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When Kneeling is Standing

There's a difference between pledging allegiance and practicing it.

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"Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Unless you've spent the last year or so on a rock in the Aleutians without Internet or cell coverage, you probably know that many NFL players and coaches have been kneeling for the national anthem instead of standing, in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement against police brutality and racial inequality in general. The protests began last year with Colin Kaepernick (then of the San Francisco 49'ers) and have since spread throughout the NFL. In a post-game interview prior to the regular 2016 NFL season, gave his reasons for protesting. "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color," he said. "To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder." He followed through on that, not only by kneeling with his teammates during national anthems, but by donating the first \$1 million of his 2016-2017 salary to organizations working to address racial and social inequality, and starting [his own foundation](#) and a [youth camp](#) to raise awareness about higher education, self-empowerment, and proper interaction with law enforcement in different scenarios (Wikipedia, 2017).

Naturally, CWA (Conservative White America) steered carefully around all of this, and angrily branded the protests "disrespectful" to the flag and America's armed forces. Our fearless dictator—who ain't exactly known for his compassion and tolerance of 'dem colored folk—referred to the protests as "a total disrespect of our heritage" (i.e. – *his* heritage) and threw yet another of the adolescent, reality-show tantrums that have always defined him... "Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he's fired. He's fired!" (Griffiths & Jackson, 2017; Stelter, 2017). Kaepernick received numerous death threats. Fans boycotted games and went viral on social media with tweets, videos of people burning their NFL jerseys, and memes like the one below.



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Now I'm not much of a sports fan myself, but as a white Christian man (who unlike his fearless dictator, actually *does* care about black lives and racial injustice) I've watched all this unfold with feelings ranging from disappointment to disgust. I couldn't agree more with this meme in principle, and I understand the anger behind it. But it seems to me that it's thoroughly (not to mention conveniently) misplaced. This woman's loved one didn't die for the flag or the pledge of allegiance. He died for what they *stand for*... one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Note carefully that little word ALL folks... It *matters*. Last Fall the American people, through a combination of malice and/or neglect, gave the White House to a fascist, sociopath bully whose words, behaviors, and policies have been a lightning rod for flagrant misogyny, racial and religious hate, and fear-driven persecution... then sat back and watched as an army of neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and countless other hatemongers emboldened by his attitudes and example swept the nation with an unprecedented epidemic of hate crimes against Muslims, people of color, and women (SPLC, 2016; 2016b)... and continued to support him when he defended them as "very fine people" defiantly insisting that there's "wrong on both sides".

When we the people & our elected Congress choose to be complicit in such things, we are no longer a nation under God, nor the Republic for which our flag and national anthem stand--a nation where people of color don't have to live in fear of cross burnings, knowing that their children are three to four times more likely to be gunned down unarmed than their white counterparts (Ross, 2015; Lowery, 2016)... where peaceful Muslim families don't have to live in fear of being assaulted, their mosques burned down, or being deported to war zones for their beliefs without due process... where women can go out in public without fear of being assaulted on college campuses by men claiming that it was now "legal to grab them by the p***y", or accosted in crosswalks by men shouting "Trump...! Trump...! Trump...!" (SPLC, 2016; 2016b).

In other words, *we've become the very nation this man gave his life to SAVE us from becoming.*

Maybe I'm missing something here, but it seems to me that if NFL players and others choose to kneel during our national anthem, it isn't because they disrespect the fallen soldier in this meme. Perhaps it's because they see little resemblance between the nation under God this soldier laid his life down for, and the one just described—the one their offended audiences saw fit to choose last fall and have remained complicit with ever since. Perhaps they're choosing to PRACTICE their allegiance to the former, instead of cheapening it by standing for the latter when it serves their interests to. That's not disrespect folks. It's *having the courage of one's convictions*, and it's the only kind of patriotism that has ever mattered.

Not surprisingly, the CWA understanding of "patriotism" is as different as it is predictable. When I shared some of these thoughts on social media recently, one of my friends—a kind, godly woman whose views I otherwise have nothing but respect for—spoke for many when she responded,

"I stand and I still stand as one nation under God regardless. Enjoy your division and hate for the sociopath. [Trump] You being a Christian man should know everything is God filtered. My suggestion is that you pray for our president and stand under God's reign and trust his purposes."

