

# Are Christian Missionaries Narcissistic Idiots? — A Response to Ann Coulter

In Ann Coulter's view, Kent Brantly should never have gone to Africa in the first place

*Written by Albert Mohler | Sunday, August 10, 2014*

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In an ominous development Wednesday night, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued its highest level alert for a response to the Ebola crisis in West Africa, even as reports came in indicating that the crisis may now not be limited to West Africa. Centers for Disease Control Chief Tom Frieden posted on Twitter: "Ops Center moved to Level 1 response given the extension to Nigeria & the potential to affect many lives."

According to Doug Stanglin of *USA Today*, Level I means that increased staff and resources will be devoted to the outbreak. He also said it is the first time the agency has invoked its highest level alert since 2009, then over a deadly influenza outbreak. Meanwhile, reports come in indicating that a Nigerian nurse, who had treated the country's first fatality from Ebola two weeks ago, has herself now died from the virus that has claimed 932 lives as of last night in the latest outbreak.

To put this into perspective, Ebola has been recognized as a disease only since the first outbreak was identified 40 years ago. One third of the total fatalities caused by Ebola have occurred in the most recent outbreak—and the toll is rising. Health authorities in Nigeria have said that five other Nigerian health workers, who also had treated AIDS patients, have been diagnosed with the disease. One American, Patrick Sawyer, a financial expert of Liberian descent, died on July 25 arriving in Lagos on a flight from Liberia. Meanwhile, according to *USA Today*, a Saudi man being tested for the disease has died in Jeddah. If indeed it turns out that he died of the disease, it will be the first fatality outside West Africa during the latest outbreak. Every medical authority on the planet is on the alert.

And yet from a Christian concern we cannot leave the issue of the Ebola outbreak without turning to another kind of atrocity. In this case the atrocity was an opinion piece published just yesterday by conservative commentator Ann Coulter. Her article caught immediate attention with its title: "Ebola Doc's Condition Downgraded to 'Idiotic.'" Coulter wrote:

“I wonder how the Ebola doctor feels now that his humanitarian trip has cost a Christian charity much more than any services he rendered. What was the point?” She continues, “Whatever good Kent Brantly did in Liberia has now been overwhelmed by the more than \$2 million already paid by the Christian charity Samaritans Purse and SIM USA just to fly him and his nurse home in separate Gulfstream jets specially equipped with medical tents and to care for them at one of America’s premier hospitals.”

Further:

“There is little danger of an Ebola plague breaking loose from the treatment of these two Americans at the Emory University Hospital, but why do we have to deal with this at all? Why did Dr. Brantly have to go to Africa? The very first ‘risk factor’ listed by the Mayo Clinic for Ebola — an incurable disease with a 90% fatality rate — is: “Travel to Africa.”

She then asked this question: “Can’t anyone serve Christ in America anymore?”

“No” she suggests, “because we are doing just fine. America, the most powerful, influential nation on earth is merely in a pitched battle for its soul.”

In Ann Coulter’s view, Kent Brantly should never have gone to Africa in the first place. He should have spent his time and energies saving America. As she writes:

“If Dr. Brantly had practiced at Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles and turned one single Hollywood powerbroker to Christ, he would have done more good for the entire world than anything you could accomplish in a century spent in Liberia. Ebola, “she writes,” kills only the body. The virus of spiritual bankruptcy and moral decadence spread by so many Hollywood movies infects the world. If he had provided health care for the uninsured editors, writers, videographers, and pundits in Gotham and managed to open one set of eyes, he would have done more good than marinating himself in medieval diseases of the Third World”

It is hard to believe she actually wrote this, but she did. And she not only wrote the column, she published it. She actually suggested that going to serve in a place like Liberia will gain a Christian the respect of the secular media, singling out columnist Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times*:

“Which explains why American Christians go on mission trips to disease ridden cesspools. They’re tired of fighting the culture war in the United States. Tired of being called homophobes, racists, sexists, and bigots so they slink off to Third World countries, away from American culture to do good works, forgetting the first rule of life on a riverbank is that any good that one attempts downstream is quickly overtaken by what happens upstream. America is the most consequential nation on earth and in desperate need of God at the moment. If America falls it will be 1,000 years of darkness for the entire planet.”

So Christians who go to far off lands to serve others in Christ's name are "slinking off" to Third World countries. These Christians are not heroic, they are idiotic.

Christians, she says, "need to buck up, serve their own country, and remind themselves every day of Christ's words: 'If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.' There may be no reason for panic about the Ebola doctor, but there is reason for annoyance at Christian narcissism."

