

Uncommon Decency

Christian Civility in an Uncivil World



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REVISED &
EXPANDED

Convicted Civility

Can We Be Faithful & Polite Too?



The two cars faced each other, bumpers almost touching and horns blaring. Neither driver was willing to yield.

It was a narrow city street, crowded tighter by several double-parked delivery trucks. The two drivers who had encountered each other in this obstacle course were both in an uncompromising mood. Finally one car edged forward, pushing the other backward. The driver of the nudged car angrily backed out of the way. But he quickly jumped out of the car and, as the other driver passed by, let loose a series of curses and obscene gestures.

Several of us who were passing along the street had stopped to watch this little drama. One woman offered a poignant assessment before she moved on: "Lordy, sometimes it makes you think that everything is falling apart!"

I don't know whether the woman on the sidewalk had ever read "The Second Coming," a poem written in 1921 by W. B. Yeats. But her image—"everything is falling apart"—is one that

Yeats also used to express a sense of social crisis:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.¹

Yeats and the woman on the sidewalk are not alone in their worries about trends in human relations. Laments about the loss of civility—simple politeness and courtesy—are common these days in editorials, articles, books and sermons.

I share that concern. Things really are falling apart. Common decency is on the wane. When challenged, people refuse to back off. They resent having to give others a little space. We talk past each other in many of our most important national and international discussions. Professions like law, medicine, education and finance have begun to lose the public trust. Violence is on the rise in our cities and villages. “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

The angry encounter between the two drivers on the city street can be seen as a metaphor for the whole. There they all stand, bumper-to-bumper, horns blaring: pro-lifers and pro-choicers; gay liberationists and defenders of the traditional family; husbands and wives facing each other in courts of law; artists and legislators; “politically correct” intellectuals and crusading fundamentalists; warring ethnic groups in Eastern Europe; Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants; Arabs and Jews in the Middle East.

As a Christian I also worry that many believers seem to be contributing more to the problem than to the solution. Well-known clergy tell their followers that the time has come for a

“battle” against the forces of unbelief. The TV cameras show Christians on the picket lines, angrily shaking their fists at their opponents. We are often good examples of the kind of difficult people whom Yeats described as being “full of passionate intensity.”

When the elder George Bush made a speech a number of years ago calling Americans to be “a kinder, gentler people,” I responded with a spirited “Amen!” And I thought kindness and gentleness should be especially characteristic of those of us who are Christians.

We were created for kind and gentle living. Indeed, kindness and gentleness are two of the fruit-of-the-Spirit characteristics that the apostle Paul mentions in Galatians 5. When Christians fail to measure up to the standards of kindness and gentleness, we are not the people God meant us to be.

NOT CIVILITY ALONE

Not that civility is the be-all and end-all of life. We will not solve all our problems simply by becoming more civil people. There are times when it is appropriate to manifest some very uncivil feelings. “Passionate intensity” is not always out of place. If I am going to be a more civil person, it cannot be because I have learned to ignore my convictions.

A journalist hit the mark in a review essay dealing with urban problems. He said that Americans are facing a crisis in our cities because we “have let our standards of civility *and truth* waste dangerously away.”² I am glad he included something about a lack of concern for the truth. It is not enough merely to reclaim civility. We need to cultivate a civility that does not play fast and loose with the truth.

As Martin Marty has observed, one of the real problems in modern life is that the people who are good at being civil often

lack strong convictions and people who have strong convictions often lack civility.³ I like that way of stating the issue. We need to find a way of combining a civil outlook with a “passionate intensity” about our convictions. The real challenge is to come up with a *convicted civility*.

“INNER” CIVILITY

Civility is public politeness. It means that we display tact, moderation, refinement and good manners toward people who are different from us. It isn’t enough, though, to make an outward show of politeness. Being civil has an “inner” side as well.

