

Why Jentezen Franklin Invited John Gray to the White House

One headline read, almost immediately after President Trump met with a group of Hispanic and black pastors in the White House last week: “Trump gives thumbs-up to prison sentencing reform bill at pivotal meeting.” What that headline didn’t reveal is the amazing amount of work it has taken to move this issue to a place where true reform is finally possible.

As is the case with any profound change in the top branches of government, it’s the story behind the story that has made all of the difference. I’ve been honored to have been a part of a small group of Christian leaders, including Pastor Paula White, Pastor Jack Graham, Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, Bishop Harry Jackson and Rev. Johnnie Moore who have been working over the course of the last year in order to help advocate for this long-needed reform, and—in fact—a few of us met again immediately before the president’s much-publicized meeting last week with many of the nation’s most influential pastors from our minority communities.

While I celebrate the thousands upon thousands of lives that will be positively affected by these reforms, I am shocked and saddened to see the attack that some of those pastors received at the hands of thousands of their social media followers, many of which I’m sure they consider friends. And some are just vicious and outright evil.

One of those who has received vicious criticism is John Gray, a pastor I have known for over 15 years. He was a pastor at our church, and I had the honor of conducting his wedding ceremony. John went to that White House meeting at my invitation, knowing he could be one of the deciding voices on an issue that affects thousands of African-Americans nationwide and their families as well.

I invited John because I knew three things: First, I knew he was passionate about matters related to racial inequality in this country, as was the case for every pastor at that table. Second, I knew that when it came to the topic of prison reform, he was not only passionate, he was informed. And finally, I invited John knowing he is the last man to run from a fight on this topic, and that includes the highest office in the land. I knew he wouldn't be swayed by the magnitude of the moment or the trappings of the location. On all three points, I was correct. While there were powerful words spoken by the pastors in the room, John, while sitting at the president's side, spoke eloquently, competently and persuasively and made a difference.

When we were done with that meeting, the president then called a meeting with the Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley, Iowa; and Sens. Mike Lee, Utah; Lindsey Graham, South Carolina; Tim Scott, South Carolina; and the White House's most passionate and unrelenting advocate for prison reform, Jared Kushner. Then, immediately after, they emerged with a press conference declaring that the president had decided he was ready to move toward making these desperately needed changes a reality, and soon. You will notice that two of the senators key to this legislation are senators from the state where John Gray now resides and pastors, South Carolina.

This reform is right and smart. The number of inmates in federal prisons has swelled from 25,000 in 1980 to more than 205,000 in 2015, and taxpayer spending on federal inmates has increased from \$330 million to \$7.5 billion over that span, according to the Congressional Research Service. The core of the proposed prison reform agenda is to dramatically affect the lives of nonviolent offenders in both sentencing, rehabilitation services and reentry into everyday life, ultimately removing "felon" from their records, which has been a major cause of preventing returning citizens from getting the jobs they need to live and support their families.

In any other setting, people from both sides of the aisle and certainly Christians would celebrate this legislation as a victory and a major step forward in rehabilitating and restoring lives to millions of forgotten men and women. But because John sat at a table with Donald Trump, he and a few others have been vilified and maligned by the very people who otherwise would agree with everything that just happened. I'm not talking merely about a disagreement; we all have the right to disagree with one another. But when it turns to personal attacks and language that is intentionally hurtful and destructive, it is wrong. It's pure hatred, not for the cause John stood for, but for even attending the meeting.

Every single time in the Old or New Testament when God's people were brought before the rulers and judges in the land for counsel or anything else, they stood before the ruler, sometimes even with a pagan ruler. But when that moment arose where they were called upon, they responded and gave the counsel God placed in their hearts to give. Joseph, Esther, Daniel and prophet after prophet stood before kings and rulers and spoke what God told them to say, and many times, it altered the trajectory of a nation. Why would we think it any different today?

Every time I have prayed for or given counsel to a government leader, it has always been at their request, and every time I am able, I go where I am invited and speak what the Lord lays on my heart to say. It matters not if that person is a Republican or a Democrat, left or right. They are a human being just like me and they have the same Creator I do. God can move the heart of any leader, so why wouldn't I go and give them the counsel they have asked to receive? Proverbs 14:34 says, "Righteousness exalts a nation."

Our spiritual leaders represent the voice of righteousness in our culture.

I've faced serious criticism, but never like what Pastor John

Gray endured last week. I admire his unwavering commitment to be a voice of righteousness, and to care more about the opinion of Jesus than the opinion of critics.

Within a few short months, I am hopeful we will see this legislation pass, and the trajectory of thousands of lives and families altered forever. I am also praying for those who would heap this kind of hatred on a man of God like John Gray, for the Bible is very clear about the consequences for leaders who raise their voices in judgment against those anointed by God.

John Gray is a leader for our time and a true man of God. I'm honored to stand with him in advance of prison reform.

Pastor Jentezen Franklin *is the senior pastor of Free Chapel, a multi campus church. Each week his television program, Kingdom Connection, is broadcast on major networks all over the world. A New York Times best-selling author, Jentezen has written eight books, including his latest, Love Like You've Never Been Hurt.*