

Resisting Politics as Usual: Civility as Christian Witness

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@ *this point*, March 2012

Many who hoped that the tenor of the 2012 presidential campaign would rise above the negativity we've come to expect in American politics had that optimism laid to rest by Rush Limbaugh's radio show the last week of February. In the heat of controversy surrounding a ruling that religious organizations would have to fund contraception as a part of health care reform, a young Georgetown law student had the audacity to testify before members of Congress. In response to her defense of the requirement for institutions like her own, Limbaugh not only dismissed her argument and her right to voice it, but called her a "slut" and a "prostitute" in the process. Public outrage over Limbaugh's attack was swift and significant, and dozens of advertisers deserted his program in protest. But response from politicians campaigning for the presidency was more tepid. Each of the Republican primary candidates acted as if Limbaugh's only crime was a poor choice of words, and one dismissed his attack as nothing more than the "outrageous" rhetoric of an "entertainer." Limbaugh's personal attack on the young woman was barely noteworthy from those invested in "politics as usual."

Sadly, the incivility Limbaugh represents is pretty commonplace in American politics. And in case we are tempted to see incivility as a transgression only Republicans commit, we can quickly recall Bill Maher's treatment of Senate candidate Christine O'Donnell and former governor Sarah Palin in the last presidential campaign to set us straight on that myth. For at least the last dozen years, probably more, our political environment has become noticeably more vitriolic and demeaning, from both ends of the ideological spectrum. Coming up with instances of this incivility is easy; limiting ourselves to just a couple of examples is the hard part. We've seen members of Congress publicly finger-wag the President of the United States, and interrupt his State of the Union address with shouts of "liar!" We've endured a state party blog labeling women of its political persuasion "babes" and denigrating women in the other major caucus as "dogs." We've seen a politician booed in a debate because he invoked the Golden Rule! And we've watched protestors shout down their local representatives in town hall meetings about health care reform, convinced as they were that such behavior is a proper means of communication in what passes for the American political forum.

Far from rare, these displays of incivility have become all too characteristic of American politics, and of the broader public discourse in this country. But many Americans are impatient for something better. In a poll conducted soon after the 2010 midterm elections by the Public Religion Research Institute and Religion News Service, nearly 60% of respondents viewed politics as more divisive today than it's been at any point in our past, and 80% responded that the absence of civil discourse in the United States is a serious problem. There's nothing to indicate that the tone has improved in the 2012 election cycle.

What is the alternative? *Is there an alternative?* Or should we resign ourselves to this negativity as a natural by-product of "politics as usual"? Despite the abundance of evidence to the

contrary, I am convinced that we are capable of healthier political debate. I still hold out hope for truly *civil* political debate regarding the issues that divide us. To me civility consists of a set of virtues that governs our conversations and interactions with one another. Specifically, I understand civility to be “the exercise of patience, integrity, humility, and mutual respect in civil conversation, even (and especially) with those with whom we disagree.”¹ Civility requires that we treat our fellow participants in political debate as conversation partners, not obstacles to overcome, even as we acknowledge our disagreements with them and remain committed to our particular convictions and worldviews. Civility does not guarantee that we will reach substantial agreement on issues like abortion, sexual mores, or the environment, but infusing our public debates with civility would promise to make our exploration of those disagreements more productive. Civility does not ask us necessarily to retreat from our most cherished values, but it does require us to negotiate our disagreements with our fellow citizens in healthier ways, ways that honor and respect them as citizens and human beings.

In a political age in which respect doesn’t come naturally to many of the players, what is needed is a kind of public intervention to convince our leaders that we wish public debate to be conducted a different way. Among the possible sources for such an intervention, I think religious communities could play a particularly useful and powerful role. Now, that is perhaps a dubious claim from a member of the Reformed Christian tradition like myself, whose theological forefather, John Calvin, was fond of calling his antagonists “stupid” (and worse) for disagreeing with him. Mine is the tradition of the Puritans, whose reputation for banishing or hanging those who dissented from their rules is somewhat misleading but not undeserved. Mine is the theological tradition of the Presbyterian Church (USA), one of several mainline denominations in the United States that endlessly debates the appropriateness of same-sex unions and the ordination of LGBT persons, sometimes with demonizing and fear-mongering language hurled in both directions. How are religious traditions like mine to offer leadership in the public project of civility?

Theological traditions often have contributed to division in civil society, a reminder that leaps from the tongues of religion’s cultured despisers. But I want to argue that the better angels of theological traditions just as often emphasize values that promote civility and respectful engagement. As a Christian, I believe it is pretty straightforward to claim that the virtues that contribute to civility—patience, integrity, humility, and mutual respect—make up character that my tradition commends to all who consider themselves children of divine grace.

