

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska  
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### ***Evangelicals, a Free Press and Donald Trump***

Among the various voting blocs in the United States, 81% of Evangelical Christians voted for Donald Trump for president in 2016. There were undoubtedly many reasons for this unbridled allegiance to a man who, in terms of character, honesty and lifestyle, only a few years ago would never have earned their vote. But his opponent was Hillary Clinton and most evangelicals viewed her as a worse choice. In my reading and in my conversations with evangelical Christians, the consensus among evangelicals seems to be that God has given us a political “savior” who will lead America back to its roots. He will bring about an America that is great economically, culturally and spiritually. I have been absolutely amazed at the absence of any critical evaluation or concern among evangelicals about some of the things Trump has said and has done. Only time will tell if this nearly blind allegiance to President Trump will yield the results evangelicals hope for.

But as a Christian leader, I wish to raise a very serious concern. Although I expect that some of what I say will make evangelicals angry, my concern is President Trump’s conscious, deliberate and apparently calculated attack on the free press of this nation. The First Amendment to the Constitution states that “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech or of the press . . .” Past presidents have taken out after the free press of this nation in a variety of ways. For example, President John Adams in the late 1790s had Congress pass the Alien and Sedition Acts, which, among other things, were aimed at silencing the newspapers in the nation which were critical of his policies. These acts would later be regarded as betraying the Constitution. President Nixon and Vice President Spiro Agnew were vitriolic in their criticism of the press and said so many times. President Obama, early in his administration, unsuccessfully took out after Fox News. [It should be stated that the terms “free press” and “media” today are basically interchangeable terms, for “media” is more than newspapers; “media” includes print newspapers, TV and radio news, cable TV, blogs and tweets. All such “media” are protected by the First Amendment.]

But here are some of the things President Trump’s administration has done in its attack on the free press:

- In an interview with the *New York Times*, Trump adviser Stephen Bannon stated: “I want you to quote this. The media here is the opposition party.” As Bannon painted a picture of his ideal political world, he envisioned a world where the press would be “silent.” “The media should be embarrassed and humiliated and keep its mouth shut and just listen for a while.”

- Kellyanne Conway in an interview dealing with, among other things, the size of the crowds at Trump's inauguration, used the memorable "alternative facts" phrase. As a Christian interested in the pursuit of truth and facts, facts are facts. "Alternative facts" are not truth; they are lies, misrepresenting the facts.
- The White House recently banned reporters from CNN, the New York Times, Politico, the Los Angeles Times and BuzzFeed from attending a non-televised briefing, but gave access to other media outlets, including conservative news organizations. Obviously, the White House press secretary has the power to exclude some and include others, but historically the press is critical of sitting governments in power. That is part of governing in a democracy. Such an act should be disturbing to Christians. It sends a message (intended or unintended), "write what we like or you will not be invited to briefings." For us as Christians, is this acceptable? How would we regard another president excluding news outlets we consider conservative?
- Finally and most disturbingly, President Trump has declared many times, most recently in his address before the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), that the media is "the enemy of the people," a chilling phrase that brings up historical memories of totalitarianism seeking to control what people read. Joseph Stalin used this phrase, as did Adolf Hitler's regime. It is a phrase that historically has been used of totalitarian leaders, not democratic governments. The phrase, "the enemy of the people," was first used in 1789 during the French Revolution. The revolutionaries, especially the radical Jacobins, used this phrase to refer to anyone who opposed them. In 1794 the Jacobins adopted a law which established a revolutionary tribunal "to punish the enemies of the people" and codified political crimes punishable by death, including "spreading false news to divide or trouble the people." Lenin, the Bolshevik leader of Russia, argued that Jacobin terror against the "enemies of the people" was "instructive" and needed to be utilized in revolutionary Russia in 1917.

As a Christian, I am disturbed by President Trump's administration attacking the free press of the United States. I am in sympathy with many of the policies Trump is advocating. I totally support his recent appointment to the Supreme Court. I support his educational initiatives, many of them necessary for a thoroughgoing reform of public education in the US. But, we live in a democracy where disagreement and critical evaluation of policies and proposals are a given. Every president in our history has had to deal with this. Former President Bush offered some wise counsel to President Trump: When asked about Trump's claim that the media is the "enemy of the people," Bush warned that an independent press is essential to democracy and that denouncing the press at home makes it difficult for the United States to preach democratic values abroad. "I consider the media to be indispensable to democracy," Bush said. "We need an independent media to hold people like me to account." "Power can be very addictive and it can be corrosive and it's important for the media to call to account people who abuse power, whether it be here or elsewhere," he added. Bush noted that during his presidency, he sought to persuade people like Russian President Vladimir Putin to respect a free press. "It's kind of

hard to tell others to have an independent free press when we're not willing to have one ourselves," Bush said.

As I understand the Bible, Christians are to serve as champions of the values and virtues dear to our God. We do not live in a totalitarian nation, thank the Lord. We live in a democratic-republic, and, as the First Amendment declares, a free press is one of the distinctives of our democratic-republic. Holding our leaders accountable, including President Trump and his administration, is one of the privileges we have as Christians. We should declare our support for Trump's policies. But we should also hold him accountable for what he says and what members of his administration say. Regardless of how it criticizes him, the free press is not "an enemy of the people." And there are no such things as "alternative facts." Respecting and honoring the Constitution is one of the duties of the president. He should also set an example by proclaiming truth. And he should be humble enough to accept criticism and a critical evaluation of his policies. That proposition is at the heart of a democracy. May God give him the enablement to do so.

See Abby Phillip in the *Washington Post* (27 February 2017); Andrew Higgins in the *New York Times* (27 February 2017); Paul Farhi in the *Washington Post* (27 February 2017); E.J. Dionne in the *Washington Post* (20 February 2017); and Richard Cohen in the *Washington Post* (21 February 2017).