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BARACK OBAMA CHANNELS AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO -- AND GETS SCOURGED FOR HIS EFFORTS

This past Thursday, President Obama addressed the National Prayer Breakfast, an annual event held in Washington, D.C., on the first Thursday of February. The first such breakfast was held in 1953, two weeks after the inauguration of Dwight Eisenhower. A typical breakfast -- which for the past 35 years has been held in



the Washington Hilton's International Ballroom -- is attended by more than 3,500 guests, including international invitees from more than 100 countries and dozens of different religious traditions. The breakfast, which is hosted by members of Congress, is organized on their behalf by the [Faith Foundation](#), described as a "Christ-centered organization."

Read in its entirety, [the president's address](#) was filled with words of faith and humanity, of hope and humility:

- *Our job is not to ask that God respond to our notion of truth -- our job is to be true to Him, His word, and His commandments. And we should assume humbly*

- that we're confused and don't always know what we're doing and we're staggering and stumbling towards Him, and have some humility in that process.*
- *As children of God, let's stand up for the dignity and value of every woman, and man, and child, because we are all equal in His eyes, and work to send the scourge and the sin of modern-day slavery and human trafficking, and "set the oppressed free."*
 - *If we are properly humble, if we drop to our knees on occasion, we will acknowledge that we never fully know God's purpose. We can never fully fathom His amazing grace. "We see through a glass, darkly" -- grappling with the expanse of His awesome love. But even with our limits, we can heed that which is required: To do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.*

"Humanity has been grappling with these questions throughout human history," he told the group at one point, speaking of the tension between the compassionate and murderous acts which religions can inspire. Then he continued with the 51 words (out of precisely 2,878) with which his critics have chosen to scourge him:

"And lest we get on our high horse and think this is unique to some other place, remember that during the Crusades and the Inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ. In our home country, slavery and Jim Crow all too often was justified in the name of Christ."

Condemnation and characterization of these 51 words -- as if they were the sum and substance of his remarks -- were swift and unforgiving:

- **Former Virginia Governor Jim Gilmore:** *"The president's comments this morning at the prayer breakfast are the most offensive I've ever heard a president make in my lifetime . . . He has offended every believing Christian in the United States."*
- **Bill Donohue, the president of the Catholic League,** said that Mr. Obama was trying to *"deflect guilt from Muslim madmen"* and said the president's comparisons were *"insulting"* and *"pernicious."*
- **Dr. Ben Carson,** a former pediatric neurosurgeon and potential candidate for the Republican presidential nomination told Fox *"... it makes me feel that perhaps we're being betrayed. Perhaps we don't have a leader who feels the same about things as most of us do."*
- **Rush Limbaugh** devoted a segment of his show to what he said were the president's insults to the *"whole gamut of Christians."*

In reading the president's address in its entirety, I was struck by its tone of humility and searching. Indeed, it seemed as if he were channeling a key theological principle of Augustine of Hippo, one of the seminal figures in both early Christianity and Western philosophy. For St. Augustine taught in his two most famous works -- *Confessions* and *City of God* -- that we are all sinners; that our ability to both recognize and admit our past sins and/or sinfulness is the basis for our future redemption. In referring to the Crusades, the Inquisition, and American slavery -- all of which were atrocious and sinful; all of which found justification in the eyes of many through a gross perversion of Christian doctrine -- President Obama was attempting to show that there have long been those who will use their religion to rationalize acts of inhumanity. Augustine would say that recognizing such brutality carried out in the name of God, is a first step toward redemption -- both of the individual and eventually of the world.



That the president dared speak about Christianity's dark side -- the Crusades, the Inquisition, American slavery and Jim Crow -- caused his enemies to haul out the verbal birch rods and whips and give him a solid rhetorical thrashing. They accused him of being soft on ISIS; of refusing to speak the words "radical Islam" or "Islamic terrorists" for fear that he might offend his "coreligionists." The president has long viewed Islamic terrorists as fanatics who exploit their religion . . . turning its theology inside out and standing it on its head. Those who wish to scourge him believe there is something in Islam that creates fanatics who are more than willing to carry out the most unimaginably horrific acts of violence -- in the name of that religion.

People can -- and obviously do -- disagree with the president using the Crusades, the Inquisition, slavery and Jim Crow as examples of how religion can be perverted and made to justify evil. One can question why he rarely -- if ever -- utters the words "radical Islam" or "Islamic terrorists." But for those who read his address in its entirety, one should not question his faith, his humanity or his belief in redemption. In this instance, I choose not to be overly aggrieved with those who wish to flog the president. It's just another instance of those who give voice to the words of Matthew -- *Judge not lest ye be judged* -- or John -- *Let him who without sin cast the first stone* -- doing precisely the opposite of that which they preach -- judging and casting stones.

Methinks all those brandishing rods against the president would do well to learn the words of St. Augustine:

Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility . . .

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