

Black Leader: SBC Critics Miss African-American Context of Carson's 'All God's Children' Remark

A civil rights-savvy black leader says Ben Carson's comment that "We are all God's children" is widely accepted in the African-American community as an "innocent" and unifying message, and, he contends that objections raised about the statement reveal a lack of cultural understanding.

Reacting strongly to news Carson, a conservative and outspoken Christian and neurosurgeon from Baltimore, would not be speaking at the 2015 SBC Pastors' Conference in Columbus, Ohio, in June, Maxie Miller Jr. said criticisms about Carson's "theology" over the one statement are troubling.

"In our culture, in African-American culture, it's something that we are taught as children," Miller, former director of the African-American division of the Florida Baptist Convention and the senior pastor of New City Church in Plant City, Florida, said. "No matter what happens to you and how people treat you, remember we are all God's children. All parents told you that."

Some Southern Baptists raised their concerns publicly about Carson, who expresses his faith through the Seventh-Day Adventist tradition, including leaders of Baptist21, a network of Calvinist millennials with Southern Baptist Theological Seminary ties.

Among their concerns was an Easter greeting Carson posted on Facebook in which he addressed Jews, Christians and Muslims.

In context of "godly principles of loving our fellow man"

Carson noted “there are ideological differences in who Jesus was” but offered “we should find peace in the fact that we are all God’s children.”

Baptist21 leaders strongly rejected the notion.

“Certainly, we do not all worship the same God—we worship the Trinity whom Muslims and Jews would deny,” they wrote on their blog. “And, the idea that we are all God’s children is at best the type of liberalism the Conservative Resurgence sought to address, and at worst, it is universalism.”

They also said an appearance by Carson—who is not a politician and considered a Washington outsider with no connections to the Republican Party establishment, but is rumored to be considering a run for the White House—would give the impression that Southern Baptists are “in bed with the Republican Party.”

Miller said he understands Carson’s statements as one who came out of the civil rights movement, but also as a trained theologian.

It should not be dissected for its theological truth, he said, but understood as a moral statement.

“That was one of the mantras of the civil rights movement—we are all God’s children—why are you treating us any differently?” Miller explained.

Miller also emphasized Carson is neither a theologian nor a preacher.

“Those of us who studied theology must remember one of the major premises or treatises of our faith is grace and mercy and we must extend that because we never know when we are going to need that in return,” he said.

“He’s not a theologian and never went to seminary,” Miller continued. “He’s made contributions to our culture and our

society and we don't want to pull the rug out from under him. We want to extend grace and mercy to him."

Tears in his eyes, Miller, a Vietnam-era veteran who holds degrees from Beeson Divinity School and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, said he is disappointed in his denomination.

"I love being a Southern Baptist, I love our theological principles, but we must be careful that we don't paint ourselves as being spiritual elitists to other Christians," Miller said. "There is a whole lot we can accomplish in our community with Christians who don't agree on every theological point."

Careful, because he did not want to alienate anyone, especially when calling for unity, Miller said he is concerned that Southern Baptists are not learning from others.

"The average Christian who is not a theologian, nor a pastor, would make that statement—and in the African-American culture, very innocently, and not looking for someone to punish their comments," Miller said. "Even young people who I'm teaching in my church might make that statement and I know what they mean and I am their pastor and I accept that."

"Southern Baptists are an exceptional group," Miller said. "But, if we are not careful, we give the message—if you don't believe like us, we can't work with you."

Miller said "this is a hill" Southern Baptists need to climb. The disagreement over Carson is disappointing, he said, especially because it's a cultural misstep that reflects poorly on Southern Baptists.

"It just troubles me that we are allowing this to make us look worse than if he had stood and misspoken," Miller said. "We've had people speak there before who are not Southern Baptist."

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