To be sure, for some people civility is only a form of play-acting. A friend was telling me about the difficult time he and his wife were experiencing in their relationship. “We go through whole weeks where we’re lucky if we can simply manage to be *civil* to each other,” he said. For him civility was not a very pleasant arrangement. It felt like a form of hypocrisy. Being civil meant that he and his wife would mask their hostile feelings with polite words and grudging accommodation.

In fact, my friend isn’t alone. Many people today think of civility as nothing more than an outward, often hypocritical shell. But this cynical understanding of civility is yet another sign of the decline of real civility. In the past civility was understood in much richer terms. To be civil was to genuinely care about the larger society. It required a heartfelt commitment to your fellow citizens. It was a willingness to promote the well-being of people who were very different, including people who seriously disagreed with you on important matters. Civility wasn’t merely an external show of politeness. It included an inner politeness as well.

In *The Hiding Place* Corrie ten Boom tells of the time she and her father needed to find a safer place for a Jewish mother and

child they had been concealing from the Nazis. A local clergyman came into their watch shop, and they asked him if he would take the Jews into his home. The pastor refused. On an impulse, Corrie ran to fetch the Jewish baby and brought it to him. But the pastor was not moved. “No. Definitely not,” he said. “We could lose our lives for that Jewish child.”

At that point, Father ten Boom stepped forward and took the baby into his own arms. He peered into the child’s face for a moment, his white beard grazing against the tiny cheek. Then he looked up and spoke to the pastor: “You say we could lose our lives for this child. I would consider that the greatest honor that could come to my family.”⁴

That was a wonderful display of civility. No mere outward show of politeness could have sustained the ten Booms through their fearful months of service to oppressed Jewish people. They had a deep and costly inner commitment to those God had identified as their neighbors, even though these neighbors represented a different cultural and religious ethos. Their civility was hardly an “empty shell.”

FLOURISHING IN HUMANNESS

I already said that I believe being civil is a way of becoming more like what God intends us to be. Though he would not have put it in those terms, the ancient philosopher Aristotle would have agreed. He was firmly convinced that civility is necessary for people to realize their human potential. Along those lines, he insisted that we human beings are essentially “political animals.” “Political” comes from the Greek word *polis*, which pertains to the city—like the Latin *civitas*, the root for our word “civil.” Aristotle was convinced that we cannot become truly human until we can capably function as citizens of the city.

To be good citizens, we must learn to move beyond relation-

ships that are based exclusively on familiarity and intimacy. We must learn how to behave among strangers, to treat people with courtesy not because we know them, but simply because we see them as human beings like ourselves. When we learn the skills of citizenship, Aristotle taught, we have begun to flourish in our humanness.

Acorns do not realize their innate possibilities until they grow branches and sprout leaves. And people do not attain their full potential until they learn how to behave in the public square. In their kind and brave treatment of their Jewish neighbors, Aristotle would have said, the ten Booms had learned some important lessons about what it means to be human.

The great Greek thinker's views on civility and citizenship have been echoed in the teachings of many Christians. St. Thomas Aquinas, for one, was convinced that the Bible confirmed Aristotle's philosophy on this subject. And John Calvin pursued a similar line of thought when he said that public life provides us with the opportunity "to shape our manners in accordance with civil justice."⁵

What Aristotle, Aquinas and Calvin are suggesting has profound implications for the way we make our way through the world. The woman on the sidewalk was expressing similar thoughts when she wondered aloud whether "everything is falling apart." She knew that the incivility she had witnessed on that cramped street was a deep violation of something important. If too much of that kind of thing happens, then we are on our way to losing our humanness. Things *will* fall apart.

THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVILITY

But how can we hold onto strongly felt convictions while still nurturing a spirit that is authentically kind and gentle? Is it possible to keep these things together?

The answer is that it is not impossible—but it isn't easy. Convicted civility is something we have to work at. We have to work at it because both sides of the equation are very important. Civility is important. And so is conviction.

The Bible itself recognizes the difficulty of maintaining convicted civility. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews lays the struggle out very clearly: we must "*pursue* peace with every one," he tells us, while we work at the same time to cultivate that "holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14).

