

A LETTER TO PRESIDENT BARAK OBAMA FROM A BAPTIST PASTOR
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Text: 1 Peter 2:13-17

Introduction: With the inauguration of the 44th President of the United States coming up on Tuesday, January 20th, I have spent a lot of time trying to figure out if I could use the event in a sermon today. How would I approach such a topic? I decided after much wavering back and forth to address the historic event by writing a letter to our new President.

One would have to be very naive to think that a letter from me would ever reach the desk of the president. But I have believed for a long time that "If you don't ask, you don't get." Besides, I tried one other time to send a letter to an important figure, not a president but the wife of a president. In 1996 I was the interim executive director of the Historical Commission of the SBC. One of my responsibilities was to edit a journal entitled *Baptist History and Heritage*. This position may have been the most enjoyable responsibility I had as a professional. I really liked planning thematic issues and I came up with a great idea to publish in January 1997 an issue on "Baptists in the White House."

Do you know how many Baptists have served as President of the United States? There have been four Baptists who served as our President. Warren G. Harding (Republican) of the famous Teapot Dome (located near Casper, WY) scandal was considered one of the country's worst presidents. Harry S. Truman (Democrat) of course was well known as a Baptist, who had a rather colorful vocabulary. Jimmy Carter (Democrat), the Man from Plains, and Bill Clinton (Democrat) are the other two Baptists who served as President. I concluded that an issue with articles on these individuals would be interesting to a lot of people - and it was. The first two were American Baptists, the last two were Southern Baptists.

In preparing the issue of the journal I decided that I needed someone to open with an editorial on being Baptist in the White House. I didn't think that asking Presidents Carter or Clinton would be a good idea, so I wrote to Rosalyn Carter (who actually is a Methodist). Her initial response was to turn me down. I quickly wrote back and pleaded with her, pointing out that not all Southern Baptists were so negative toward her husband and that she was the one person who could do a good and insightful job. After putting the letter in the mail I immediately thought "How audacious of me." But a few weeks later her personal secretary called and said that Mrs. Carter would write the editorial, which she did. So persistence, even if audacious, paid off. So, who knows whether a letter to the President might actually reach his desk?

One other thought, writing a letter may well be composed for the one who is writing rather than the reader. In that sense my addressing a letter to the 44th President of the United States may wind up being a vehicle for me to express some of my thoughts much more so than believing that I might convince the most powerful person in the world to take seriously my comments. So with that in mind, my letter may only do me, and hopefully a few friends like you, any good. Be that as it may, here is my letter to the President.

January 20, 2009

Dear President Obama:

Congratulations on your historic election to serve as the 44th President of the United States of America. I along with many millions of people in our country who voted for you, who voted for your opponent or opponents, or who did not even vote, share the excitement of this historic event in the life of our nation. The reality of your election has far exceeded the visions and dreams of national heroes, such as President Abraham Lincoln and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I am the interim pastor of the First Baptist Church in Boulder, Colorado, a state where your very nomination as the presidential candidate of your party made history. Our congregation has some Democrats, some Republicans, and some independents. Regardless of our political commitments, we recognize that you are the president of all of us. As you embark upon your historic journey as the leader of our nation, and even of the free world, I encourage you to focus on several important challenges. And, if you do so, you will lead our nation so very well!

First, we support you as the defender of the Constitution of the United States. Your experience as a student and teacher of Constitutional law gives us comfort in knowing that you will understand and interpret the foundation of our democracy in a consistent, fair, and legal manner. Your power is authorized in that historic document. Our rights as persons in the majority or in the minority are preserved on its pages.

Many in the religious community would call upon you to follow the teachings of the Bible, and some would insist that you give the Written Word precedence over the Constitution itself. And, I am sure most of my fellow American Baptists would *not* be among those making such a demand. I have heard enough of your story to know your appreciation of the Bible and your commitment to your faith. And I know that when you take your oath of office it will take place with your hand upon a historic copy of the Bible, the Bible on which Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office of the President of the United States in 1861. The Bible is the written moral and ethical guide for those of us who give thanks to the religious freedom afforded in our nation, but the Constitution is the legal guide for those of us who are citizens of this land. As a Christian, I love and appreciate the Bible. As a citizen of the United States of America I am in awe of the wisdom of the Constitution!

