

# **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska  
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## ***A Call for Compassion, Empathy and Forgiveness in America***

Most Americans are rejoicing that the presidential election is finally over. America has endured eighteen months of innuendo, vindictiveness, conspiracy theories, and the abandonment of reason, mixed with racial and ethnic discord. Tragically, there was little, substantive discussion about the significant issues facing the nation over the next four years. However, as a Christian, I can affirm several bedrock truths:

- God is still on His throne
- Jesus Christ sits enthroned at the right hand of His Father, waiting for the order to go get His church
- The tomb is still empty
- The Bible remains the infallible Word of God
- The Gospel remains as powerful and as life-changing as ever
- The cross, not the state, is the solution to the problems of the human condition.

But given these fundamental truths, it is important for us to consider what the next president and the nation will face. Permit me a few comments on the monumental challenges the United States faces over the next four years. My purpose here is to drive those of us who confess the name of Jesus to our knees. We must set aside the bitter residue of this election and focus on God and His Word. We must ask God to call this nation to repentance.

Columnist Michael Gerson has eloquently summarized the 2016 presidential campaign and its impact on the American experiment in democracy. This campaign witnessed two contrasting analyses and two contrasting visions:

- “Donald Trump’s vision is unremittingly dark — in his words, a ‘crippled America.’ A nation of closed factories and crumbling bridges, flooded by illegal immigrants who are taking jobs and committing crimes, threatened by cop-killers and jihadists, exploited by foreign competitors and humiliated by the stupidity of its governing class. Trump devotes almost no attention to describing his ideal America, but his Eden is somewhere in the past, requiring recovered greatness. His stated goal is the restoration of a lost country, which he defines as a certain land and people and way of life. Liberal ideology may have contributed to the mess, but the main problem is failed leadership. ‘If we don’t get tough,’ argues Trump, ‘and if we don’t get smart, and fast, we’re not going to have our country anymore. There will be nothing, absolutely nothing, left.’ And

because the ruling class will not surrender power willingly, it must be taken by an uprising of the forgotten.”

- “Hillary Clinton is also not in the vision business, but she seems to assume a conventionally liberal conception of the country — America the evolving. A nation with a flawed past moving toward liberal ideals of tolerance, openness and opportunity, helped along by an activist government that secures individual rights against various forms of social oppression and works for greater economic equality. Clinton’s Eden is clearly in the future. Her stated goal is to ‘break down the barriers that hold Americans back, including the barriers of bigotry and discrimination.’ America becomes more itself as it moves toward progressive values. Clinton cannot promise revolution, being constrained by effectively being the incumbent. But Clinton, as a sober, levelheaded Midwesterner, would not be comfortable in a revolutionary role anyway. Besides, a more liberal future is made inevitable by politically advantageous demographic change.”

America the “crippled.” America the evolving. These are two parallel, non-intersecting convictions about our country. You might think the adherents of these views would have something to learn from each other. But there has been no real dialogue — or even real argument — between them. Correctly, Gerson observes the fundamental shift that has occurred within American culture: “Trump has accelerated America’s movement toward political division by class and education. Many blue-collar voters, particularly white men, have been drawn strongly to his message. Many white-collar voters, particularly college-educated women, have been turned off by it. What used to be a culture war is increasingly a class conflict — though the two generously overlap. This type of clash is bitter in its own, special way — bringing out deep resentments toward elites and sneering condescension by elites.”

The bitterness of this presidential campaign has guaranteed one certain outcome. The next American president will be someone whom a large portion of the country finds sympathetic and a large portion of the country finds utterly alien, even illegitimate. “Urging national unity is incumbent on any president. But our political culture is sicker and more damaged than usual. The worlds we live in are further apart. A message of national healing — presenting the vision of a single nation — has seldom been more urgent.”

This will require a skill the candidates have not displayed in the current campaign — a capacity for empathy, compassion and forgiveness. Near the end of the most bitter period in American history, in 1865 Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as president for the second time, winning reelection in the midst of the Civil War—an unprecedented development on its own! His second inaugural address is perhaps the greatest one ever delivered by a president. He eloquently summarized the two positions during the War, but, instead of bombast and triumph, Lincoln offered another vision for the American Republic:

**“Both parties deprecated war, but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish, and the war came.**

One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war, while the Government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully.

The Almighty has His own purposes. 'Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.' If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'

*With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."* [Italics added]

May our new leaders call us as a nation to the compassion, empathy and forgiveness so evident in Lincoln's address. Our national leaders (the president and all congressional leaders) and those at the state and local level must place the bitterness and vitriol behind us as a nation and they must lead as servants of this Republic, not as triumphant demagogues. May God graciously give them the courage to do so!

See Michael Gerson, *Washington Post* (8 November 2016).