

Building and Repairing Bridges in a Divisive Season

The votes are counted and the 2016 election is over. Those who voted for Hillary Clinton are grieving or protesting. Those who supported Donald Trump are cheering—secretly or publicly—over his surprise victory. Journalists are scratching their heads because they never imagined that Trump and the Republican Party would end up in charge of the White House and Congress.

But Mr. Trump is president now. And the church faces a huge challenge. Exit polls show the election was most definitely decided along racial lines, since 88 percent of African Americans and 79 percent of Hispanics voted for Clinton. How do followers of Jesus Christ—who is the ultimate reconciler—minister to people from all kinds of ethnic and political backgrounds when the election divided them?

During and after the election I decided to park myself in Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul's heavenly discourse on Christian unity. I urge you to read it several times over the next week. Paul's words fly in the face of our nasty political Facebook posts. He calls the church to declare a ceasefire from arguments and to embrace (are we ready for this?) gentleness, humility and reconciliation.

I've said this before, and some angry Christians have criticized me for it. They seem to suggest that following Paul's biblical guidelines doesn't apply during an election. They also think that being a peacemaker is a sign of weakness—even though Jesus promised special blessings to those who make peace (Matt. 5:9). Yet my concern is that if we don't dial down our harsh tone, the church is going to lose its influence as we congratulate ourselves for our voting power.

It's your choice. You can dig in your heels and be a cantankerous and offensive Christian, or you can become a peacemaker. Here are some steps you can take:

1. See the world through other people's eyes. I have immigrant friends who were scared of Donald Trump because of his comments about Mexicans. I've learned to say, "*Hablemos*" ("Let's talk"). Speaking to my Hispanic *amigos* in my broken Spanish tells them I care, even though I don't say my verbs correctly. Immigrants are not our enemies. Be a friend and try to understand how they feel.

2. Repent of your outrage. The apostle Paul told the Ephesians: "Be angry but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Eph. 4:26). It's one thing to be passionate about your political position; it's another to be so angry about an issue that you seethe with bitterness toward anyone who slightly disagrees with you. That is sin. And when the world sees angry, judgmental Christians, they drive past our cold churches and vow never to visit. If you allow hate to dwell in your heart, there is no room for the love of God.

3. Bite your lip in conversations. Paul said, "Let no unwholesome word proceed out of your mouth, but only that which is good for building up, that it may give grace to the listeners" (Eph. 4:29). The apostle did not put an asterisk at the end of this sentence to say, "except during elections." This rule applies 365 days a year. We don't have permission to spew our verbal venom just because a liberal Democrat is running for office. Ask the Holy Spirit to filter what you say. And if it's unkind, condemning, insulting, racist or crude, just be quiet.

(P.S. I am not sure when it became acceptable for Christians to swear at each other, but you are grieving the Holy Spirit when you use a derogatory term to describe a brother or sister in Christ. And remember: Jesus said in Matthew 5:22 that if you call someone a "fool," you are "shall be in danger of hell

fire.”)

4. Preserve and nurture relationships with those you disagree with. This election was intense, and the conversations between friends and family often got heated. Your candidate may have won, but if you burned bridges because of your campaigning, you lost. Now is the time to mend broken relationships. Paul told us to be “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). That means you have to work hard at staying connected to people. If you cut Christians out of your life because of how they voted, you are dismembering the body of Christ.

5. Gently challenge any form of prejudice. We can’t achieve Christian unity just by sitting in a circle and smiling at each other. True peacemakers are not wimps. Building bridges requires the courage to confront. Paul said true unity requires “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). Pastors, especially, have the responsibility to speak from the pulpit about racism. It is shameful for us to run from this issue when it is staring us in the face.

I challenge every church leader in America to carefully assess whether you burned any bridges during this election. Did people walk out because of political statements? How are you going to win those people back? And how are you planning to reach people who are from a different racial group? Let’s set aside all animosity and build a bridge with Christ’s love.

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