The oath that you take will be to "preserve, protect and defend" the Constitution of the United States of America, not to implement the teachings of the Scriptures of any religious group, including those of us who are Baptists. In fact, as you well know, that very Constitution has only one article, Article Six, which even mentions religion. And it demands that there will be no religious test for anyone who seeks to hold federal office. That includes everyone who seeks high office in our country.

On the other hand, the Bill of Rights, which was adopted in 1791, has a distinctive Baptist flair to the very first amendment. It was our Baptist ancestors who insisted upon separation of church and state and religious liberty for all, *I repeat for all*. They influenced James Madison, who introduced a set of amendments to Constitution in the very first Congress of the United States, and who provided the foundation for the opening article of the First Amendment, which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . ." In your efforts to acknowledge all of the citizens of this country, don't be drawn into the temptation to favor or to discriminate against any religious group over others, and always defend the right of every citizen of this land to believe and practice his or her faith, or not to believe at all in terms of religion, in complete freedom from state control. The cause of conscience is the foundation of true belief and commitment. We Baptists simply ask that we have the freedom to practice and propagate our faith, and that the success or failure of our religion rests upon our commitment, not upon support or discrimination by the government.

Again, I remind you that although the Constitution calls for governance by the majority, it is a unique document, which also insists upon the rights of the minority. We Baptists have been in both categories, and I assure you that history affirms that a religion is at its best when it does not get too close to the state, and can certainly reveal its worse qualities when it receives a favored status by well meaning politicians seeking votes.

I also assure you that we Baptists here in Boulder will support and defend your commitment to the Constitution and never seek to replace it with any other document, including the words and teachings of our faith as found in our Scriptures, a book that we unquestionably cherish. We will speak out openly

against any and all who wish to minimize the Constitution, or interpret it in a manner inconsistent with its nature, purpose and teachings.

Second, I ask that you use every resource in your means to *unite us*. I, like many millions of our citizens were introduced to you when you spoke at the 2004 Democratic Convention. You called upon us to recognize that there is no Red America, no Blue America, that there is the United States of America. This is a really nice slogan, but it also is a dream to be achieved. You, more than any politician that I have known in recent years, have the potential to move us toward the reality of these words. And never more has there been a time when our nation needs to be united. Yet I am also aware that commitment to the principle of unity will be tested time and again. Be strong!

For too long we have been a divided people. The very nature of our society results in diversity: ethnic diversity; religious diversity; economic diversity; educational diversity; cultural diversity. But diversity does not necessitate division. It does demand respect, and you have demonstrated that since your emergence upon the American landscape. Your inclusion of religious figures from diametrical perspectives in your inauguration clearly conveys the conviction that your words are not shallow. But diversity is best achieved when it arises out of the context of dialogue. All of our citizens must be encouraged to speak, and all of us must be assured that our words will be heard. We will trust that you will hear our voices and then determine what is best for our nation and its people.

We who are American Baptists have a history of affirming diversity. In a real sense your parentage mirrors the diversity of our denomination's make-up. Although a narrow majority of our membership is Caucasian, forty-seven percent of our membership is African American. At our best we have been known throughout our history for our unity in diversity. Because of this, we are better people.

We Baptists here in Boulder know that respect of diversity, that commitment to dialogue, that open and honest discussion, and that empathy and understanding toward those who differ with us leads to a stronger people. We also remind you and commit ourselves not simply to tolerate those with whom we disagree, but to demand liberty for ourselves and for others, a hallmark of our religious tradition and a quality of our historic contributions.

