

Editorial: Practicing faith in the Age of Trump

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As Donald Trump enters the White House, evangelicals and other conservative Christians who helped put him there face a crucial challenge: Can they influence his administration to uphold Christian virtues they had to overlook when they cast their ballots?



Marv KnoxIn campaigning for their votes, Trump repeatedly told evangelicals they are special. [Speaking to a group of evangelical leaders last summer](#), he said: “Your power has been totally taken away. I mean, I don’t want to insult anybody, but your power has been totally taken away. So, we’re going to get your voice back. We’re going to get it back.” Pastors “should be far more powerful.”

Leveraging power

Numerous pastors and other evangelical leaders pointed to that promise as justification for supporting Trump, even though he shares few of the values they claim. In fact, “access to the White House” became a repeated theme, particularly from Southern Baptist Convention leaders who backed Trump and countered Russell Moore, leader of the SBC Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, who opposed Trump on moral grounds.

Many evangelicals also cited Trump’s repeated promise to appoint only pro-

life justices to the Supreme Court as justification for supporting him—even though, they acknowledged, they disagreed with his other moral positions.

Expecting Trump to keep his promises may be a stretch. After all, his decades-long pattern has been to stiff vendors and construction workers, break contracts, declare bankruptcy to get out of debts, avoid paying taxes and apparently say whatever is necessary to close deals. Is his word to evangelicals his bond? We'll see.

Of course, leveraging their “power” for Christian virtues may not be what the evangelical leaders had in mind. In his speech last summer, Trump promised to take away the “Johnson amendment,” the IRS policy that prohibits churches and pastors from officially endorsing candidates for public office. That’s political power, not moral power.

Still, with Trump entering office, evangelicals and other Christians who claim to follow the teachings of Jesus should be vigilant to champion the values that flow from those teachings. These are noble virtues that transcend mere politics and span the spectrum of faith and religious ideology.

Four-year to-do list

The topics Christians should monitor and contend with are numerous. Five of the most important are:

- *Care for the poor and the weak*

These are people Trump has called “losers.” Yet Jesus said, “... whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40). Everyone—Trump included, but also all of us—ultimately will be judged by how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick and the prisoners.

Well-meaning Christians disagree regarding the extent to which Jesus' repeated teachings about poor and weak people comprise a church issue and a government issue. That's partly why Christians participate in both Democratic and Republican parties. But even accounting for these differences, none of us should affirm any actions through which the government actively or passively harms and/or exploits the poor and the weak.

- *Unfailing support for absolute religious liberty*

This is an issue on which Trump seems clueless. His threats to prohibit or restrict Muslim immigration and create a Muslim registry not only violate the First Amendment, but also counter centuries of Baptist teaching and practice.

Trump's disdain for Muslims no doubt appealed to many evangelicals, who fear not only terrorism, but also their loss of privilege as a waning majority. But that's no reason to ignore both decency and principles. Besides, any threat to the constitutional protection of one religion is a threat to all religions. A few decades of demographic shifting, and the current majority's day of reckoning will come.

- *Repudiation of racism*

Trump played racism for full effect in 2016. A few endorsements to the contrary, Trump's campaign rhetoric widened America's racial divide significantly. This speaks to deep-seated fear, but it is a great travesty nonetheless.

Nothing in Trump's history indicates he will work to refute racism. In fact, he has continued to exploit race, even during his transition to the White House. The stain of racism marks most U.S. Christian communities, which is all the more reason we must stand for racial equality, justice and righteousness, even in the face of government hostility. If we say we

believe the Bible, then we believe all people were created equally, and racism has no place in our lives, our government and our society.

- *Affirmation of sexual equality*

Trump's misogyny dragged the 2016 campaign to its lowest point. His admission of sexual abuse, vile descriptions of women and treatment of women as objects defy our belief that both women and men are created in God's image and worthy of full respect.

If evangelicals and other Christians cannot stand up for women and tirelessly counter Trump's misogyny, then we have no right to provide moral instruction to our children. If pastors do not preach the equal value of women and men—recognizing some understand the relationship to be egalitarian while others see it as complementarian—then they have no right to expect women to remain in their congregations.

- *Protection of the "other"*

Both Jesus and the prophets emphasized the absolute mandate to care for the stranger who enters the community. This hallmark principle focused on protecting those who are "other."

This means Christians should speak with grace and compassion about immigration, as well as civil and human rights for all kinds of people, particularly myriad minorities. That's not to say we cannot advocate for immigration reform or seek to balance the rights of LGBT people and religious people. But it means we must empathize with the other and seek the greater good, not privilege for the powerful.

Christians who care for biblical principles and Jesus' values are going to be busy the next four years. The welfare of our nation requires it. The reputation of the church depends upon it.

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