

DOING JUSTICE, LOVING MERCY



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(Left) Police line tape in front of the White House. (Top Middle) A mural honoring George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN. (Top Right) Make America Great Again hats are sold at a sales booth in Washington D.C. (Bottom right) A protest is held outside the White House in Washington D.C. on June 6, 2020.

CHRISTENDOM, THE POLICE STATE, *and the "Upside Down" Bible*

BY OLIVE J. HEMMINGS

The theatrics on Monday, June 1, 2020 that played out in the vicinity of the White House—the president of the United States holding the Bible against the backdrop of federal law enforcement agents advancing through a crowd of peaceful protesters with flash grenades and tear gas—exposes the distortion of the Christian faith: the misuse of the Bible by a powerful sector of Christendom. The drama finds bold relief in the inaccurate press report that he held the Bible “upside down.” The new evidence that the president did not hold the Bible upside down does not take away from the fact that in essence the Bible was in an “upside down” position in the hand of the United States president. The entire scene is a stark picture of the dismantlement of the central prophetic element of the Bible that advocates against any kind of injustice. So the inaccurate report of the press is ironic—an act of providence. This is how the Bible has been for centuries in the hands of the principalities and powers of Christendom: “upside down” in the interest of power, control, and self-preservation. The leader of the most powerful nation in the world, standing in front of the St. John’s Episcopal Church, uses the Bible in a photo op as a symbol of domination. He brings out the military and law enforcers to teargas a peaceful demonstration against systemic injustice, and to clear the path so that he can walk with an all-White-male retinue of stooges, Bible in hand, towards the front of this historic church, now empty and boarded up (a church that stands strongly against injustice). He heads this delegation of the White, male, police state, to signal the assault on justice, and exposes the ugly underbelly of a cultural system that allows some to keep their knees upon the necks of others so that the principalities and powers can thrive—using the Bible as prop. (Yes, a woman is there in the all-White male line-up, but so uniformed like

the males, few seem to notice).

Monday, May 25, 2020, the body of George Floyd is vandalized not over the alleged counterfeit \$20 bill that he allegedly attempts to pass. It is vandalized in the interest of power and control. He has no weapon, he is handcuffed, he is lying on the ground, but that is not enough. Make sure. Oppress down some more—knee on neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds while the man cries for his Mama and pleads. “I can’t breathe.” “Don’t kill me.” He lays still, and still the knee presses down upon his neck. America and the world witness this. Thousands of all stripes come out in protest—and the police state attempts to repress them. The president threatens to deploy the military on American citizens and calls on state law enforcement to overwhelm and “dominate” the streets.

This is not merely the story of an alleged criminal and a law enforcement officer. This is the story of a culture sustained by the “knee on the neck policy,” with the Bible as prop. Please, let not “separation of church and state” jargon deceive anyone. The police state is

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the Fundamentalist Christian state¹—the “Law and Order” state. It uses the Bible to keep people in subjection—to hold on to slavery, to entrench the idea that the White race is superior to races of color, and to entrench male domination and female subjugation. These ideas were openly and consciously enforced by preachers not very long ago to keep slaves and women in subjection. In fact, the idea of female subjugation and male domination is still being spewed

from the pulpit, and from committees—Bible in hand, and written in denominational policies in the Southern Baptist and Seventh-day Adventist churches, for example. One only needs to visit the Washington Museum of the Bible in Washington DC to observe the “Slave Bible”—a demonstration of the extent to which Christendom

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uses the Bible to instill obedience and subjection to the principalities and powers. This “Slave Bible” excludes 90% of the Old Testament and 50% of the New Testament in an attempt to purge the Bible of its prophetic element and discourage any kind of rebellion. The Exodus story is not there, but Ephesians 6:5 is there. Today, this editing of the Bible still occurs, through interpretation in the interest of power and control.

The Fundamentalist Movement arose in 1919, just after World War I, to address and stem the worrying inroads of modernism and liberalism. With the end-time apocalyptic fervor, Fundamentalism registered anxiety over the fight for women’s suffrage, the availability of birth control, the upending of traditional gender roles, and the African American struggle for full citizenship.² As the watchdog of Christian rights and freedom, it became progressively enmeshed in US sovereignty and Americanism. As such, it became a militarist wing of Christendom ready to go to war to protect “Christian rights and freedom,” and to own weapons to protect person and property. In fact, lynching was part of the quest to protect Christian rights and freedoms, for not all Americans were recognized as full persons. It is because of its founding purpose that Fundamentalist Christianity identifies so comfortably with the “Make America Great Again” campaign slogan of Donald Trump. Anxiety over survival—survival of the traditionally privileged, survival of traditional beliefs and practices, including those that marginalize huge segments of humanity—along with deference to the rich by government economic policy, this essentially defines the agenda of the (religious) right. It is difficult to understand the extent to which this materialistic/nationalistic and misanthropic stance can be compatible with end-time apocalyptic fervor. But it is

easier to understand how today, contrary to its moralist stance, this wing of Christendom backs a political culture of criminality, lies, and “alternative facts” towards its own ideological interests, i.e., the ideological agenda of the Christian right.

