evangelical Christian and a climate scientist”—in fact, a “top climate scientist.” And she is just one among countless top scientists who are committed Christians, and some of them are close to the president.

The bottom line is that there is zero factual support for the

misleading and even dangerous *Times* headline. And Stewart has no support whatsoever that science-denying evangelicals are influencing the president's decisions. To the contrary, wherever his gut and his optimism might lead, it appears that he is following scientific guidelines in order to save as many lives as possible.

If Stewart had focused her article on the cavalier attitudes of some Christian leaders, I would have added my hearty amen, having written and spoken similar things as well. But the current article paints a false picture, recklessly scapegoating evangelical Christians in the process.

When people are dying of the virus and tens of millions are afraid, this is a highly irresponsible thing to do. And whoever came up with the headline for the article has acted even more irresponsibly. Shame on him or her.

A public apology and retraction would be a good place to start.