

How Should the Evangelical Church Respond to the Murder of George Floyd?

Rich Nathan

June 5, 2020

Isaiah 11:1-9

It was less than two weeks ago that George Floyd, an African American man and Christian brother, had the life choked out of him by a police officer kneeling on his neck for nearly nine minutes. As you know, protests have broken out in all 50 states in response not only to the murder of George Floyd and the killing of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor in the last few weeks, but the deaths of so many others in the last few years – Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin and many others.

But in addition, the protests are about much more than these murders. These protests are about the fundamental issue of racial injustice in our country – all the ways that our country is systematically structured to keep power and wealth in the hands of whites and to deny power and wealth to those who are black and brown.

Still, there was something about the video of a handcuffed George Floyd repeatedly saying, “I can’t breathe” and calling out to his deceased mother multiple times that hit the heart of all decent Americans like shock paddles on a cardiac patient. The video silenced all the absurd alternative explanations regarding why so many unarmed black men are killed by police violence.

Today, the leadership of our church chose to delay the start of a new series we were planning – to offer a biblical lens on this extraordinary moment – in our nation, our city, and our church.

So, as we are considering together all that we've been experiencing, I've titled today's message, "How should the Evangelical Church Respond to the Murder of George Floyd?" Let's pray.

Now, at the front end of this talk I want to acknowledge that this will be a difficult message for some of us to listen to. I ask you to just stay with me. Whether you agree with my comments or disagree, would you please just listen until the end? Try as best as you can to not allow one point of disagreement or one phrase or one statement to so put you off that you say, "That's it. I'm switching this off." It's ok for all of us to be uncomfortable. I can tell you as a pastor that I would much rather preach on subjects that we all can agree about – about how we need to love each other or be kind to the poor or about parenting or marriage or the Buckeyes. But sometimes, as a Christian pastor, I need to say uncomfortable things and there are times that all of us, including me, need to be made to feel a little uncomfortable.

Lots of our black and brown brothers and sisters spend a lot of their lives feeling uncomfortable. So, if those of us who are white are a bit uncomfortable for 30 or 35

minutes, we'll survive! So, hang in there with me, OK? And if there are things that you object to, please write to me, Eric.Pickerill@vineyardcolumbus.org.

Now, most of you know that I was born and raised as a Jew. In fact, I just did my DNA test and I am 100% Ashkenazic Jew. Nothing else. My wife, Marlene, says that my DNA proves that I am the most boring man on the face of the earth. I responded to her and said, "Well, that just proves my claim that I've been telling you since we got married that I can trace my ancestry all the way back to Father Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So there."

I am a Jew by birth, but I became an evangelical by choice. I know that the word "evangelical" has become corrupted by its association with politics. That's why many of us don't use the word "evangelical" anymore to describe ourselves.

But the term "evangelical" means that you are a person who appeals to the Bible as the final authority for your faith and your life. Evangelicals are people of the book. I love the Bible! There's virtually no day in the last 40+ years where I have not opened the Bible and tried to apply it to my life. I'm a man of the Word. We have tried to build a church that is devoted to a love of Scripture.

Evangelicals are also people who believe that someone must trust in Jesus Christ in order to be saved. We evangelicals believe in evangelism – sharing the good news of

God's love for the world, demonstrated most clearly in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to die on a cross for our sins. It's these two convictions as an evangelical – my love for the Bible and my love for evangelism – that compel me to speak out today about some extremely disturbing realities in the evangelical church, in our current political system and in our nation as a whole.

There are times that:

Slide

We need to speak out

There's an old Jewish saying that goes like this:

Slide

If not now, when? If not us, who?

In other words if this is not the right moment for us to speak, then when will we ever speak out?

Now, there are lots of good reasons why I, as a pastor, don't speak about particular politicians whether for or against.

Slide

Good reasons to not speak

In fact, it has been my practice to almost never mention politicians by name. The truth is I could spend my entire ministry responding to the latest outrageous tweets or the most recent comments from this or that person coming out of Washington. Most of us as pastors signed up to actually do something, not comment about politics.

One of the reasons I left the teaching of law in response to the call of God is because I wanted to actually do something directly to promote God's kingdom. I wanted to preach the Bible, to disciple people, to announce the good news of Jesus Christ, to heal broken marriages, to offer people hope, to see hungry people fed. I didn't sign up to be a political pundit, I signed up to do ministry. I have no interest in ever trying to persuade you who to vote for.

