

Editorial: What to make of Biden's use of Christian faith language

November 11, 2020

Biblical references often have featured in American presidential speeches. Joe Biden's speech Nov. 7 was no exception.

Evangelical Christians generally appreciate a politician's references to the Bible or Christian hymns. At the same time, Christians need to remain clear-headed about the political appropriation of faith language—especially when that language comes from the Bible, what the majority of Baptists consider “[the supreme standard](#) by which all human conduct ... should be tried.”

What did Biden say?

Halfway through his speech, [Biden said](#): “[L]et's give each other a chance. It's time to put away the harsh rhetoric, lower the temperature, see each other again, listen to each other again. And to make progress, we have to stop treating our opponents as our enemy. They are not our enemies. They are Americans.”

Those worn out by the demonizing political rhetoric of the last four years received these words as balm for the soul. Certainly, Biden intended that.

Then quoting from Ecclesiastes 3, Biden said: “The Bible tells us, ‘To everything there is a season, a time to build, a time to reap and a time to sow, and a time to heal. This is the time to heal in America.’”

Near the conclusion of his speech, Biden quoted from “On Eagle's Wings,”

a hymn loved by his deceased son Beau. He said the hymn “captures the faith that sustains me and which I believe sustains America.”

“And he will raise you up on eagle’s wings / bear you on the breath of dawn / and make you to shine like the sun / and hold you in the palm of his hand,” Biden recited. “And now together—on eagle’s wings—we embark on the work that God and history have called upon us to do ... with faith in America and in each other,” he continued.

Biden ended by quoting his grandfather, who frequently told him as a child, “Joey, keep the faith.” His grandmother always followed with, “No, Joey, spread it.”

“Spread the faith,” Biden proclaimed.

Critiquing Biden’s faith language

Biden quoting the Bible, a hymn and his grandparents’ exhortations about faith are the kind of thing that can warm a Christian’s heart.

So welcome are the words of Ecclesiastes 3 that it might seem petty to take issue with them. It might seem heartless to quibble with a song so important to Biden’s deceased son. And his grandparents’ exhortation? Am I really going to take issue with that? How it was used, yes.

The words cited in each instance are not problematic in themselves. What should give us pause is the context in which they were spoken.

While there are seasons and times for everything, the starting and stopping of them is not always at our discretion. Though Christians may agree a time of healing is needed, our steps are ordered by God’s will, not our desires. As much as I may desire healing, it may be time for correcting and repenting, and then healing.

[“On Eagle’s Wings”](#) is a beautiful rendering of [Psalm 91](#). However, the promises of Psalm 91 were not given to bless America’s will. Rather, they are assurances given to those who obey God’s will. The promise is made to “[w]hoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High ... ‘because he loves me,’ says the Lord.” Psalm 91 stipulates calling on the Lord, but Biden didn’t seem to suggest America needs to do that. But he’s not alone on that score.

Then there’s faith. I imagine evangelical Christians shouting, “Amen!” at Biden’s grandmother charging him to spread the faith rather than keep it. Making that distinction was a winning finish.

But faith is a fuzzy word. What faith are we talking about? Or are we talking about hope, optimism, belief, moral support or something else?

Biden’s meaning came a few sentences before, when he told us to “embark on the work that God and history have called upon us to do ... with faith in America and in each other.”

However committed Biden is to God, he seems to be asking Americans to place their trust in America, fellow Americans, and in the laws, institutions and systems of the U.S. government. He follows in a long line of presidents who have used the language of Christian faith to call us to America’s cause.

As preferable as Biden’s speech may be in comparison to others, we must listen to it carefully. When Biden tells us to spread the faith, what faith are we spreading?

The language of Christian faith has a place in American political discourse, but when it is brought to the service of American political will, we must pay attention.

Listen carefully

American Christians cheer these biblical references. They hear themselves in them and, as a result, more closely identify with the politician who speaks them.

American politicians know biblical references connect with the majority of the U.S. population. They know these references can soothe or rally, depending on the need. For politicians, there is a pragmatic reason to speak the language of Christian faith.

Politicians speaking the language of Christian faith isn't necessarily cynical, though. The words Biden recited Nov. 7 surely mean as much to him as they would to conservative Christians like Sen. James Lankford (R-Okla.) or Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.).

The problem lies in appropriating the language of Christian faith to baptize American ways and values. This is a bipartisan problem.

Regardless of intentions or how sincere a politician is about his or her Christian faith, we must pay close attention to where a politician's faith language is pointing us.

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.