

Editorial: Biden's pastoral presidency and the 'power of our example'

January 21, 2021

How often have we, as Christians, prodded each other with reminders that the world is watching, that our lives are an example of Christ?

When I heard similar words from President Joe Biden during his inauguration, I heard more than a call to address national issues. I heard a challenge to embody our best character.

A Christian's best character comes from Jesus Christ. Followers of Christ can embrace the challenge to embrace that character for the sake of the gospel and the welfare of the city.

We may even find glimpses of this sacred calling exemplified in the secular.

Pastor Biden

"We all understand the world is watching," Biden said toward the end of his inaugural address. Speaking to the watching world, Biden added, "We'll lead not merely by the example of our power, but by [the power of our example](#)."

Biden set the tone of our example the evening before he took office. While not yet officially president and vice-president, Biden and Kamala Harris presided over a [COVID-19 memorial ceremony](#) at the Lincoln Memorial on Jan. 19. Before he even took office, Biden set out on a pastoral presidency.

In his inaugural address, moments after referring to the power of our

example, Biden led the nation in “a moment of silent prayer to remember all those who we lost this past year to the pandemic.”

Biden’s pastoral posture is an important example for all of us.

Acknowledging our sorrow

“Somber” was a recurring description of the presidential inauguration. Even the pomp and circumstance seemed muted. The tone of the day was appropriate for the added seriousness surrounding it.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic cast an inescapable shadow over the day. Almost 200,000 flags took the place of the normal crowd in the National Mall. Mask-wearing dignitaries and family members were spaced several feet apart, not cheek by jowl as in previous years.

Between each speaker, the podium was disinfected, slowing the proceedings slightly. This simple action ensured viewers could not ignore the ongoing pandemic’s presence. The cleaning took on a subtle rhythm, itself a pastoral feature of the inauguration.

The storming of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 also cast a shadow. Attendees and viewers could not ignore the consequences of the mob’s attempt to stop the certification of Biden’s and Harris’ electoral win. The tenuousness of democracy was duly noted throughout the inauguration. The streets empty of all but law enforcement, National Guard troops and Secret Service personnel spoke their own confirmation.



Screen shot of Kamala Harris being sworn in as vice president of the United States.

Making room for joy

Yet, not all was gloomy. Joy sparked throughout the inauguration, as well. A pastoral posture always makes room for joy.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., marked a historic fact when she noted “the first Latina to ever serve on the Supreme Court of the United States of America” would administer the oath of office to “our first African American, our first Asian American and our first woman vice president”—Kamala Harris.

Dr. Lisa Rainey, a member of the Baptist Standard board of directors, reflected on Harris’ inauguration, saying it “allows all little girls of every race to know they can lift their voices, speak truth to power and be respected for their brilliance and, yes, beauty.”



Screen shot of Fire Captain Andrea Hall leading the Pledge of Allegiance during the 59th presidential inauguration.

Biden being the oldest person ever to become the president of the United States also is of note. That the majority of our country voted for him to lead us through one of the most challenging times in our nation's history indicates we still value senior adults, despite our infatuation with youth.

Fire Captain Andrea Hall of South Fulton, Ga., led the Pledge of Allegiance in spoken word and sign language. By doing so, she made the inauguration more accessible. It was a powerful and inspiring moment.

The grand finale, Amanda Gorman reciting her poem "[The Hill We Climb](#)," was an event all its own. Gorman's self-possession and command of language were awe-inspiring. At least one on-air commentator acknowledged the sermonic nature of Gorman's words and delivery. If she, at age 22, is a glimpse of the power of our example, we have much cause for joy.



Screen shot of Amanda Gorman reciting her poem “The Hill We Climb” to conclude the 59th presidential inauguration.

A challenge for our nation

In referring to “the power of our example,” Biden appealed to our national unity in working together to face our shared challenges. His is a noble and worthwhile call. Realizing his vision will be hard work.

Our nation and our local communities, churches and families need a pastoral posture. Sorrow in the wake of disease and division has touched us all. Though we are weary, we need to face our sorrow. This is not weakness; this is strength.

A pastoral posture looks pain and loss in the face and doesn’t flinch. A pastoral posture does not grow squeamish and turn away, but is honest about the state of things and enters into the hurt. A pastoral posture embraces the pain while making room for joy. Followers of Jesus should know this better than anyone.

A challenge for Christians

The world isn't just watching what Americans do with democracy. The world also is watching what Christians do with Jesus.

Christians always have been called to unity—in Christ. There is power in this example, too.

As followers of Jesus, let us not be outdone in acknowledging our past failings, being honest about our current challenges and stepping into future possibilities.

Let us find unity in Christ. Let us value every person as created in his image. Let us embody the good news of Christ in such a way that any and all can access it. And let us be known by our love—for God and for people—so the power of our example will draw a watching world to Jesus.

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at eric.black@baptiststandard.com or on Twitter at [@EricBlackBSP](https://twitter.com/EricBlackBSP). The views expressed are those solely of the author.