There are good reasons why we pastors don't speak up more often about what's happening in politics. Most of us don't want to add to the rancor, the noise, to the division that our country is subjected to 24/7 with all the screaming heads on TV.

Despite this, let me tick off three reasons why those of us who are white evangelicals must speak out.

Slide

Good reasons to speak

Slide

We cannot be missing in action any longer

For much of American history, white evangelicals have been missing in action regarding the cause of racial equality in America. Many white evangelicals today will pepper their sermons with Dr. King quotes. I have a picture of Dr. King in my office, along with my other great hero, C.S. Lewis. They are both sitting over my desk. But the truth is not a single white evangelical pastor joined Dr. King in his civil rights marches or worked for civil rights legislation. Not one! When push came to shove, white evangelicals in America were missing in action. We were silent. We let everyone else do the work of justice, but we stayed on the sidelines and critiqued King's marches as violent, as filled with outside agitators, as inspired by Communists!

There were many rabbis who marched with Dr. King. There were many Catholic priests who marched with him. There were mainline Protestants – Episcopalians, Lutherans and Presbyterians – who stood with him. But there were no white evangelicals anywhere to be found.

We have another moment now, brothers and sisters, where we can change things for our children and our grandchildren. This is a moment pregnant with possibilities. Are we white evangelicals going to be silent again? Are we going again to assume the role of critics of the protest? God have mercy on us! We can't be missing in action again. White evangelicals need to speak out in this moment, we cannot support the status quo. If not now when? If not us, who?

Slide

We cannot continue to support the status quo

The system is broken. The system is structured to work against black and brown people. We're living in a broken system. To say nothing is to support the status quo. The current is all moving in one direction and if we just float, we're going to go with the current. We must actively swim against the current. We must actively oppose racism. We must vocally oppose racism. We must become anti-racist and work for change. The system will keep producing what it's producing and all of the racial disparities in our country will continue for our kids and our grandkids.

Here's a third reason why white evangelicals must speak out.

Slide

We cannot continue to be wed to a political party or politician

Let me state the obvious. Let me call attention to the elephant that's in the room. 80% of self-identified white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump as President. White evangelical leaders and pastors are among President Trump's most loyal and most vocal supporters. It's entirely legitimate for the public to ask white evangelical pastors or anybody who identifies with the white evangelical movement, "Do you support all of President Trump's statements? Do you support his views regarding civil rights? Do you agree with his use of the police and the military to clear peaceful protestors, including dozens of pastors, out of the way so that he could stand in front of a church and hold the Bible for a photo-op? Do you agree with his characterization, that those exercising their constitutional right to protest in front of the White House were "terrorists"? Do you agree with the President making allusions to the worst aspects of our civil rights history, that we're going to sic vicious dogs on protestors?"

Now, there's no sane person in America who supports anyone who is looting during the protests. There's no sane person who supports anyone who is advocating violence during the protests. Sane people don't advocate anarchists coming in – as some did in the city of Columbus – and tried to break into a power plant to cut off the power to Children's Hospital. Sane Americans despise all of that! But don't let these fringe groups distract any of us from the message of the protestors!

99% of folks who are protesting are protesting peacefully and are seeking racial justice.

They are seeking real reforms in our police departments. So the question hangs in the air and needs to be answered by white evangelicals. Do you ever critique our President regarding his views on race, his treatment of immigrants, or the awful things he regularly says and tweets about black and brown people?

I'm speaking out today because I am an evangelical and I love the Bible. Republican Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska, who is a white evangelical Christian brother, said that we evangelicals do not support the President holding up the Bible for a photo-op. The Bible is not just something we evangelicals wave around as a partisan, political symbol. The Bible is the Word of God and is something that we've given our lives to obey.

Now, if the President had not only held up the Bible, but opened it and said, "I take seriously the examples of King Josiah and King Hezekiah and Nehemiah. I'm calling for a national day of repentance or a national week of repentance from the historic racism that has characterized America. I stand before you calling for repentance and radical change. I will work tirelessly to tear down barriers to the advancement of black and brown people!" Brothers and sisters, that would be the proper use of the Bible.

I am also concerned as a committed evangelical that the wedding of evangelicals to this President and one political party is damaging the long-term cause of evangelism. It will be more difficult for many people to hear the gospel message, especially black and

brown people, Millennials and Gen Z, if what they think is “oh, you’re just giving me a certain brand of politics.” We need to speak up! We evangelicals need a permanent divorce from both political parties – Democratic as well as Republican. We need a renewed, radical commitment to the Kingdom of God! What’s the way forward for us as a church?

