



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on April 18, 2018

Evangelical Leaders Critical of Trump Strategize at “Invitation Only” Meeting

A group of 50 or so evangelical Christian leaders gathered April 16-17 at Wheaton College in Illinois for an “invitation only” meeting to strategize about the future of the evangelical movement during the Trump administration. As reported by the [Washington Post](#), the prominent pastors and denominational leaders attending the closed confab were expected to discuss “the future and the ‘soul’ of evangelicalism at a time when many of them are concerned their faith group has become tainted by its association with divisive politics under President Trump.”

The meeting, which was discussed last month at evangelist Billy Graham’s funeral, came ahead of a scheduled June meeting at Trump International Hotel composed of prominent Christian leaders who support and advise the president on faith matters. Interestingly, Franklin Graham, son of the late evangelist and a vocal supporter of the president, was not invited to the Wheaton meeting.

One of the meeting’s attendees, Doug Birdsall of Lausanne, a high-profile evangelical movement, told the *Post* that there is concern among the leaders at the Wheaton meeting that the Trump presidency has cast too heavy a shadow over Evangelical faith in America. “When you Google evangelicals, you get Trump,” Birdsall said. “When people say what does it mean to be an evangelical, people don’t say evangelism or the gospel. There’s a grotesque caricature of what it means to be an evangelical.”

One attendee, the Reverend A.R. Bernard, a black pastor who leads a 40,000-member racially diverse congregation in New York City, told the *Post* that he fears the white evangelical base that helped to elect Trump are putting the reputation of American evangelical Christianity in jeopardy. Bernard, who resigned from an evangelical advisory group in 2017 after Trump blamed “both sides” for the violence that erupted during a march in Charlottesville, Virginia, charged that White evangelicals “continue to squander their moral authority in an attempt to sanitize the president.” While avoiding specifics, Bernard claimed that the Trump presidency “has exposed the spiritual, moral, and racial condition of this nation. The racial divides go deep in this country, and they’ve invaded the church.”

While prominent Trump-supporting leaders such as Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell, Jr. were conspicuously not invited, those organizing the closed meeting insisted that it was not intended to be critical of the Trump administration or leaders who support and advise him. Darrell Bock, executive director of cultural engagement at Dallas Theological Seminary and one of the meeting’s organizers, told the [Christian Post](#) that the meeting was about “discovering with one another where we are and where we see things and how that relates to the ministries that we participate in.” He added that the core topic “was thinking through the consistency of our Christian walk. This is an issue of consistency. If you care about abortion, do you care about life on the other end? If you care about families, do you



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care about the way in which families get broken up in certain policy situations that we talk about? Flip it around. If you care about a stable society, do you care about the rule of law?"

Nonetheless, participant Katelyn Beaty, editor-at-large of *Christianity Today*, confirmed to [Sojourners](#) magazine, that "yes, the reason we are getting together is the 2016 election and the role that white evangelicals played in electing Trump."

Conservative Christian publication [OneNewsNow.com](#) challenged the notion among attendees that the closed meeting represented a quorum of valid evangelical thought, since it intentionally excluded prominent leaders who are also vocally supportive of President Trump. The Christian news site quoted Dr. Richard Land, a well-respected Southern Baptist pastor and denominational leader, as charging that a close inspection of who was — and was not — invited betrayed the truth that one of the main purposes of the meeting was to offer a high-profile marginalization of evangelicals who support the president.

"Any definition of 'thought leaders' and any definition of evangelicalism that excludes the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Franklin Graham is a pale imitation — anemic and incomplete," said Land.

As reported by [OneNewsNow.com](#), among the complaints of those organizing the closed meeting "is that supporting Trump excuses his past indiscretions and taints the evangelical movement." But the Reverend Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas and one of the president's evangelical advisors, said that while Trump's past public moral failings are wrong, he nonetheless embraces Christian values here and now — something the alternate 2016 presidential candidate decidedly did not. "He is, without doubt, the most faith-friendly president we've ever had," Jeffress said. "And I include George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan in that."

Jeffress predicted to [CBN News](#) that the closed meeting would have "very little impact on evangelicalism as a whole. Many of [those attending] are sincere, but they are having a hard time understanding that they have little impact on evangelicalism."

Image: screenshot of [Wheaton College website](#)



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