

# Editorial: As much as ever, America must hear from our 'better angels'

November 9, 2016

*"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."* — Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address

✘ Marv Knox Those wise words sound poignant for America in the autumn of 2016. But they echo from a far darker place in our history. President Lincoln spoke them a month before the start of the Civil War in the spring of 1861.

Lincoln's words would have applied to us this year, no matter who won our presidential contest. Because anger fueled Donald Trump's populist campaign and because so many Americans who opposed him are so deflated, we particularly need to consider them now.

If you recall history, you know the circumstances President Lincoln addressed declined drastically before they improved. Americans north and south became enemies. The Civil War cost many thousands of lives. Its traumatic stress disordered countless others. The catastrophe of conflict wreaked havoc on the economy. And even though the union stood, the scars of war marked our nation for generations.

Still, the better angels of America's nature eventually struck the chords of our collective memory. Those strains healed, and we grew strong enough to endure world wars, and the Great Depression, along with the wear and tear

of expansion and change and generational strife. The process of healing stretched across the decades, with twists and turns and undulations.

Now we are struggling once again through a season of bitterness and discord. We face vital questions: What next? What should U.S. Christians—and in our case, Texas Baptists—do now? Four suggestions:

### **Get along**

The first bridges we build must span the chasms between individual Americans. We need to repair relationships and recognize we're all Americans, and we'll never be stronger than the disrespect we tolerate among ourselves.

This is hard to do—but doable—even among friends. A Christian brother and I exchanged emails about the election, explaining what we feared in the other's candidate. We stood far apart. But we recognized we want a safe and stable future for our children and our grandchildren. And we vowed not to let our political differences destroy our friendship.

This is even more important to do among Americans with visible and substantial differences. We must reach across lines of race, education, class, geography and economics. We must find ground for conversation about our shared dreams and aspiration. We must see America through the others' lenses.

Then we can strive for unity, even—no, especially—in diversity.

### **Demand reform**

The problem with reform is what you mean by it. Most Americans agree our government and political structure need to be reformed. But recently, many Americans have sought reform by pouring billions of unaccounted dollars into politics and electing lawmakers who despise the basic functions of

government. That's like saying the cure for thirst is a tablespoon of salt.

We've had enough of partisanship and hardball. The kind of reform we need is a return to cooperation around a quest for the common good. We hold honest disagreements over the size and scope of government. But we ought to agree government must work, and for that to happen, lawmakers must trade self-interest for the public trust and stubbornness for compromise.

Maybe we should start by demanding government leaders follow the rules of kindergarten—play fair, take turns, share, say you're sorry.

### **Stand for values**

Many Christians voted against Hillary Clinton because they opposed some of her values, most notably abortion and LGBT rights. However, Trump's stump speech opposed many values historically revered by Baptists, among others. With President Trump in power, we must stand firm to protect those values. They include:

- Religious liberty. Candidate Trump proposed restricting immigration for Muslims. This clear violation of the religion clauses of the First Amendment is wrong on at least two levels. First, it violates Baptists' 400-year commitment to religious freedom for all people. Second, if the government can violate Muslims' rights today, what's to keep it from violating Christians' tomorrow?
- Free speech. In another proposed violation of the First Amendment, Trump said he wants to simplify the process of suing his critics for libel. Protection of speech and the press are hallmarks of American freedom. Dictatorships flourish where government stifles political expression and free exchange of ideas. Think Russia and China.
- Human dignity. Christian orthodoxy affirms all people are created by God

and equally worthy of respect because they bear the divine image. Nevertheless, we heard a litany of condemnations and debasement of people based upon their race, nationality, physical ability, gender, looks and opinions. If President Trump acts upon the base instincts of Candidate Trump, Christians must stand up for human dignity or stand in shame before their Creator.

### **Protect the vulnerable**

Many of Trump's assaults on values paralleled threats to the vulnerable. If we want our nation to heal, much less to be a global role model, we must protect the vulnerable. We must:

- Eradicate misogyny. Trump's "locker room talk" about women reminded the nation of violence perpetrated upon women by jocks and other men. Such cavalier disregard for women is beneath a middle-schooler, much less the president. We must make sure America is safe for all women, and that begins with how we talk.
- Eliminate nativism. Calling Mexican immigrants rapists and killers may have been a successful campaign line, but it's disastrous for domestic and foreign relations. We are a nation of immigrants and an upright world leader. Speaking slanderously of people from other countries disrespects our heritage and imperils international relations. On top of that, it violates commands from both the Old and New Testaments to care for the stranger, the visitor, the "other."
- Defend the handicapped. The saddest moment of a dispiriting campaign occurred when Trump flopped his arms back and forth, publicly ridiculing a reporter who had excelled remarkably, overcoming a near-debilitating birth defect. It violated one of the most basic tenets of human decency. Our society cannot be any kinder than the treatment received by people who live through products of their birth.

- Promote a just economy. Most analyses of Trump's economic plan indicate it will benefit the wealthy at the expense of the poor. This campaign will have been a sham if it fails to help the people who entrusted their futures—particularly residents of rural America and Americans without a college education—to the Trump-Pence ticket.
- Wage peace. Our next president will possess codes that could launch nuclear war. That fact—given Trump's often-impetuous campaign—is what frightens many Americans most. America always must first seek peaceful resolution to international crises.

America has elected a new president. A hallmark of our democracy has been the peaceful transfer of power. Now is the time to pray for the next president, to pray for Congress and the Supreme Court, and to pray for ourselves.

**Follow Marv on Twitter: [@marvknoxbs](https://twitter.com/marvknoxbs)**