Matthew Avery Sutton writes in *The Washington Post*:

White evangelicals’ pragmatic and self-serving approach to political power has been consistent for at least a century, dating to fundamentalists’ adoration for Warren G. Harding in the 1920s—which sounded a lot like their championing of Trump today.³

In spite of, and because of, all the knowledge we now have that debunks those myths that sustain domination, it all goes underground—unconscious racism and sexism born in Sabbath School and Sunday School, but killed by knowledge and education. The ghost haunts us—coldly peering out at the world from the eyes of White police officers vandalizing the black bodies of George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor—just the most recent among millions of black bodies for 401 years now. This ghost appears as church leaders vote to disavow women called to represent God, in whose image they stand. It appears as Christian parents pull their children out of educational institutions that admit too many students of color, and alumni cease to support an alma mater that has become too black. It is only a ghost. This police officer with his knee on the neck denies that he is racist, and the Pope of Rome denies that he is sexist. It is only a ghost; it wanders the catacombs of deserted church buildings and (e)merges into civil society, haunting us. Who will exorcise it, this spirit of domination—needy and hungry for control?

The Bible has become an idol because too many in

Christendom equate it with the Word of God—even with God. The myths of human culture tell us that an idol can be an agent of death. Fundamentalist Christianity has long used the Bible towards institutional self-interests and as an agent of death. But the Word of God, as John 1:1 indicates, is not the Bible. The word of God is the *logos*⁴—the very life of God that sustains eternity, that manifests itself in Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:18) and seeks to (re)manifest in fallen humanity as we learn to love (1 John 12:4). As Jesus says to the “Bible thumpers” of his day, “you search the scriptures because you think you have eternal life in them, but they are they which testify about me” (John 5:39). To abide by the Word of God is to follow the difficult path of love, which is the path of life, rather than follow the easy wide road of “law and order” that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:12–14).⁵

No one, no institution, no religion, no society can lock the Word of God up in a book. How can one lock eternity up in a book, and fixate it in the annals of human culture, and subject it to arbitrary interpretations for institutional self-interests? The very Book screams to us to open it up so that it speaks life, not death. Let it breathe. Apostle Paul says that what we can know about God is visible in the creation; and Paul knew so much less about the creation than we now have the privilege to know. He was willing to admit that his knowledge was limited (1 Corinthians 13:12). How much did Paul know about human biology for example? Paul also declares that there are those without scripture who know the Word of God, because the Word of God is written on the conscience, not in a book (Roman 2:14)—“love your neighbor as yourself . . . love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:8–10). Prophet Jeremiah prophesies: “I will put my law within them, I will write it on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). But religion/culture has dumbed down the human consciousness. That is why the knee of a culture remains upon the neck of those it marginalizes with the “upside down” Bible as prop. And in spite of, and because of, all that we know today, in science, technology, the arts, and the humanities, ignorance goes underground, entrenched in the consciousness; nothing has changed, knowledge is utilized to further the causes of injustice.

To abide by the word of God is to attend to all the knowledge and understanding that humanity now has, and biblical authors did not have. To abide by the word of God is to hear the story of creation as a story of the Oneness of God in humanity, the divine nature of humanity, the loss of that

divinity, and the message of Jesus that we can yet nurture and restore that image. Fundamentalist Christianity has lost that story of God and/in humanity. It has lost it in the attempt to hold on to its idol, the “upside down” Bible, which is really self—self-preservation. And today we have a police state, a Fundamentalist Christian state, largely unconscious of the true value of humanity, created in the divine image—male and female—them (not him) having dominion (stewardship) over creation.

The current president of the United States is not known for good morals. Neither does anyone know him to be a person of religious fervor. As Mike Mullen, seventeenth chairman of the joint chiefs of staff says, he has no need of religion, neither does he care about the devout, except as they serve his political needs.⁶ The Bible has little, if any, existential meaning to him. All of Christendom knows that. Yet, he holds it against the backdrop of law enforcement while they repress those who seek justice. This act is a coded statement to the real enforcers of the police state—Fundamentalist Christianity. You support me, and I support you, and I can stack the courts with those who support your agenda—transactional morality. They turn the Bible “upside down,” and justice lies bleeding in the street with the knee of this influential sector of Christendom squarely on the neck of Jesus of Nazareth as it grabs power and control through the police state.

Historic Adventism opposed the police state, spoke out against slavery and racism, and women had significant voice—even the prophetic voice of authority in Ellen White—at a time in America when women were supposed to stay home and shut up. It was a movement steeped in the study of the Bible while resisting statements of creed. But progressively it set creeds and closed the Bible so that as scholars continue to observe the Word of God—not to destroy the denomination, but to facilitate growth and strength—the principalities and powers of Adventism joined hands with Fundamentalism to preserve what they consider to be the pillars of Adventism.⁷ That is why they gave sanctuary to Jim Crow until he was outlawed. That is why they never backed the civil rights movement. That is why they still refuse to ordain women even though over and over the scholars of the church conclude that they have no Biblical reason not to. That is why today, in spite of the many clear Seventh-day Adventist leadership voices against this pandemic of injustice, we are yet to hear a clear voice from

the principalities and powers of Adventism—aside from the old clichés about signs of the end.

