

Charlottesville Pastor Reveals the 4 Things We Must Do if America Is to Be Saved

Chris Atwell is a Charlottesville native, born and raised in the city and lead pastor of Portico Church. Chris has been with the Portico church in Charlottesville since the fall of 2003. Chris' main goal since moving back to his hometown of Charlottesville has been to pursue racial reconciliation in the city. It is Chris' view that a segregated American church was not acceptable in light of how the gospel wins our reconciliation. Unsurprisingly then, it would have been difficult for Chris to watch the violence and hatred in his own neighborhood surrounding people of different races and cultures.

Interview by Iain Fenton, journalist for .

Iain: Hi Chris, thank you so much for speaking with me. So, as a Charlottesville native—could you ever have predicted the events that unfolded over the weekend? Were there any signs? Has Charlottesville always had an edge to it, or is it usually a quiet place?

Chris: Nazis with guns, shields and clubs? No, that's not us. The events and images were and still are shocking. Charlottesville has a long history of race problems, being in the historic South and being a Confederate state. But most of our issues are in the "institutional realm"—systems and structures. There are racists here, trust me I grew up hearing and seeing stuff, but almost all of the neo-Nazis and protesters came from out of town. Charlottesville often makes the list of "happiest towns" in the USA and best places to live. So, yeah, this is very rare and disruptive.

Iain: For many people, the facts of what actually happened

remain confusing due to Trump's so-called "fake news" media. Was it a liberals against Nazis sort of thing? Surely there are two sides to a fight? Were all the right-wing protesters Nazis?

Chris: I was preaching at an event in Richmond, Virginia, during the actual rally. So I was not on the ground as an eyewitness. I have heard both valiant and questionable tactics by the so called left wing counter-terror groups (Black Lives Matter/antifa, or anti-fascism groups). But there is no question that the nationalists' groups were heavily armed and came for a fight. Even HBO's new 20-minute VICE episode shows some of their thinking. There is no justification for that hatred. We fought those battles in the 1860s and 1940s. This does not fit "neatly" into Democrat and Republican. There were Hitler quotes and salutes. There were anti-Semitic chants. It was really deplorable.

Iain: Could you imagine the possibility of any of the thugs who were causing violence attending any of the Christian churches in America?

Chris: We had three show up at our second service on Sunday! Two left early, [talking] on their cell phones. One of them acted very enthusiastic during service but then shouted out a justification at the end of our service. He was kindly and peacefully escorted out to our lobby for further conversation. I think if any of these guys are in "church," they are in very fringe fundamentalist churches. But that's just my guess.

Iain: Why do they attend? Do they think God would permit such violent behavior? It's the same for the Antifa section and even Black Lives Matter, who have known to be violent. Surely they cannot believe that this is God's will?

Chris: I can't speak to their motives. Any form of racism or supremacy is a sin against God, who made humankind "in His image." He made them, and called it "good" (Gen. 1).

Iain: How much of a problem is far-right nationalism in the USA? The country seems to be divided at the moment between Trump supporters and Trump despisers; what is the endgame to all of this?

Chris: I wish I knew the full extent. I do not. I do know that the supremacy groups have already applied for permits to bring their protests to Richmond, Virginia, next month. I am concerned that this is the tip of the iceberg. The nation is very divided, and we seem to use these events just to reinforce our own positions and go back deeper into our corners. That's unfortunate. I believe that through confession of sin, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation, we can experience great healing from God.

Iain: Do you think there's a correlation between the fact that the majority of American Christians are from the Southern states whilst a lot of Trump's support in the election also came from the South?

Chris: I don't think there's an equivalence between these haters and Christians. I've spoken to my network of local pastors, and our church seems to be the only one that had visible nationalist attenders, and probably because we're downtown in the footpath. So, 3 out of 1,000 is about right. I wouldn't be surprised if that's about the percentage of those types that attend any church. A supremacy ideology just doesn't fit well in a Genesis 1 common human ancestry and "made in the image of God" theology. Not to mention the "all nations" and reconciliation language of Jesus.

Iain: To go off on another route, many people, correctly or incorrectly, regard Islam as the creator of terrorism, but are these Islamic extremists really part of a religious community when they bring so much death and hate to the world? All religion is about peace and respect for [one's] fellow man, right?

Chris: Depends on your Koran interpretation. If one follows the law of abrogation, whereby later written passages carry more authority, Islam is pretty jihadist. Supposedly Mohammed himself affirmed such an interpretation.

Iain: But Islamist terrorism only really begun around the September 11th attacks, right? Since then, there have been lots of terrorist attacks—but the religion of Islam is centuries old.

Chris: Oh, not at all. Islam spread at the tip of the sword of conquest. I'll leave that history research to you. Many, many acts of terror prior to 9/11.

Iain: I guess it depends how you define terrorism—some would say the British empire committed many acts of terrorism during the 19th and 20th century.

Chris: Probably. And white lynchings were terror in the post-Civil War South. But, as a whole, those incidents couldn't be linked to a sacred text "demanding" terror, that is, Jihad.

Iain: Do you think jihad extremists, far right neo-Nazis, violent members of antifa and so on are born with hatred in them or have they been misled throughout their lives?

Chris: Both. The Bible teaches that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). But particular "varieties" of sin are a combination of nature and nurture.

Iain: Finally then, will the USA or, in fact, the whole world ever come together and live in harmony? What needs to be done to end all this violence, hate and suffering?

Chris: The Bible teaches that Christians should seek and practice the virtues of peacemaking, repentance and reconciliation. But, no, all will not be perfect until the return of Christ. He is the hope. This is not to downplay the power of Christ now to transform hearts and communities; but

no, all will not be eradicated until His return.