I don't hate Trump—my apologies if I sound like I do. But Jesus didn't hate the Pharisees either, and last time I checked, that sure as hell didn't keep Him from calling them out for exactly what they were—an evil brood of vipers (Matt. 12:34) who tithed from their wealth while neglecting justice and the love of God (Luke 11:42). Again, note the word *justice* in that verse. It matters too. Apparently, Jesus thinks love doesn't turn a blind eye to injustice in

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others. If I'm to follow in His steps, I fail to see how doing likewise to a man like Donald Trump—who is, in fact, a sociopath, a fascist, a misogynist, & a bully—constitutes "hate".

I don't "enjoy division" either. At least, no more than the disciples did. Of the twelve, the only one who wasn't martyred for his faith was John, & he was boiled in hot oil twice for it. But what their secular and religious persecutors considered "division", the world remembers as *discipleship*. There's a reason why no churches today are named after the Sanhedrin or Pontius Pilate but plenty are named after the disciples, and I'm here to tell you... it has nothing whatsoever to do with "hate" or "[enjoying] division".

That said, my friend is right. As a Christian man, I should know that everything is "God filtered", and I do. But after 40+ years of being one, I also know that those filters begin with His Church. For the life of me, I just can't find anything in the Bible that says, or even implies, that "God filtered" doesn't begin with *me* choosing to take up a cross and follow Him, and in so doing, be salt and light to my nation and world (Matt. 5:13-16). Today I stand redeemed because He was crucified by religious and secular authorities who thought He "[enjoyed] division" as well. If anyone can explain to me how I could authentically follow Him without embracing His kind of "division", I'm all ears.

As for "[praying] for our president", my friend is right again... I should be. But there are many kinds of prayer, and they aren't all equally authentic. During WWII for instance, the German Church & Dietrich Bonhoeffer both prayed for their nation and its leader. But unlike the Church's, Bonhoeffer's prayers were vocal, public, and no more afraid of "division" than Jesus' were. As he once said,

"We must finally stop appealing to theology to justify our reserved silence about what the state is doing — for that is nothing but fear. 'Open your mouth for the one who is voiceless' — for who in the church today still remembers that that is the least of the Bible's demands in times such as these?"

On Apr. 8, 1945 the Fuhrer he was praying for responded to his "enjoyment" of "division" by having him publicly stripped naked and hung slowly from a slaughterhouse meat hook with piano wire. His death is thought to have taken at least half an hour. His last prayer for said Fuhrer was made *kneeling* at the foot of the gallows before climbing the steps to his execution (Bonhoefferblog, 2009).

It's funny, don't you think, how often things turn out badly for those who have the audacity to think that "[standing] under God's reign" doesn't include blind nationalism and remaining silent in the face of liberty and justice only for *some*?

The difference between the German Church's prayer and Bonhoeffer's speaks for itself. Through theirs, the Church trusted God's purposes silently from a safe distance, whereas through his, Bonhoeffer became the *vehicle* of those purposes. It's little wonder that history remembers him differently as well. Once again, that has nothing whatsoever to do with "[enjoying] division and hate".

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Don't get me wrong. I don't mean to suggest that we shouldn't "stand as one nation under God regardless". Again, my apologies if I sounded like I was! I intend to keep standing for the flag and national anthem as well, and for the same reasons. But now more than ever we need to remember that there's a *helluva* lot more to them than a red, white, and blue piece of cloth and some inspiring words. In times like these, if we're to stand for them as *one nation under God* we damn well better be clear about what such a nation looks like in *His* eyes—not ours, the Republican or Democratic parties', our government's, or anyone else's—and see to it that the example we set for the world with our words, behaviors, and votes doesn't cheapen it. By my lights, at a bare minimum that means;

- Remembering that in such a nation liberty and justice belong to EVERYONE, not just white Christian men like me.
- Not taking offense from a safe distance when people of color choose to kneel peacefully before their nation's anthem, not out of "disrespect" for its armed forces, but because that nation has become one where neither they, nor their unarmed law-abiding families have any right whatsoever to expect liberty or justice when they're at barrel's end of its armed law enforcement officers.
- Not standing in solidarity with a leader who thinks torch and club-wielding neo-Nazis are "some very fine people" and said people of color on their knees are "sons of bitches"—any more than Bonhoeffer was willing to stand with the "very fine people" who hung him from a meat hook with piano wire.
- Having as much respect and concern for the First Amendment rights of people of color to kneel in peaceful protest, as I do for those of the torch and club-wielding neo-Nazis who want they and their families lynched.

I can't speak for anyone else, but as far as I'm concerned anything less would disgrace a nation under God, its flag and national anthem... and the fallen soldier in the meme above.

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