

Viewpoint: JAV401

HEALING THE DIVIDE: MOVING FORWARD AFTER THE ELECTION

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It's over. Election 2016 is finished. We have a new president.

The response was expected; many people are in mourning while others are dancing in the streets. This election has strained relations in communities across the nation. Our political discourse hit rock bottom before the first votes were cast.

But what happens now?

Now that the election is over, pollsters take a four-year break, and news networks move on to other breaking stories, Americans have to do one of the hardest jobs of the election cycle: once again look one another in the eyes. Months of division and slander across the aisles (and pews) have caused family members, friends, and coworkers to say and do things that are acceptable during an election but unheard of during "ordinary time."

But let's not pretend that this is an aberration in our history, as if prior to this election, we were lockstep about what it means to be American. This election simply has exposed our differences while vilifying different groups, pitting them against one another in a miniature clash of civilizations. Nor can we blame politicians, who are as diverse in their motivations for holding office as the electorate is for placing them there.

Christians can begin healing the partisan divide that this election has brought. We are called to love others, regardless of political opinion or vote cast. Now, at the height of election fatigue, Christians must find ways to be good citizens in our

communities where we live and work. This will not only help heal our divisions but also may keep us from making the same mistakes come Election 2020.

One of the greatest sins that we have committed during this season is the failure to listen to one another. And it is a sin — a refusal to listen to our brothers and sisters' grievances is a refusal to *love*. Rather than reach across the divide to try and understand what the other is saying, many of us have placed ourselves into cliques on Facebook and Twitter, sharing dishonest memes intending to distort the truth.

A Shaken Community. Growing up in south central Kentucky, both my parents were blue-collar workers who weren't particularly interested in formal education. However, my parents were proud when I did well in school and received high marks from my teachers. William Faulkner's depiction of the Compson family in *The Sound and the Fury* is an uncanny portrait of families like mine, where familial bonds and Southern honor surpass all other virtues. I was the black sheep of the family — more interested in music and video games than sports. Although I have always gotten along with my family, I've felt like the outsider who never quite "fit."

Given my background, I understood the populist and nativist sentiment that arose during the election, even while fundamentally disagreeing with it. However, many of my college-educated friends and coworkers could not fathom why people would vote the way they did. Didn't they *know* that building walls and alienating our allies was wrong? Couldn't they understand that free trade was ultimately a boon and not a burden?

They may have understood this, but I also knew the stories from my hometown as a kid, when the biggest factory in town shut down and moved to Mexico, leaving many, including my mom, without a job, without benefits, and without answers. Husbands and wives who worked at that factory their whole lives were suddenly jobless. Homes were foreclosed on, and families picked up and moved on to other opportunities. The loss of one of the largest producers of jobs in the county disrupted the social fabric of our little community. The only other places of employment in the county were the school and the government, both requiring some type of advanced education that most people didn't have. Thankfully, Mom found work in the next town over within a few months. Many others weren't so lucky.¹

Loving the Other. Those on both sides of the political divide have failed to consider people like my mom, who, as a white, blue-collar worker, is a reflection of the vast majority of Americans. But we've also ignored the stories of minorities, individuals far different from my mom, and treated their experiences as inconveniences for our

political narratives. If Christians want to make a real difference in the lives of *all* Americans, we must listen prayerfully to them. We won't always agree with whom we're speaking, and we won't always change hearts and minds. We know that only the Holy Spirit can do this. But Jesus promised that the peacemakers would be blessed (Matt. 5:9). James says that the wisdom that comes from above is peaceable (James 3:17). Real change in our country is going to start at home with us, with Christians who are willing to endure awkward conversations and love on people who don't look or talk like we do. Sure, it's hard.² But the conquering Lamb has come to show us that He can turn our weakness into chain-shattering, mountain-moving change. A little thing like a presidential election isn't going to stop power like that.

We've seen in this race the dangers of Christians aligning their faith completely with their political party. Hitching our wagons to strong leaders is something of a trait in Christianity.³ In a video about the religious right, Russell Moore did an excellent job reminding us that evangelicals who unite themselves to political power are always in danger of becoming the very thing they have warned against.⁴ Political parties are simply tools to be used and, if necessary, to be cast off. They are very poor substitutes for our communities and especially our churches.

Regardless of our opinions, Christians are sinning against the Holy Spirit when they divide themselves along party lines, whether political, economic, or religious. Peter Leithart, critiquing the disharmony in the church brought on by factionalism, states:

We should have no place for such cheap solace,⁵ which only makes us complacent in the face of disunity. Painful as it is to acknowledge, the church as such is a historical community and thus as such is both sinful and divided. And that means that the church as such is not living in the gospel. To the extent that we are divided, we are not evangelical. Jesus is the evangel in person, and he prays for our unity and calls us to peace.⁶ (Emphasis in original.)

During the election, Christians too often were at each other's throats over a wide variety of issues, including the plight of refugees, the limits of religious liberty, and the character and histories of both major candidates. This has left evangelicals on both sides of the political divide struggling to recover their witness and to return to "business as usual" in their churches.

Although it cannot be denied that Christians will continue to stumble, Jesus will not forsake His church. We've made mistakes and said things that have harmed each other. However, the gospel can and will break down the barrier that is built up between us. But we must be willing to enter into the messiness that occurs when the walls start to come down.

Moving Forward. Every election, a dangerous forgetfulness descends on the nation like a cloud, as if somehow *this* election will decide the fate of America for the next 1,000 years. Christians should know better. Christians not only have survived numerous failed empires and nation-states but also outlasted countless emperors, kings, governors, presidents, and tyrants. We've survived Roman persecution, communist regimes, distractive nationalism, and the scorn of cultured despisers. Christianity has more to offer America than aiding partisan groups wrestling for control of a divided nation.

Instead, we should point to our churches and proclaim a better way that is possible in the gospel. We need to show how our churches are united in love for one another — how our communities have been affected by the witness of their churches. Without the holy habit of love permeating our lives, we will be doomed to repeat the mistakes of this election cycle in 2020.

At the very least, we've made it. The election has come to a close. The country now has to work through the problems that emerged during the campaign. Thankfully, we've been given a message that transcends political partisanship, and a person who promises, "Come to me, all you are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Let's bank on that better promise for the next four years. —C. Daniel Motley

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NOTES

- 1 J. D. Vance's must-read memoir on growing up working class in Kentucky and Ohio, *Hillbilly Elegy* (Harper, 2016), is helpful for anyone who didn't grow up in the rural areas that carried the election. In it, he describes the despair that towns like mine felt in the aftermath of the loss of factories that upheld the local economy. As he notes from his own experience, once jobs are taken from an area, drugs usually creep in to take their place. The DEA reports that there were hundreds of confirmed meth labs in Kentucky from 2004 to 2012, the drug of choice because of its ability to offer a quick high for cheap ("National Clandestine Laboratory Register – Kentucky," Drug Enforcement Administration, accessed

December 4, 2016, <https://www.dea.gov/clan-lab/ky.pdf>). Those who didn't attend church often turned to drugs and alcohol for self-medication.

- 2 Read Mark 10:24!
- 3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantinian_shift.
- 4 <https://www.firstthings.com/media/can-the-religious-right-be-saved>.
- 5 That is, comfort that comes from believing that divisions in the church are between those "within" and those "outside" the church.
- 6 Peter Leithart, *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fractured Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 23.