

Unless you are living on the moon--and perhaps not even then--you are aware that 2012 is an election year in the United States. And if you're aware of this, you're undoubtedly also aware of just how partisan and politicized our national public discourse has become. Representatives from the two major political parties seem to be living in parallel universes without the possibility of even talking to, let alone working with, those in the other party. And we citizens aren't necessarily doing much better in talking about important political issues in ways that are civil, thoughtful, and receptive to listening to those with whom we disagree. Indeed, in many places, it has become so ugly that some of us would probably prefer to live on the moon! The only political claim that most of us seem to agree about is that all this vituperativeness, self-interest, and small-mindedness is destructive to our national character and health.

This issue of *@ This Point* picks up on this concern and focuses on the significance of civility not just as a civic value that is desperately needed today, but a distinctive Christian value that ought to motivate our behavior in the church and society. James Davis, an Associate Professor of Religion at Middlebury College in Vermont and the author of *In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues that Divide Us* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010) suggests that there are several basic virtues--humility, patience, integrity, and mutual respect--that are not only intrinsic to Christian life but valuable for our larger public engagements.

His respondents include Caroline Kelly, a Presbyterian minister at Central Presbyterian Church of Atlanta, which is situated just across the street from the state capitol. Her work regularly takes her across that street and so she is deeply attentive not only to the importance of civility but the difficulties--both in the church and in the public square--of achieving it. John Senior is Assistant Professor of the Practice of Religion and Society at Wake Forest Divinity School and has been doing important work in thinking about how Christians engage political matters beyond talking about them. And Jeffery Tribble is Columbia Theological Seminary's own Associate Professor of Ministry, whose acute attention to an African-American context, his own theological traditions, and his role as a professor at a seminary shape his reflections and priorities in thinking about and teaching on civility. All three responses are worth not only a first reading but a second, if only to discover new insights each time. And Davis' thoughtful and helpful reply helps shape the next steps in that conversation: steps that we at ATP encourage the readers to take on their own!

Toward that end, you will also find a set of lesson plans for using these essays in small group settings. They have, once again, been ably developed by Jill Tolbert, whose skill in thinking about how to teach on these matters reveals how much we still have to learn about such matters. All in all, it is a splendid edition and has come together through the careful work of associate editor Carrie Bowers. We at CTS invite you to read, reflect, share, and grow from these essays--and then to go out and be beacons of civility in what sometimes seems to be an increasingly uncivil world.

Mark Douglas

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