

IF I LOVE MY NEIGHBOR

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How are we to understand the recent events in Charlottesville, Virginia, and how are Christians to respond?

Before I respond to this question, let me first offer some background information: The City of Charlottesville VA proposed to remove a statue of Confederate General Robert E Lee. A group of white nationalists and supremacists organized a rally to protest removal of the statue, obtaining the necessary permit to demonstrate. However, when they arrived, they appeared with shields, bats, guns, and pepper spray. It doesn't seem that they were aiming for a peaceful protest.

Another group, without a permit, gathered to protest the rally, with signs and pepper spray of their own. Chanting slogans quickly turned to name-calling, bottle throwing, shoving and trading punches.

When police shut down the permitted rally, the rallygoers disbursed, but counter-protesters followed them and more violence ensued. One rallygoer drove his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one and injuring nineteen others.

It was a long and violent day, sparking other protests across the nation, and generating a great deal of emotion and controversy in the news and social media.

I want to approach this with several subsidiary questions, which can help guide our thoughts...

Is freedom of speech a Biblical command or rule? We recognize freedom of speech as a basic human right, but not *indiscriminate* speech. Some speech doesn't fit within the godly behavior the Bible describes.

Where does "freedom of speech" come from? Primarily from the First Amendment of the US Constitution (an important document, but not on the level of inspired Scripture). But it is extremely doubtful that the founders of our nation intended "freedom" to include wickedness or anarchy or perverse injuries.

Does freedom of speech apply to groups who slander others? Should it? Those who seek to obey God's Word will not permit themselves indiscriminate freedom of speech, because the Bible does not permit indiscriminate freedom of speech. The Third Commandment (Ex 20:7) forbids cursing and abusing God's name; the Ninth Commandment (Ex 20:16) forbids lies and other deceptive speech; Colossians 3:8 pro-

hibits coarse joking and filthy speech; 2 Timothy 2:23 says not to get involved in pointless disputes; Titus 3:2 instructs us to speak evil of no one; 2 Peter 2:10 specially warns us against speaking evil of dignitaries.

Beware of inflammatory posts and tweets—don't make them and don't get drawn in by them. Beware of conversational racism—when someone makes a slur against others in conversation, and politeness overlooks it but silently condones it. Beware of political put-downs—just because you're referring to figureheads instead of people you know, doesn't make it right or uplifting.

In her last Facebook post, Heather Heyer, the woman who was struck and killed by a car driven into a group of counter-protesters in Charlottesville, wrote this: "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention." Her statement is true, but far too many people camp right there—in outrage. However, human outrage does not accomplish what pleases God (James 1:20). It usually just exacerbates conflict, which then becomes an end in itself, and real righteousness is lost in the mix.

Overcoming evil with good (Romans 12:21), as the Apostle Paul prescribed, is what we need. Pay attention, get outraged, and then figure out a way to love your enemy.

Is white supremacy a Biblical value? Many white supremacists base their claim on Biblical ground (the Ku Klux Klan was founded as a Christian organization). Are they right?

No. But why not? Because the assumptions that lie behind supremacy assume some innate difference (superiority/inferiority) in the creation or formation of the "races."

The Answers in Genesis website offers this: "Some people think there must be different races of people because there appear to be major differences between various groups, such as skin color and eye shape.

"The truth, though, is that these so-called 'racial characteristics' are only minor variations among people groups. If one were to take any two people anywhere in the world, scientists have found that the basic genetic differences between these two people would typically be around 0.2 percent (2 in 1,000)—even if they came from the same people group. But these so-called "racial" characteristics that people think are major differences (skin color, eye shape, etc.) 'account for only 0.012 percent (1 in 10,000) of human biological variation.'"

Supremacy of any people group is unsupported in the Bible. (The Hebrew people were chosen by God for His purpose to reveal Himself in human form, but not because they were better than other groups. See Deuteronomy 7:7-8.)

I appreciate the recent comment of Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary: “A claim of white superiority is not merely wrong, and not merely deadly. It is a denial of the glory of God in creating humanity—every single human being—in His own image. It is a rejection of God’s glory in creating a humanity of different skin pigmentation. It is a misconstrual of God’s judgment and glory in creating different ethnicities. Most urgently, it is a rejection of the gospel of Christ—the great good news of God’s saving purpose in the atonement accomplished by Christ. A claim of racial superiority denies our common humanity, our common sinfulness, our common salvation through faith in Christ, and God’s purpose to create a common new humanity in Christ.”

