



Redeeming Babel

CHRISTIANS  and the VACCINE

June 30, 2021

The Honorable James E. Clyburn  
US House of Representatives  
Chairman, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis  
2157 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Steve Scalise  
US House of Representatives  
Ranking Member, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis  
2157 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Hearing on “Building Trust and Battling Barriers: The Urgent Need to Overcome Vaccine Hesitancy”, July 1, 2021

Dear Representative Clyburn and Representative Scalise:

In December 2020, Redeeming Babel, led by Curtis Chang and Kris Carter, founded “Christians and the Vaccine” ([www.ChristiansAndTheVaccine.com](http://www.ChristiansAndTheVaccine.com)), a partnership with the Ad Council, COVID Collaborative, the National Association of Evangelicals, and Values Partnerships designed to speak to vaccine hesitancy within the Christian community broadly, and the evangelical community specifically. Our methodology centers around short, shareable online videos that equip Christians to reframe the vaccine as fully consistent with their Biblical values.

The pathway to ending the pandemic runs through the evangelical church. Almost half of all white evangelicals are [resistant to getting vaccinated](#). The sheer size of this population nationally and within concentrated regions mean evangelicals could make or break the vaccine’s potential to restore life to normal in communities across the country. With the increasing spread of the Delta variant in regional pockets with low vaccination rates and high concentrations of evangelicals, this is only becoming more urgent.

As life-long evangelicals, we worry about how our people could become a barrier for recovery from the pandemic. But as insiders, we also have an understanding of how we got here.

Evangelical resistance to the vaccine is driven by larger forces that have reshaped our tribe's relationship with the broader secular world. Vaccine outreach efforts to our community must account for these deeper dynamics, and should partner with evangelical leaders who know best how to navigate this altered landscape.

For everyone — evangelical or not — the decision to take the vaccine is essentially a decision to trust institutions. Few of us are equipped to understand the vaccines' scientific complexities. We only take the vaccine when we decide to trust "Them:" the constellation of scientific, government, and media institutions assuring everyone that the vaccine is truly safe, effective, and necessary.

But what happens when this trust in "Them" is thoroughly undermined within a particular community?

American evangelicals are historically prone to ambivalence toward the dominant secular institutions of the day. In fact, a posture of critical evaluation is built into the fabric of our faith. Evangelicals interpret Jesus' teaching that his followers are in the world but not "of the world" (John 17:16) to mean we should engage with the world's secular institutions with a certain measure of caution. In proper doses, a certain amount of caution is healthy for all communities — not just evangelicals. No institution is infallible, and critical thinking can be a civic virtue.

Unfortunately, in recent years, the evangelical posture of critical engagement with secular institutions has mutated from caution into outright fear and hostility. Reminders to be on guard while engaging "Them" have turned into a belief that "They are out to get us!" Many social forces — both internal and external to our community — caused this, but three current forces have especially exploited our built-in ambivalence toward secular institutions.

First, conservative media have mastered the art of sowing evangelical suspicion of "the Establishment" to attract our eyeballs and grow their ratings. Second, politicians — some Christian and some not — have mastered the art of leveraging fear of elite institutions to gain our votes. Third, online conspiracy movements such as QAnon and the anti-vaxxers — which are thoroughly secular in their origins — have mastered the art of creating fictional enemies that are out to destroy our values, and in the case of the vaccine, our actual bodies. All of these forces now actively shape how large segments of our community perceive the vaccine.

In our vaccine outreach with evangelicals, we hear a variety of reasons for suspicion, ranging from common fears that the vaccine was rushed to conspiracy theories that the

vaccine contains tracking chips or is the “the mark of the beast”. But underneath all of those diverse reasons is the sharply intensified reflex of institutional distrust.

This reflex has taken root so rapidly that an alarming gap has opened up between evangelical pastors and the people in their pews. One survey from the National Association of Evangelicals conducted in January showed that [95% of leaders were planning to take the vaccine themselves](#), a marked contrast to other surveys that show [45%](#) to [55%](#) of evangelicals continuing to be reluctant on the vaccine. This gap follows [a well-researched trend](#) of pastors feeling afraid to speak on public issues for fear of alienating some portion of their members.

Even so, there is a path forward. A [just-released study](#) from Public Religion Research Institute and Interfaith Youth Core (PRRI/IFYC) reveals two key encouraging truths. First, there still exists a large “moveable middle” even among vaccine-hesitant evangelicals. Second, faith-based appeals — distinguished from secular public health appeals — are an effective strategy. Among vaccine-hesitant white evangelicals, 47% said that more faith-based outreach would encourage them to get the shot.

Several high-profile evangelical leaders have already begun faith-based outreach. NIH Director Francis Collins, a well-known evangelical, has worked tirelessly to promote the vaccine. BioLogos, a Christian nonprofit that promotes the integration of faith and science, has rallied other evangelical scientists for the cause. Russell Moore, head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, has provided important guidance to the country’s largest Protestant denomination. Even Donald Trump-supporting conservatives like Franklin Graham and Dr. Robert Jeffress have come out strongly in favor of the vaccines, willingly enduring hostile reactions from their base.

These national voices are important, but we are now at a pivotal moment: the ground game phase of vaccination outreach. The PRRI/IFYC study spotlighted that the remaining vaccine-hesitant evangelicals will be most persuaded by a mixture of subtle, local and highly relational efforts: e.g. people learning that their pastor or fellow church member got vaccinated, or getting help from their church in scheduling a vaccination appointment.

Evangelicals on the ground must take the lead in implementing these efforts because the underlying problem is our community’s distrust of secular institutions. Resistance won’t be overcome by more well-intended PSAs from the Biden Administration; it can only happen via millions of granular exchanges like that between a pro-vaccine evangelical and a vaccine-hesitant friend who attends the same church.

While evangelicals are best-equipped to reach evangelicals, secular institutions still have a critical role to play, particularly to achieve the scale of outreach necessary in this crucial moment. Philanthropy, social media platforms, public health all can meaningfully

accelerate this ground game phase — if those institutions are willing to partner with evangelicals.

American evangelicals must help our own community find their way out of the thicket of vaccine confusion and distrust. But we still need the partnership of secular institutions. The pandemic has provided this nation many lessons in humility, perhaps none greater than the realization that none of us — and no sub-community — ever stands fully alone.

Thank you for the work of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis and your focus on the urgency of vaccine hesitancy. We look forward to engaging with you on this critically important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Curtis Chang".

Curtis Chang

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kris Carter".

Kris Carter