Take humility, for example. Humility is an important Christian corollary to the belief that God is God and we are not. To believe the Christian story requires that we respect the chasm that exists between Creator and creation. God is God and we are (only) God’s creation, which means there is no comparison between God’s wisdom and the knowledge that human beings possess. By virtue of the fact that we are not God, theologically aware human beings have to admit that there are things we do not know, there is truth we may not possess, and the convictions we hold may not be God’s last word on the issues that confront us. We are hindered in our grasp of what is right and

¹ James Calvin Davis, *In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues That Divide Us* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 159.

good by our finitude and by our flaws. We are dogged by the limits of our createdness, limits that are exacerbated by our failures—the selfishness and pride that in our more theological moments we call “sin.” The limits of finitude and failure remind us that no individual or community has an air-tight claim on the truth, which should in turn infuse us with a dose of humility when we engage other people in debates over issues that divide us.

The acknowledgement of our limitations encourages humility, but it also encourages patience. Patience is an essential component of Christian character, not a threat but a complement to faithful convictions. This patience is rooted in humility about the limits to human wisdom, but also in a celebration of the sovereignty of God, who reveals the truth on God’s own time. God is the final arbiter of truth, and God will make the right and the good known at the end of human history. Until that time, Christians pursue the truth, but with a certain amount of patience with the slow pace of human understanding, the mysteries of God, and the dissenting views of others.

When we humbly and patiently engage others in conversation, despite sometimes intense disagreements, it gives us the opportunity to display another Christian virtue, integrity. A person of integrity is someone who is true to herself and her convictions, when it is convenient but also when it is not. Integrity is the kind of consistency of character the apostle commends in 2 Timothy, when he urges Christian evangelists faced with changing cultural tides and “itching ears” to “proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2, NSRV). We expect the person of integrity to be allergic to hypocrisy and unafraid of prevailing winds. We expect someone of integrity to represent himself and his opponents with honesty. The Christian with integrity is true to faith and morals, in season and out of season.

The exercise of humility, patience, and integrity toward others contributes to the exhibition of the final virtue essential for living together in disagreement, mutual respect. Genesis tells us that God made us in the divine image: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27, NSRV). The idea that we are made in the *imago Dei* represents the fundamental value every human being possesses in the eyes of God. Sin distorts the reflection of the divine in us, but we remain creatures of pinnacle value, beings worthy of respect, as a result of being created in the image of God and graced by God’s love. When Christians treat one another and strangers alike with respect, they honor the *imago Dei* in the other, and mimic the grace of God.

Each of the virtues of civility is a fruit of the Spirit, a lived response to the offer of divine grace. Taken together, these virtues provide theological motivation for Christians to prioritize civility among themselves and in their public engagement with other people. In other words, a commitment to political civility becomes an expression of Christian character. Christian humility reminds us of the limits to our perspective, and therefore commends to us openness to the possibility that we could learn something from conversation, even conversation with our ideological opponents. Christian patience reminds us that God unveils truth on God’s time, so that we should feel free to use the time between God’s time to listen to and struggle with one another in

our discovery of what is right and good. Christian integrity insists that our debates with those who disagree with us be governed by honesty, and that we resist the cultural acceptability of distorting the positions of others for political gain. (Christian integrity also demands that those who claim religious allegiance with us to secure our votes be rewarded with them only if their political behavior proves consistent with the religious identity they hurry to claim.) And Christian respect requires us to see everyone in the ideological debates that divide us—those who agree with us and those who seem to subscribe to a very different ideology or worldview—as fellow citizens and (more importantly) children of God whom we cannot demonize just because we disagree. In short, a commitment to these Christian principles of character coincidentally requires a commitment to political civility. For the Christian, civility is not just necessary for a stable society; it’s a matter of religious obligation.

My argument for seeing the virtues of civility as Christian commitments is admittedly a construction from the best impulses of my tradition, rather than a lesson drawn straight from the pages of any single Christian theologian. To be fair, in fact, many of the prominent thinkers of classic Christianity would have found it difficult to adhere to my call for theologically motivated civility in the controversies of their time and place. But one figure in Christian history would serve appropriately as a poster child for civility, if we desired one. Roger Williams (1603-1683) was a Puritan who managed to get himself banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for espousing various theological and political doctrines at odds with the ruling parties there. He went on to found Rhode Island on the principle of religious freedom. In his verbal sparring with the Puritans who exiled him and in his work as an officer of a fledgling colony, Williams consistently defended civility as a necessary ingredient for a stable and flourishing society.