What do we need during this moment of protest?

Slide

We need hope

Slide Isaiah 11:1

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

The historical situation in which Isaiah was speaking was that Assyria – the nation that was coming against Israel – was going to be cut down. But Isaiah also prophesies that his own people, Israel, would be cut down and reduced to a stump.

But miraculously, something utterly unexpected will occur. A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse. New life will come up from this dead stump of Israel. Now, obviously, the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy was found in Jesus the Messiah.

Christians are people who always hope. The Word of God tells us not only that a better day in the future is possible for our children and our grandchildren, but that a better day is absolutely promised by God. We are not just a product of our culture, our environment, our history, our DNA, our politics, our tribalism. Christians understand that there's another power at work in the world that goes beyond the social forces that shape us. The other power is the power of the Holy Spirit.

Slide Isaiah 11:2

²The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—

Do you see what Isaiah is saying here? Speaking to Israelites who were hopeless – they've lived through 450 years of mostly horrible kings, 250 years of corruption and injustice. And they were attacked. The northern kingdom went into exile. At that point, they said it's over, it's dead. The tree has been cut down. But the Spirit of God broke in. A green shoot of life sprang up from the dead stump of Jesse!

Do any of you feel hopeless? Any of you say, "Ah, the protests won't make any difference. The situation is irredeemable. There is no hope for change."

Brothers and sisters, hopelessness is not a Christian option. As Parker Palmer put it so eloquently

Slide

When you choose hopelessness over hope it's not a reflection of the fate of the world.
It is a reflection of the state of our souls.

What do we need in this moment of time?

- We need to speak out.
- We need hope. Hope for change. Hope for God's intervention.

Slide

We need leadership

I want you to note a few characteristics of this leader.

Slide Isaiah 11:3a

³and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

I love that phrase. “Delight in the fear of the Lord.” The leader that we need at this moment is not someone who delights in exercises of power, threats, pomp and circumstance or the prerequisites of their high office. We need leaders who are permeated by a consciousness that they are ultimately accountable to God. We need leaders who know down to their toes that one day they will stand before God for every word they utter and every action they take. We need leaders who tremble at the thought of God’s coming judgment. We need leaders whose delight is the fear of God.

We need a leader who exercises right judgment.

Slide Isaiah 11:3b

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,

What does this mean? Isaiah is saying that the kind of leader who will work justice is someone who does not judge by appearance. Isn’t that what we desperately need in America right now – to stop judging by appearance? Just because someone is in a large black body doesn’t make them a threat. They may be a kind person. A good person. A Christian brother. Just because someone is wearing a uniform and a badge doesn’t make them an oppressor. They may be sympathetic to the protests and utterly despise what Derek Chauvin did to George Floyd. The person wearing a uniform might always try to do the right thing and deserve our respect. We have to get below the surface, below the appearance.

Christians are kingdom minded people. If we look at the surface of what's happening right now – people are yelling, people are angry, people are marching – but we need to dig deep, why are people protesting?

Surveys tell us that when white evangelicals hear the term racism, they immediately think of individual acts of meanness. To call America racist or anyone a racist is to criticize the state of an individual's heart. Racism includes the state of our hearts. Many evangelicals think people are protesting the state of other people's hearts. But we have to get beyond what most white evangelicals hear by that term. The protests are about all the invisible systems in our country that confer benefits on one group – white people – and deny benefits – to other groups, black and brown people.

- We need to speak out
- We need hope
- We need leadership

Slide

We need a vision of a new society

Slide Isaiah 11:6–8

⁶The wolf will live with the lamb,

the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.

⁷The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
⁸The infant will play near the cobra's den,
the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.

Isaiah is talking about a situation where wolves are no longer predatory. Where the vulnerable are no longer prey. Isaiah's pointing ahead to a day where people can live in safety without fear.

Why should every African American parent have to have the “talk” especially with their sons? Do all of you white parents know what I mean by the “talk”? I learned about “the talk” for the first time 20 years ago from a black pastor. Every black dad and every black mom has had to say to their sons when their sons get a driver’s license, “When you are pulled over by the police, keep your hands on the steering wheel. Don’t reach for your wallet. Keep your hands in sight. Say yes, sir and no, sir.” Black dads and black moms genuinely fear that their sons will be shot if they make a police officer nervous.

