

Past Cringe-Worthy Behavior Catches Up With Virginia's Governor and Attorney General

The Wired Word for the Week of February 17, 2019

In the News

In the opening six days of this month, surprise revelations about three government leaders in Virginia have raised widespread calls for the men -- Gov. Ralph Northam, Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax and State Attorney General Mark Herring -- to resign, though as of this writing, none has done so.

The political storm began when a picture on Gov. Northam's 1984 medical school yearbook page surfaced showing two people -- one in blackface (a form of theatrical makeup used predominantly by non-black performers to represent a caricature of a black person), the other in a KKK hood and robe. Initially Northam said he was one of those in the picture, but later, after viewing the photo, which he said he had not seen previously, he denied that he was either of the persons in that photo. But he added that he *had* darkened his face to look more like Michael Jackson for a dance contest that same year. The governor, now 59, would have been 24 years old at that time.

Soon thereafter, Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax, the person in line to become governor if Northam resigned, was accused by a woman named Vanessa Tyson of assaulting her during the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston. Fairfax denied the allegations, saying the interaction was consensual. Tyson responded with a statement in which she said in part, "What began as consensual kissing quickly turned into a sexual assault." A second woman has since accused Fairfax of rape.

Then, State Attorney General Mark Herring, who would be next in line to become governor if both Northam and Fairfax resigned, released a statement acknowledging that he, too, had appeared in blackface, at a party in 1980, to portray a rapper he listened to. Herring was 19 and in college at the time.

All three men are Democrats. Should all of them resign, the governorship would then go to speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates, Republican Kirk Cox.

For purposes of this lesson, we are considering the circumstances of only Northam and Herring. The accusations against Fairfax fall into a different category.

Northam has refused to resign, saying that he now recognizes the hurt that blackface behavior causes, and that it does not represent his present views.

In a statement Northam released when the photo first surfaced, he said, "This behavior is not in keeping with who I am today and the values I have fought for throughout my career in the military, in medicine [Northam was a pediatric neurologist], and in public service."

Northam added, "But I want to be clear. I understand how this decision shakes Virginians' faith in that commitment. I recognize that it will take time and serious effort to heal the damage this conduct has caused. I am ready to do that important work. The first step is to offer my sincerest apology and to state my absolute commitment to living up to the expectations Virginians set for me when they elected me to be their governor."

Herring has also apologized for his blackface episode.

According to a Washington Post-Schar School poll, conducted following the revelation of the racist photo on Northam's yearbook page, Virginia's population is split quite evenly about what he should do, with 47 percent wanting him to stay as governor and the same percentage wanting him to resign.

A majority of African-Americans in Virginia, however, prefer that he remain in office: 58 percent to 37 percent.

The Washington Post, reporting on the poll results, quoted Virginia resident Louise Butler, 76, of Richmond. She's African-American and grew up in the city and can still recall an argument she had as a teenager with a white woman over where she was allowed to sit on a bus.

Butler admits to being shocked and disappointed by the yearbook photo, noting that the Klan costume, in particular, brought back memories of the violence and discrimination experienced by black people in the South before and during the civil rights movement.

Nonetheless, she said that despite the views Northam may have held as a young man, she believes he is now committed to advancing racial equality -- something Northam now says will be the focus of his remaining years as governor.

"He's been a good governor, and he's been good, as far as I know, to black people," Butler said.

The existence of the photo was first reported by Patrick Howley, editor in chief of the website *Big League Politics*, who later told *The Washington Post* in an interview that he learned of the photo from a tip from a "concerned citizen, not a political opponent."

The tip came after Northam's comments about late-term abortions, Howley said. He declined to further identify the source, but according to two people at *Big League Politics*, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, the tip appears to have come from a medical school classmate or classmates of Northam who acted as a direct result of the abortion controversy.

More on this story can be found at these links:

The Complete and Utter Collapse of Virginia's Democratic Party. *CNN*

Virginians Are Split on Governor's Fate Amid Blackface Scandal, Poll Shows. *The Washington Post*

A Tip From a 'Concerned Citizen' Helps a Reporter Land the Scoop of a Lifetime About Northam. *The Washington Post*

Embattled Ralph Northam, in First Interview Since Blackface Furor, Says He Wants to Focus on Racial Equity. *Fox News*

Applying the News Story

Regarding our past catching up with us, one of our wise TWW editorial team members, Liz Antonson, recommended that we make a distinction between "cringe-worthy" stuff and crime. We at *The Wired Word* are not in a position to know the facts or the attitudes of the heart involved in the past acts of any of the three men, but in the cases of Northam and Herring, what they have admitted to doing -- wearing blackface -- is something they now consider cringe-worthy in light of today's cultural climate. The accusations against Fairfax -- sexual assaults -- if true, are crimes.

The Wired Word is also not in a position to advise any of the three as to what they ought to do now, and we have no interest in any political aspects of their plights.

We also recognize that questions of offensiveness and absolution are between Northam, Herring and those who feel demeaned by their actions.

What we can do, however, is to acknowledge that many people, including some of us, have done stupid or offensive stuff or made insensitive comments in the past that we have since outgrown. Today, we might even cringe as we recall some of those incidents. We accept that some of those things may have hurt others, and we rightly regret them.