Our beloved community—a police state(?)—theologians dismissed *not* for lack of biblical integrity(?)⁸—compliance documents(?)—wary of those who put Christ before Church—Word of God before Bible traditions that sustain domination, and denominational identity(?). Observe the Sabbath School lessons of the past two weeks—May 16–29. What a lost opportunity to tell the story of creation. What a missed chance to prophesy—God is One; humanity is one. We have made a mess of it through systemic injustice—a culture of domination and alienation: “He shall rule over you.”⁹ What a profound story of Grace and hope—human nakedness covered by divine grace. Yes, that occasion to speak life out of the creation story has been eclipsed by the project of ecclesiastical self-preservation.

What if *all* of Christendom focuses on the living, breathing Word of God, and especially on the actual story of creation? What if it becomes less obsessed with proving the Bible is a science book, or using it to sustain dogmas of self-identity. What if it delights in the Word of God—the *logos* waiting to manifest in us and among us? Would the knees of a culture persist upon the necks of people of color; or the foreigner; or the non-Christian? Would the ecclesiastical powers still press women down? Would a United States president today have the temerity to use the Bible as a prop in a police state? Is the Bible turned upside down in the interest of self-preservation, power, and control?

What is God telling us here in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which we now see to be not the real pandemic, but a culture of domination entrenched by religious dogma and enforced by the police state?

Are we ready to listen?

Are we hoping for Jesus to return to clean up our mess, or are we willing to clean it up ourselves?

Open the Bible—*up-side up*. Let the Word of God to which it points *b-r-e-a-t-h-e* life into a culture sinking in chaos, and unto a citizenry hoping in despair and despairing in hope.

Endnotes

1. Fundamentalist Christianity arose in 1919 to address and stem the worrying inroads of modernism and liberalism. It registered anxiety that the old structures that made America were passing away. With the end-time apocalyptic fervor, Fundamentalism registered anxiety over the fight for women’s suffrage, the availability of birth control, the upending of traditional gender roles, and the African American struggle for full citizenship. It is because of its founding purpose that it identifies so

comfortably with the “Make America Great Again” campaign slogan of Donald Trump. Today it backs a political culture of lies and “alternative facts” towards its own ideological interests, having become the watchdog against “anything that seems to threaten Christians’ rights and freedoms” (i.e., the ideological agenda of the Christian right). See Matthew Sutton, below.

2. Matthew Avery Sutton, “The Day Christian Fundamentalism Was Born,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 2019. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/25/opinion/the-day-christian-fundamentalism-was-born.html>.

3. Matthew Avery Sutton, “Explaining the Bond Between Trump and White Evangelicals,” *The Washington Post*, November 21, 2019. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/25/opinion/the-day-christian-fundamentalism-was-born.html>.

4. *Logos* in Greek is not equivalent to the English term “word.” Rather, it points to the principle of life itself, through which everything comes into being.

5. Jesus says in Matthew 7:12: “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you for this is the law and the prophets” (i.e., this is what scripture is about). Many devout Christians will quote this text, but “others” for them may be a fellow member of a group alliance—the fellow White male, or the fellow male (as in “all men are created equal,” so that the racial struggle in America often appears to be a struggle among men, with women as props).

6. Mike Mullen, “I Cannot Remain Silent,” *The Atlantic*, June 2, 2020. Accessed June 5, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/american-cities-are-not-battlespaces/612553/>.

7. For a full discussion on this, see Olive J. Hemmings, *Sacred Texts and Social Conflict: The Bible and The Debate Over Women’s Ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 2013).

8. When Desmond Ford was dismissed because he called the denomination to review the doctrine of the sanctuary and the investigative judgement, no one accused him of lack of biblical integrity. Rather, he was accused of denominational disloyalty. See Raymond F. Cottrell, “The Sanctuary Review Committee and its Consensus,” *Spectrum* 11, no. 2 (November 1980): 18. For more insight into the discussion of church authority versus biblical authority, see Roy Naden, “The Authority Paradox,” *Ministry*, April 2000: 16–20; Douglas Clark, “Are Adventists Still People of the Book?” *Spectrum* 25, no. 1 (September 1995): 25–29; Raoul Dederen, “The Church: Authority and Unity,” Supplement to *Ministry*, May 1995; and C. E. Bradford, “The Authority of the Church,” *Adventist Review*, February 19, 1981: 4–6.

9. The so-called “curse” of Genesis 3 is not God’s prescription for human error; rather, it is God’s description of the result of it. Rosemary Radford Reuther argues that a patriarchal culture of domination lies at the root of all systems of domination and oppression. Christendom has been the perpetuator of this doctrine of domination that drives the police state and remains entrenched in the culture. See Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God Talk* (New York: Beacon Press, 1992).



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