We pledge to you that we will continue to speak out for diversity and call for unity in our society. We pledge to you that we will continue to find ways to break down those barriers that divide us. We commit ourselves to listen, to hear, and to work with those whom we have differences, and that we will cherish all open and honest dialogue. In other words, we will do our part to unite our people here in our part of the world, as you seek to unite the citizens of our nation.

Third, in all of the important decisions that you will make, remember our children and our children's children. I have often been impressed by the care that Jesus had toward children. In fact, he simplified our faith by teaching all of us that we should have the faith of the little children. Such faith was simple, but it was a confident, trusting, and authentic faith.

You are the leader of our nation and the leader of the free world. We know that in the end, you must earn our respect when it comes to the future for our children and our grandchildren. But with two delightful children of your own, we are confident that you are committed to this very thing. You and First Lady Michelle Obama share the vision of all of us - to make the world of our children better than the one in which we live. And both of you have realized the fulfillment of that very promise in your respective journeys, as have so many of us here in Boulder.

So many of the decisions that you must make during the next few years will affect the future generations. You must work hard to insure that they will not have to carry more of a burden than that which is required of this nation's citizens. You must lead us to avoid placing an unfair tax burden upon our children and grandchildren because we lacked the courage and commitment to address significant

issues that would affect our political destinies. You must find a way that will reduce the financial burden of a national indebtedness that hangs around their necks because of our reckless and irresponsible spending and open-ended borrowing.

I am impressed by your commitment to leave a world that is better, cleaner, and more sustainable than the one that you received. We have inherited the future from our children. These are not idle, or flamboyant words. They reflect a responsibility that we all must share.

We at First Baptist Church commit ourselves to being good stewards of our world, responsible parents and grandparents, and good examples that brings out the best in others and in ourselves. We are assured that you share this commitment.

Fourth, cherish your personal faith. It appears to me that you have had an interesting personal faith journey. You have seen both the positive and negative influence of religious leaders in your life. You have the ability to separate in Biblical terms the wheat from the chaff. You have the intelligence and the wisdom to find the good in those around you and to understand the frailties of those same people.

We simply pray that you will be able to have and practice an authentic faith, which will influence the decisions that you make and validate the integrity of your convictions. We at First Baptist Church promise to pray for you and your family. We pray that you will have the strength, the courage, and the wisdom necessary to lead our nation in such challenging, yet opportune times. And we commit ourselves to encouraging you and your administration in constructive ways that make your work easier

And finally, lead us in becoming a better people. We have spent so much time dealing with problems, issues, divisions, and ideologies that we have seldom simply enunciated to ourselves and to others what kind of people we want to be.

We, the American people are a good people. When tragedies strike around the world, we respond unselfishly. When injustice appears, we find a way to address it. When challenges appear, we have risen to the occasion and met them. Our generation, like every generation must learn anew the lesson that we are stewards of all the blessings that have been bestowed upon us. Remind us constantly of this self-evident truth!

With all of the resources, with all of the tools, with all of the passion of our people, I call upon you to appeal to our very best nature. You have the understanding and the capacity to do so. You can make us both humble and proud! Please take the time to do so!

And <http://rmls.com/RC2/engine/reportGenerator.asp> we promise to respond to the needs around us, to see the good when others see only the faults, and to respond to our better nature.

In conclusion, note that I have not mentioned the economy, the military, regulations, communications, health issues, aging, justice, scientific study, infrastructure, and so many more concerns, which are related to every aspect of our lives. I have only alluded to budgets and their impact upon the future, the environment. There are so many responsibilities placed upon your office. These and other issues will absorb so much of your time and that of your administration. I trust that you will seek and receive direction and recommendations from qualified members of your administration and that you will act in what you consider to be in the best interest of our nation and its citizens.

Should you ever find yourself in Boulder, Colorado on a Sunday morning, we invite you to worship us. You will find the Baptists of Boulder friendly, intelligent, and caring. And you will find a great place to worship the God of us all.

Sincerely,
Slayden Yarbrough, Interim Pastor