And that brings us to the theme for this lesson: that life at its best should be a journey. We Christians talk about "growing in Christ," and what is that growth if not movement from one understanding to another? We sometimes call this "maturing" in Christ, but this side of the grave, maturing is not a destination, but a series of milestones.

So for this lesson, we'll consider what it means to be on the journey of life and how new perspectives mean that we don't want our lives to be defined by our past cringe-worthy moments.

The Big Questions

1. How is your walk with God different today from when you took your first steps in it? What are some marks of spiritual immaturity? What are some marks of spiritual maturity?
2. Is there something cringe-worthy in your past that you would change if you could? What defines who you are today? How should looking at yourself in the past and at how you have changed influence how you look at yourself now, with an eye toward future changes? In other words, might a time come when you consider your current views cringe-worthy?
3. What does it take for you to give the benefit of the doubt to people with cringe-worthy stuff in their background? What makes you believe -- or not believe -- that a person has changed for the better and would today repudiate the earlier behavior or attitudes?
4. How did your context -- the times, your surroundings, your culture, your family influences, your religious commitment, etc. -- affect what you used to affirm but no longer support? Should you have known better then? Why or why not? How does your context now affect how you view your earlier ideas and understandings?
5. As a society, why are we so intent on measuring people by past choices, and often eager to ruin people? Should we assume that we are the only ones who are works in progress and that everyone else remains as they were?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

1 Peter 1:18 (The Message)

Your life is a journey you must travel with a deep consciousness of God. It cost God plenty to get you out of that dead-end, empty-headed life you grew up in. (For context, read 1:17-21.)

Hebrews 11:8

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. (For context, read 11:1-2, 8-12.)

"Your life is a journey you must travel with a deep consciousness of God" is not an exact translation of the original Greek of 1 Peter 1:18, but as a paraphrase, it captures not only the spirit of what Peter intended in the verse, but also a theme of the spiritual life itself -- that of journey.

Abraham quite literally set out on a journey at the call of God, and all of his subsequent life was a trek with God. The place "he looked forward to" by faith was "the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (v. 10), but that destination was not for his life on earth. On earth, the journey was the reality.

Abraham's journey was not without its own episodes that at least some Bible readers view as cringe-worthy, and some of those had lifelong negative effects on others. We wonder if Abraham ever regretted sending his son Ishmael and Ishmael's mother away. Did he ever regret obeying what seemed to be a divine message to sacrifice Isaac, an event that must have terrified Isaac, even though he was spared, and possibly scarred him for life?

Questions: In what sense is journey a motif for your life? How, if at all, are your attitudes about people unlike yourself different from what they were in your youth? In what ways has God been in those changes of perspective?

2 Corinthians 5:17

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (For context, read 5:14-19.)

As this verse says, in Christ, we don't have to be defined by our past.

Our newness, of course, does not necessarily undo damage we may have done to others by our past stupidities. In some cases, the new person we have become may need to take specific steps to demonstrate our revised view of things and reconcile with those we may have offended.

Questions: If you can identify a specific time when you received Christ, in what ways did that bring newness to you? If you can't identify a specific time, but are a follower of Christ, how does that make you different from what you might have been otherwise?

Galatians 1:13, 15-16

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. ... But when God, who ... called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being ... (For context, read 1:13-24.)

The apostle Paul here acknowledges his cringe-worthy period (in another era, his persecution of Christians may also have been a crime, but that was not the case in his day). Such was his reputation for zealous persecution that after his Damascus Road conversion, Barnabas, an established Jesus follower, had to vouch for him before other followers of Jesus would accept him (see Acts 9:27).

We wonder if Paul's theological opponents ever brought up his cringe-worthy past in an effort to discredit him.

Questions: Which of your cringe-worthy moments would you not want your life to be judged by? Why? (See also "For Further Discussion" #4 below.)

2 Peter 1:5-7

For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and

goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. (For context, read 1:1-11.)

Right at the top of the letter, Peter says that he is writing to people who have received a "faith ... through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ." And just a couple of verses later, he adds that God has given followers of Jesus "everything needed for life and godliness."

Faith resulting in godliness implies that Christians should be filled with the fruit of the Spirit. But Peter does not suggest that such infilling happens automatically. Rather he tells his readers, "you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge" In fact, that statement is just the start of a list of seven qualities Peter names to support faith: goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection and love.

The fact that Peter speaks of these seven virtues as "supports" for faith suggests that they are structures we can work on putting in place as we journey with the Lord. When we set out in the Christian life, many of us begin with faith that is pretty shaky, but we can work on putting supports in place, and Peter gives us an idea of what those supports can be.

Questions: In what ways do you work on supporting your faith with goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection and love? How is doing this like a journey?

Matthew 7:2

For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. (For context, read 7:1-6.)

Jesus is here pointing out that when it comes to judging, we need to focus mainly on our own shortcomings, faults and failings. We are responsible for our own actions and for amending our own lives, no matter how tempting it is to join in on pointing out the failures of others. Not that judging another might not at times be appropriate, but that it needs to be in the context and recognition of our own sins and sinfulness.

Questions: Think about times when you were tempted to pass judgement on someone for something that you yourself were once guilty of. How *should* you react? Discuss the following scenario: "I did something wrong long ago, was not exposed then and have learned from it and changed; the offense of the other person we are now talking about is current and overt." What are the conflicts, and how, if at all, might they be resolved?