Isaiah is giving us a vision of a better society. You say, "That's just in the future." In the age of the kingdom, we are kingdom people. Vineyard people are people who reach for the future. We want to bring it into time. We want to live in a society that offers security and safety for all, not just the wealthy and not just the white. But for all! For security and safety for black and brown citizens, what do we need?

Here's the last thing:

Slide

We need young people to lead us

Slide Isaiah 11:6

⁶The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.

You know, the most encouraging thing to me about these protests is that when you look at them, it's mostly an incredible mosaic of young people. Almost everyone is young. When I look at the crowds, there are African Americans and whites and Asians and Latinos are marching side by side and saying, "We're not going to tolerate anymore the treatment of our black brothers and black sisters. We've heard their cries. We've seen

their pain. We're going to put our bodies in front of theirs until there's real change in our country!"

Here at Vineyard Columbus we're celebrating Recognition Weekend. I'd like to speak to any of you who are young and are listening to this message on justice and race. I'd like to say to you that your church family is so proud of you! You're moving on from elementary school to middle school or middle school to high school or high school to college. Your Vineyard family is proud of you.

Because we see God's work in your lives, we have hope for our future. Many of you young people have a different mindset, a different attitude when it comes to race than older generations! With God's help, you can change this world for the better. Do not say, I'm too young to make a difference. Remember, Mary was a teenager when she gave birth to Jesus. Esther was likely a teenager when she spoke up on behalf of her people and saved the Jewish people from an evil governor. Daniel was a teenager when he was taken to Babylon and prophesied to the king.

Let me close by telling you the story of two remarkable teenagers:

Let me introduce you to Peyton Klein:

Slide



Pic of Peyton

Peyton Klein founded the Global Minds Initiative, a student-led organization that seeks to combat discrimination and promote inclusion in schools around the world. After seeing an ESL (English as a second language) classmate struggle to communicate with a teacher, Peyton realized just how many barriers these students face in order to access the same education as her. Global Minds acts as a support system for ESL students and teaches skills like leadership, community engagement, global friendship, cultural identity, and inclusivity.

And here's Zyahna Bryant:

Slide

Pic of Zyahna

Zyahna Bryant was only 15 years old when she petitioned her local city council to take down a monument to Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia. One year later, hundreds of white supremacists rallied to preserve the statue, resulting in a violent and tragic clash with counter-protesters. Zyahna's voice sparked a national conversation about what Confederate monuments like this represent in modern culture and why their lasting presence is hurtful to Black Americans.

Young people, you can make a difference. And older adults, you can make a difference as well! Speak out. Confront racism whenever you hear it. Become an anti-racist. Welcome people who don't look like you into your home and into your life. Get involved with one of 100 things that we're doing at our Vineyard Columbus Community Center. Tear down barriers and obstacles in front of black and brown people. Brothers and sisters, this is a moment pregnant with the possibility of change. Let's not find ourselves missing in action. Instead, let's join together with the Lord to welcome more of God's Kingdom into the world.

CLOSING

-Certainly, worshipping together online is different, but I want to try something...can we pause a moment and wait on the Holy Spirit together?

(Worship playing in background)

-If you have something else going on at the same time, would you turn it off?

-Let's try and quiet ourselves, despite this incredibly distracting time...

-Let's not post in the chat, let's just stop and ask God to fill us and speak to us...

(WAIT for about 10 seconds?)

-I want to invite several groups to get prayer...again, we have pastors and leaders standing by to pray with you. (Invite groups to get prayer)

-Whether you think you need prayer or not, I believe that if you fall into any of these groups, God wants to meet you in prayer right now...



-You can also text "PRAY" to 98977 if you want someone to pray for you right now.

You'll get a response back in the next 15 minutes from one of our pastors or leaders,
they are here and ready to pray with you.

-(Closing prayer/blessing)

How Should the Evangelical Church Respond to the Murder of George Floyd?

Rich Nathan

June 5, 2020

Isaiah 11:1-9

1. We need to speak out
 - a. Good reasons to not speak
 - b. Good reasons to speak
 - i. We cannot be missing in action any longer
 - ii. We cannot continue to support the status quo
 - iii. We cannot continue to be wed to a political party or politician
2. We need hope
3. We need leadership
4. We need a vision of a new society
5. We need young people to lead us