In fact, Biblically, any issue of separation among humans is based not on external appearance (such as skin color or people group), but on internal character (morals, as they relate to the True God).

There is only one race: the human race. This has been confirmed by the research of the Genome Project. There are many people groups among us, but the differences, scientifically or genetically, are slight to insignificant.

Why is it important to remember our history—the good, bad, and the ugly? History provides the roots for culture, describing the people and events that contributed to who we have become. To rewrite or revise our history by ignoring or erasing that information negates the lessons we have been taught. Memorials, even to negative events, like bodily scars, convey a lasting message of caution that reaches and teaches succeeding generations.

In remembering the characters of the bloodiest war fought on American soil, we need not celebrate their ideals as we recall the lessons of their time. If we tear down the markers of our past because someone is offended by their own perception of a recognized individual, we will, in time, tear them all down, and be left with a bland history, bereft of personages, causes, and realistic perspective.

There are important lessons to be learned from our historic mistakes.

1 Corinthians 10:1-11

I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground. ² In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses. ³ All of them ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all of them drank the same spiritual water. For they drank from the spiritual rock that traveled with them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵ Yet God was not pleased with most of them, and their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

⁶ These things happened as a warning to us, so that we would not crave evil things as they did, ⁷ or worship idols as some of them did. As the Scriptures say, “The people

celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in pagan revelry.”⁸ And we must not engage in sexual immorality as some of them did, causing 23,000 of them to die in one day.

⁹ Nor should we put Christ to the test, as some of them did and then died from snake-bites. ¹⁰ And don't grumble as some of them did, and then were destroyed by the angel of death. ¹¹ These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age.

What should we do? Should we march? Should we write letters? Should we arm ourselves? Should we close our hearts?

Matthew 13:24-30

²⁴ Here is another story Jesus told: “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. ²⁵ But that night as the workers slept, his enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat, then slipped away. ²⁶ When the crop began to grow and produce grain, the weeds also grew.

²⁷ “The farmer’s workers went to him and said, ‘Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds! Where did they come from?’

²⁸ “ ‘An enemy has done this!’ the farmer exclaimed.

“ ‘Should we pull out the weeds?’ they asked.

²⁹ “ ‘No,’ he replied, ‘you’ll uproot the wheat if you do. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters to sort out the weeds, tie them into bundles, and burn them, and to put the wheat in the barn.’ ”

We are not to destroy the weeds from the bad seed (that’s God’s responsibility), but we are to continue to sow good seed and tend it until there is a harvest.

In other words, don’t just challenge (attack) misinformation and errors, without also thoughtfully (and prayerfully) sowing the truth of God’s Word.

When we speak or act from a right heart (a heart that seeks to honor and imitate Christ’s heart), then we should do whatever is in our heart to do, whatever comes to our hand to do. But above all other things you can think to do to have an impact, do this: PRAY.

Godless people, worldly people, may perceive praying as a “cop out” or as useless, but we who know our God, know that He has committed Himself to “bend down and listen” when His people pray to Him. The Living God gives ear to your voice!

When you talk to men, you will get what men can do. When you talk to God, you will get what God can do. And He is “able to do far beyond anything we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20).

It is often true that we can do *more* than pray, but we cannot do more *until* we have prayed. To speak or to act, apart from God's help and guidance, is foolish, and often only adds fuel to the fire.

I close with a quote from my friend, Dr. Charlie Self, called "If I Love My Neighbor":

If I love my neighbor, I desire the best for them and offer my daily life in service of others.

If I love my neighbor, I look for wise opportunities to share the Good News of Jesus Christ and invite them to believe and repent.

If I love my neighbor, I work for justice so all have access and opportunity to flourish, fearlessly evaluating both individual iniquity (beginning with me) and institutional injustice (including my failures to see structures that need change).

If I love my neighbor, I can debate differences of moral, political and religious belief with civility, without either compromise or intolerance.

If I love my neighbor, I support efforts to safeguard our liberties from extremists—whether pagan-secular ideologues or militant Islamists—while praying for those that think me an enemy.

If I love my neighbor, I foster hospitality to people of all cultures, while upholding the rule of law.

If I love my neighbor, I have room in my heart for new friends, including those that cannot return the favor.

If I love my neighbor, it is because the Holy Trinity first loved me: A Father who gives, a Son that joyfully surrenders as my sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit indwelling this broken and beautiful jar of clay.

The grace of justification means I now serve out of the overflow of thankfulness and not in attempts to gain merit.

Lord, help me love my neighbor.