Well the real annoyance here, indeed outrage, is not over the service of these two missionary doctors. It is over this kind of column that flies in the very face of everything Christ taught his disciples. The logic of the Christian church and of Christian missions has nothing to do with American nationalism. Some parts of Ann Coulter's article where she speaks especially of Africa come very close to racism, but she certainly falls directly into nationalism when she says that American Christians need to "serve their own country."

American nationalism of this toxic variety flies right in the face of the gospel of Jesus Christ and in the command of Christ given in the Great Commission. Coulter has written a very sad and infuriating article—an article that should lead to outrage in Christian circles. It reveals a radical nationalistic and libertarian worldview that is fundamentally incompatible with evangelical Christianity, with the Scripture, and with the command of Christ.

American evangelical Christians did not come up with the Great Commission because we were frustrated with losses in the culture war. American Christians are not "slinking off" to foreign countries in order to escape the United States; they are going in obedience to the command of Christ. True gospel missionaries—those faithful to the command of Jesus Christ—are not driven by "narcissism" to use Ann Coulter's word, they are indeed heroic. More than heroic, they are simply faithful.

We should also note the common sense realization that many of the modern medical facilities we know today were founded by Christians who did so out of a humanitarian impulse driven by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we need to note that the Christian church, when it has been faithful, has been obedient to the Great Commission and when it has not been obedient to the Great Commission it has been profoundly unfaithful. Christians are under the obligation to be obedient to Christ long before we should enter into any kind of calculation about whether or not it is good for the United States of America.

In a strange irony, a contrast to the position taken by Ann Coulter was indeed taken by columnist Nicholas Kristof in the editorial pages of *The New York Times*. He writes about Dr. Brantly and about his nurse, Nancy Writebol, and suggests that they are fighting Ebola for us all. Just as Coulter predicted, Kristof writes about them in heroic terms:

"Some people have blamed Brantly and another American missionary infected, Nancy Writebol, for bringing the danger to themselves, even objecting to their return to Atlanta to be treated for the disease at Emory University Hospital. For Example, Donald Trump argued that Brantly and

Writebol should not be brought back to the US because of the risk involved ‘People who go to far places to help out are great but must suffer the consequences!’ Trump said on Twitter.”

Kristof comments, “This Ebola outbreak underscores why we have not only humanitarian interests in addressing global health, but also a national interest in doing so. Brantly and Writebol are moral leaders in this effort and underscore the practical imperative of tackling global contagions early on. They deserve our gratitude and admiration.”

Kristof argues that we should be very appreciative of these two American missionary doctors and others from the western world who are fighting this contagion in Africa because if the disease is not stopped there, it will indeed come here. That is an argument that is certainly superior to the argument of Ann Coulter, but it is also an argument that is far short of the Christian worldview. These two American missionary doctors did not go merely as humanitarians. They did not just join some kind of merely humanitarian effort. They were sent by American Christian missionary organizations. Their concern was not just the bodily health of those they would serve through medicine, but the spiritual condition and indeed the spiritual fate of those they would meet as they went to West Africa. We certainly should appreciate all of those that were fighting the Ebola epidemic in West Africa because it is certainly true: if it is not contained and the outbreak continues, that Level 1 alert may be for the United States one day, not just for West Africa.

But that is hardly the point. On moral terms, Nicholas Kristof’s essay is infinitely superior to the column by Ann Coulter, but it also falls short of the true Christian reality. These two missionaries and all the others who have gone as authentic missionaries in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ have not been driven by a mere humanitarian impulse. They have not just gone to help those who are victims and patients. They have gone because they believe that every single human being on the planet is an individual made in God’s image. And they also believe that every single individual on the planet is a sinner in desperate need of salvation. They believe that every single human being on the planet, whether in West Africa or in the advanced Western nations including the US, are in great need of the gospel of Jesus Christ—and that what hangs in the balance is not just the outbreak of a contagion or the future of health but indeed the eternal realities of heaven and hell.

What is missing from both of these analyses are the final words of the gospel of Matthew. We know these words as the Great Commission. In Matthew 28:18-20 — “And Jesus came up and spoke to them saying, ‘all authority has been given to me on heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And, lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age.’” Those words may have escaped the attention of both Nicholas Kristof and Ann Coulter, but they had better be at the forefront of our minds and on our hearts at all times.

Times of urgency and danger seem to bring out the best and the worst in human response. It didn’t take long for this lethal Ebola outbreak to produce both.

*Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr. serves as president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary – the flagship school of the Southern Baptist Convention. [This article](#) is taken from his blog and is used with permission.*