

Ebola comments prompt Christian backlash against Coulter, Trump, and Carson

by [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#)

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(RNS) Prominent conservative voices are criticizing the decision to bring two medical missionaries who contracted Ebola back to the United States for treatment.

Real estate mogul Donald Trump and retired neurosurgeon Dr. Ben Carson were both critical of bringing the infected missionaries back to the U.S. Columnist Ann Coulter went further, questioning why the missionaries were working in the “disease-ridden cesspools” of Africa.

Kent Brantly, with Samaritan’s Purse, and Nancy Writebol, with Service in Mission, are medical missionaries who were infected with Ebola while working with patients in Liberia. They are being treated at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta.

“If Dr. Brantly had practiced at Cedars-Sinai hospital in Los Angeles and turned one single Hollywood power-broker to Christ, he would have done more good for the entire world than anything he could accomplish in a century spent in Liberia,” Coulter wrote in a column.

But the professional provocateur is facing a backlash from the mainstream Christian establishment, especially evangelicals, for whom overseas missionary work is an article of faith.

“St. Thomas should have never gone to India and Jim Elliott should have never gone into the jungle. Sigh,” conservative columnist Erick Erickson shot back at Coulter on Twitter.

Samaritan’s Purse, which is run by Franklin Graham, declined to comment on the criticisms directed at Brantly and others. Service in Mission was unavailable for comment.

Denny Burk, a biblical studies professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said Coulter was dishing out “pagan foolishness” and shouldn’t be a go-to source for the theology of mission work. Andrew Walker from the Southern Baptists’ Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission called her remarks “absolutely reprehensible, Christ-denying vitriol.”

Last week, Trump sent a series of tweets about the missionaries being treated in the U.S.:

- “Ebola patient will be brought to the U.S. in a few days – now I know for sure that our leaders are incompetent. KEEP THEM OUT OF HERE!”
- “Stop the EBOLA patients from entering the U.S. Treat them, at the highest level, over there. THE UNITED STATES HAS ENOUGH PROBLEMS!”
- “The U.S. cannot allow EBOLA infected people back. People that go to far away places to help out are great-but must suffer the consequences!”

Russell Moore, the head of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, tried to restrain himself on Instagram: “I have no words for this. Actually I think I do but the Holy Spirit won’t let me say them.”

Conservative Minneapolis preacher and author John Piper wrote a poem for *World* magazine in reaction: “‘Why bring them home?’ Though you be stumped, This grace will not be trumped,” Piper wrote.

Carson, who is flirting with a White House run after taking on President Obama at the 2013 National Prayer Breakfast, said it was a mistake to bring the missionaries back for treatment and doctors could have flown overseas to treat them.

The head nurse at Emory, where the missionaries were taken, wrote that Americans stand to benefit from what medical professionals learn by treating the patients.

“These Americans generously went to Africa on a humanitarian mission to help eradicate a disease that is especially deadly in countries without our health-care infrastructure. They deserve the same selflessness from us,” wrote Susan M. Grant. “To refuse to care for these professionals would raise enormous questions about the ethical foundation of our profession.”

Before they returned the United States, Samaritan's Purse arranged for the missionaries to receive an experimental drug, prompting debate among Africans over why Americans could receive the drug when Africans couldn't have access.

Brantly was doing a Samaritan's Purse post-residency program before joining the medical team responding to the Ebola crisis. He received a unit of blood from a 14-year-old boy who had survived Ebola under his care. Brantly reportedly insisted that Writebol receive treatment before he did.

An elderly missionary became the first Ebola patient to arrive in Europe for treatment early Thursday (Aug. 7) when Spain's government flew a 75-year-old Roman Catholic priest back from Liberia.

Missionaries have sometimes received backlash for their involvement in other countries. Evvy Campbell, a retired professor of intercultural studies at Wheaton College who once served as a medical missionary in Sierra Leone, said a similar epidemic of fear surrounded the beginning of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1980s.

"It's driven by ignorance and self-protection," Campbell said. "Missionaries have always gone into these kinds of situations and have often been on the front line."

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued its highest-level alert for a response to the Ebola crisis. Ebola has claimed more than 900 lives in West Africa since the start of the latest outbreak.