For Williams, civility represented the “rules of the game” for living with other people in a pluralistic society and negotiating the inevitable disagreements that emerge in the competition between differing worldviews. He thought civility helped to ensure public peace, maintain social order, and create the conditions for citizens to cooperate on matters of public interest. In short, Williams believed civility was vital to protecting the common good. He recognized that members of a pluralistic society like he was constructing in Rhode Island would not completely agree on a substantive vision for what is right and good for that society, but he assumed all would agree that basic norms of tolerance, respect, common courtesy, patience, and honesty were necessary principles for debating and discharging our responsibilities to the common good.²

In contrast to critics, then and today, who object to civility as artificial nicety, Williams never assumed that a commitment to civility required the abandonment of theological and moral convictions. He defended his own beliefs with a zeal that would make today’s fundamentalists appear wishy-washy! But as a Calvinist Puritan, Williams also believed that a commitment to civility was a religious imperative for Christians. He believed that extending civility was to show respect for the image of God in other people; it was to replicate the love of God and exhibit the character of Christ. Civility for him was justified by a Calvinist sobriety that reminded him that no

² For more on Williams’s conception of civility, see James Calvin Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams: Christian Conviction and Public Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), chapter 5.

human being has a corner market on the truth and it was motivated by an appreciation for the grace God extends to all of us, despite our shortcomings. For Williams, civility was not only practically necessary for a stable politics, it also was theologically necessary for a Christian to live up to her obligations in the life of faith.

Roger Williams believed that robust and ideological debate over matters of important public interest could go hand in hand with a commitment to boundary conditions on that debate. For Christians today, a commitment to civility can be seen as an important witness we offer to an American culture desperate for this alternative to politics as usual. Indeed, contributing to a broader cultural commitment to civility could be seen as an extension of the ministry of reconciliation to which we all are called: “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.” (2 Corinthians 5:19-20, NRSV). In the words of the *Confession of 1967* of the Presbyterian Church (USA),

To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as [God’s] reconciling community. This community, the church universal, is entrusted with God’s message of reconciliation and share [God’s] labor of healing the enmities which separate [persons] from God and from each other. Christ has called the church to this mission and given it the gift of the Holy Spirit. The church maintains continuity with the apostles and with Israel by faithful obedience to [God’s] call.³

Having been reconciled to God in Christ, we are entrusted with the task of being agents of reconciliation to the world. When Christian communities step up to offer public voice and leadership to the call for civility, they embrace their reconciling ministry.

As I talk with different groups around the country on this topic, it’s clear to me that some of this important work is already underway. For just one example, friends of mine in the Presbyterian Church (USA) are launching what they’re calling a Respectful Dialogue Initiative, where they will train laypeople in the skills of civil conversation. The hope is that the participants will take those skills back to their local communities, share them, and train others to leader conversations that are more substantive, patient, and respectful. As they do, they will increase exponentially both the practice of and the demand for civility in our politics. Other Christian denominations, and other religious groups, are undertaking similar efforts. While religion sometimes is at the heart of our most entrenched conflicts, endeavors like this one show that religion also can cultivate virtues that lend themselves to an infusion of civility in our public life.

Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote, “Whenever the followers of one political party persuade themselves that the future of the nation is not safe with the opposition in power, it becomes fairly certain that the nation’s future is not safe, no matter which party rules. For such public acrimony

³ *Confession of 1967*, in the PC(USA) *Book of Confessions*, 9.31.

endangers the nation's health more than any specific policies."⁴ Clearly we are at the moment Niebuhr once feared. At few times in American history has a shared commitment to the common good seemed so tenuous. Americans of different political philosophies not only criticize the ideologies of their opponents but call into question their character and patriotism. Surely this cannot be a recipe for national health.

But Christian communities who celebrate humility, patience, integrity, and respect as fruits of the Spirit stand in all this distrust and demonization with a witness to a better way. The values of Christian character are also the antidote to our political disease. Standing in the light of God's reconciling grace, we commend that grace to the world around us, providing a template for more gracious relations with even our most ardent ideological opponent. To model the virtues of civility, and to insist on them from those who claim to represent us, is to discharge our Christian responsibility to break down the walls of hostility and reconcile the world. And that ministry of reconciliation is precisely what the American political community needs from us now. Aggressively demanding civility--from ourselves, our neighbors, our leaders, and the media--is simultaneously a profound exercise of citizenship and a prophetic act of Christian faithfulness.

Questions to consider:

1. Reflecting on your own experiences of religion and religious people engaged in public matters, would you say that more of those experiences are positive than negative? If not, why not? If so, what do those positive experiences share?
2. Davis lists humility, patience, integrity, and respect for others as four Christian virtues that are important in promoting civility. Can you think of others? If so, how do the virtues you are thinking of contribute to civility?
3. How do you understand the relationship between being civil in public settings and being an agent of reconciliation for the Kingdom of God?
4. Look at the image on the cover page of this edition of *@ This Point*. Are the people pictured there being civil? Why or why not?

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⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Democracy and the Party Spirit" (1954), in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1957, 66.