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Donald Trump would enrage Christianity's earliest followers

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Donald Trump has recently taken flak for a botched reference to “Two Corinthians” at Liberty University, where he pledged to “protect Christianity,” but he might consider reading the book of Acts, where he’ll find characters who display Trump-style attitudes and tactics. I’m referring not to the apostles, mind you, but to their persecutors.

(Note to Trump: Acts is the New Testament, right after the four Gospels. It’s about the dramatic advance of Christianity against many obstacles; it’s a book for winners! And with 28 chapters, it’s much bigger than Second Corinthians. It’s huuuge!)

While feigning Christian devotion, Trump has become a religious demagogue of truly biblical proportions.

Such is the power of The Donald these days that during my pastor’s recent sermon on Paul and Silas in Philippi in Acts 16, all I could think about was how well the passage offers a first century version of Trump’s brand of petty scapegoating and ugly nationalism — even packaged with the same cowardly use of plausible deniability.

As my pastor preached through the text, I flipped to a largely blank page in the church bulletin and began scribbling this article. Fortunately it looked like I was just taking notes on the sermon, so no one in the congregation noticed that my mind had wandered from Roman Philippi to the Republican primary.

I was struck by how the story of the Philippian mob, merchants and magistrates is a picture of what is happening among a significant sector of the American electorate.

In Acts 16: 16-40, we find Paul and Silas preaching the gospel in the Roman colony of Philippi, in modern-day Greece. The evangelists cast a demon out of a fortune-telling slave girl. Her owners are furious because they’ve lost a valuable source of income.

The slave-owning merchants then drag Paul and Silas into the marketplace. Notice their devilishly clever way of whipping up public sentiment against these two ethno-religious minority preachers:

“These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice” (v. 20b-21).

The merchants didn't need to spew anti-Semitic hatred or detail their grievances against Christianity. It was enough to simply note that Paul and Silas were Jews and their message was un-Roman. Religious intolerance is almost never about religion alone. There's usually a social, political and/or economic threat that a religious group is perceived to represent.

Like Trump, the merchants subtly tapped into popular threat perception, prejudice and xenophobia, all while maintaining plausible deniability.

If someone in the Philippian marketplace that day had had the courage to call out the merchants for their anti-Semitism, I imagine the merchants saying, in a Trump-esque manner, “We have many, many friends who are Jews and they are fantastic. We have a great relationship with the Jews. But we think Philippi needs to temporarily ban these Jews from entering the city until we can figure out what is going on.”

Whether it's Muslims or Mexicans or women, Donald Trump has had something discernibly — but deniably — nasty to say about nearly everyone who is not a white male Christian like him. As the Cato Institute's David Boaz observes, “Not since George Wallace has there been a presidential candidate who made racial and religious scapegoating so central to his campaign.”

Trump is not, as Liberty's Jerry Falwell Jr. claimed, “a breath of fresh air.” He's a noxious fume polluting American pluralism with divisive rhetoric.

Consider Trump's crafty contrast of his (self-professed) Presbyterianism with Ben Carson's Seventh-day Adventism. At a rally in Florida last October, Trump said: “I'm Presbyterian. Boy, that's down the middle of the road, folks, in all fairness. I mean, Seventh-day Adventist, I don't know about. I just don't know about.”

Trump's thinly-veiled bigotry was obvious. He was not suggesting he needed to read the Wikipedia page about Seventh-day Adventism. His point was that Presbyterians are good, mainstream Americans, and his GOP rival's Seventh-day Adventists are not.

But when Trump was asked whether he would apologize for the remarks, he said “I would certainly give an apology if I said something bad about it. But I didn't. All I said was I don't know about it.” Right. Just like the Philippian merchants were simply noting Paul and Silas's ethno-religious identity as a matter of general interest.

Trump has been more forceful in portraying Mexican immigrants as a threat to America. He launched his campaign with this now famous accusation: “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” At an August news conference, Trump told leading Hispanic journalist Jorge Ramos to “Go back to Univision.” He was not asking the eight-time Emmy Award-winning news anchor to return to his production studio. He was implicitly but obviously riffing on the disgraceful slur “Go back to Mexico.”

Trump has reserved his worst scapegoating for Muslims, repeatedly demonstrating an alarming willingness to leverage and exacerbate the swell of Islamophobia in America. Predictably, Trump has suggested, in the most Trump-y way, that Obama is a Muslim. He insinuated that the president declines to use the phrase radical Islamic terrorism because “there’s something going on with him that we don’t know about.”

He’s called for a complete (oh, but temporary) ban on Muslim travel to the U.S. and for the closing down of certain mosques. He flirted with the idea of a national database of all Muslims in America and referred to Syrian refugees as a “Trojan Horse” for ISIS.

The demagoguery of people like Donald Trump and the Philippian merchants can have serious social consequences. In Acts 16: 22-24, we’re told that the merchants’ subtle but effective dog whistling about these un-Roman Jews whipped the crowd into a violent frenzy. Caving to public sentiment, the magistrates had Paul and Silas stripped, beaten and thrown into prison.

The appalling treatment of Muslim, black and Hispanic protesters at Trump rallies — and surging interest in white nationalist groups — is perhaps a foretaste of the dystopian future under a Trump presidency.

The question for American voters in 2016 is this: Do we really want to make the merchant our magistrate?

Fortunately for Paul and Silas and for the fledgling Christian movement, the story in Acts 16 does not end with intolerance and injustice. While Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns in the dead of night, an earthquake shakes the prison, flinging open the doors and unshackling the prisoners. But the preachers make no effort to escape. So impressed by what he sees, the Philippian jailer puts his faith in Jesus and the city’s magistrates later come to apologize to Paul and Silas and let them go.

Demagoguery doesn’t need to win the day. At the risk of turning Acts 16 into an American allegory, my hope is that Trump will have a similar change of heart, embracing not just a politically advantageous “middle of the road” denominational affiliation but also the foundational biblical teaching on the dignity and equality of all people.

And I hope Trump’s support base, which includes a lamentably large number of my fellow evangelicals, will have the wisdom to see that scapegoating minorities won’t “make America

great again.” America is great. Our heritage of greatness is grounded in the founding principle, inspired in large measure by the Judeo-Christian tradition, that “all men are created equal.”

A change of heart is possible. After all, Saint Paul himself was once a religious demagogue who persecuted and incited hatred against a strange new sect that believed in a crucified savior. But his encounter with the risen Christ transformed the persecutor into the apostle who would write “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).