For some of us, "pursuit" is a very appropriate image. Civility is an elusive goal. We have to chase after it, and the chasing seems never to end. We think we have finally caught it—and then civility slips from our grasp again. Just when we think we have figured out how we're going to live with the latest cult or how to tolerate the most recent public display of sexual "freedom," someone seems to up the ante; and the limits of our patience are tested all over again. So the pursuit goes on and on.

The Christian experience in North America has been one long pursuit of civility. When the earliest generations of North American Christians were tempted by incivility, they were dealing primarily with their relationships with other Christians. Congregationalists had a hard time tolerating Baptists, and Roman Catholics fought with Presbyterians and Episcopalians. After a while, though, the skirmishes subsided; Protestants began to learn how to live in relative peace with each other, and with Catholics and Jews—as well as with the "fringe" types such as Mennonites and Quakers.

And then another set of problems emerged with newer religious movements. Mormons practiced polygamy. Shakers and other groups introduced novel patterns of communal living. Jehovah's Witnesses refused to allow their sick children to re-

ceive blood transfusions, and Christian Scientists rejected medical treatment altogether.

Traditional Christians gradually found ways of dealing with these challenges too. In some cases, as with Mormon polygamy, they set limits on what they would tolerate. With some groups they simply decided to live and let live. In other cases they worked out practical strategies for coping with specific excesses—adult Jehovah's Witnesses may refuse medical treatment for themselves, for instance, but when their children face life-threatening situations, they are temporarily made wards of the state so that the necessary transfusions can be given. After years of trial and error, a roughly acceptable arrangement was in place, and people with different religious beliefs and practices were able to live together with a fair degree of national harmony.

But the challenges of recent decades have sent us back to the drawing board. Now we have mosques in our neighborhoods and New Age devotees in our schools and businesses. Some professors openly call for a return to witchcraft and other ancient pagan practices. Homosexual couples want our churches to bless their "marriages." Cable television delivers pornography into our living rooms.

It is tempting to conclude that these developments have brought us to a point where civility is no longer possible. Isn't the social bond being stretched to the breaking point? Hasn't America's diversity reached proportions where we have lost any reasonable basis for living together in an atmosphere of tolerance and goodwill?

Perhaps. But as a Christian I am not ready to give up in despair. It has never been easy for the church to nurture a convicted civility. Indeed, when the biblical writer first urged the followers of Christ to "pursue peace with everyone," the society

was at least as multicultural and pluralistic as ours is today. The early Christians were surrounded by a variety of religious and moral systems. Their pagan neighbors worshiped many gods, and that worship was sometimes so depraved that it would even be shocking in today's permissive culture. What would we think of a religious service in which men were ritually castrated? And the representatives of the dominant culture were not inclined to live-and-let-live when it came to dealing with the early Christian community.

Our forebears in the faith paid dearly for their commitment to the gospel. If they could work at treating people with gentleness and reverence in such an environment, what is our excuse for attempting less?

PROMOTING THE CAUSE

There are two obvious ways to produce more people who combine strong convictions with a civil spirit: either we will have to help some civil people to become more convicted, or we will have to work at getting some convicted people to become more civil. Or *both*, since each of these strategies is important.

The first requires a kind of evangelism. We need to work at inviting the "nice" people in our society to ground their lives in robust convictions about the meaning of the gospel. But in order to do that, we have to be sure that we are doing our best to present discipleship as an attractive pattern of life. This means that we must also devote our energies to the second strategy: learning as Christians to be a gentler and more respectful people.

I admit that trying to make believers gentler and more "tolerant" will strike some Christians as wrong-headed. What about the devout, passionate people who picket abortion clinics and

organize boycotts against offensive television programs? They might worry that becoming civil will mean a weakening of their faith. I am convinced that this is not necessarily so. Developing a convicted civility can help us become more mature Christians. Cultivating civility can make strong Christian convictions even stronger. That is what I want to try to show in these pages.