

A Crisis of Civility



Understanding the trends that threaten our common life

KURT PETERSON

Incendiary rhetoric has become so much the norm in today's culture, that we hardly seem to notice.

Recently, op-ed columnist for *The Washington Post* Colbert I. King compared conservative Tea Party activists to southern racists in the civil rights era who opposed public-school integration. King likened the faces he saw at a recent Tea Party rally to "the faces I saw at a David Duke rally in Metairie, La., in 1991: sullen with resentment, wallowing in victimhood, then exploding with yells of excitement as the ex-Klansman and Republican gubernatorial candidate spewed vitriolic white-power rhetoric." In order to make his partisan point, King spewed his rhetorical venom, stereotyping as racist bigots those who disagree with his political point of view.

The left certainly maintains no corner on the market when it comes to inflammatory speech. In September 2009, Representative Joe Wilson from South Carolina interrupted President Obama's speech to Congress on healthcare reform, shouting, "You lie!" Other conservative activists have gone so far as to compare Obama's healthcare reforms to Hitler's euthanasia programs, and one popular t-shirt depicts Barak Obama with the caption, "Hitler gave great speeches too." Such rhetorical attacks are examples of our failing social contract.

What has happened to our society? How have public displays of incivility become so commonplace? Why have we allowed—or created—an ideological divide that condones and even applauds hateful speech? And how does all this affect the church?

The basis of our political divide is a series of social developments that threaten to undo the fabric of American public life. First, our unchecked individualism has resulted in the loss of the face-to-face relationships necessary to maintain healthy lives and communities. Second, our pursuit of affluence and "success" has fostered a sense of impermanence and creates temporary communities that do not demand our full life commitment. Finally, the triumph of ideology in the political world is mirrored in popular culture as we segregate ourselves into like-minded neighborhoods intolerant of difference.

The result of these developments is the diminishing of our common life and the triumph of public incivility. As the ideological divide deepens, our relationships suffer along with our sense of public decorum. It's easy to rant against people we don't know, and easy to slip into ad hominem arguments with distant enemies whom we demonize. Intimacy demands civility; incivility, in contrast, thrives in a world where people are alienated from one another.

The Importance of Civility to Public Life

"Civility," writes Yale law professor Stephen L. Carter, "is the sum of the many sacrifices we are called to make for the sake of living together." Public civility in the form of polite respect and rhetorical restraint is one form of the disciplined self-sacrifice citizens make on behalf of the common good. But when our sense of the commonwealth fades, so does our commitment to public propriety.

Because of our long tradition of individualism that emphasizes rights and personal freedoms, Americans have a tendency to convince ourselves that we "travel alone." When we are disconnected from others, our sacrifice makes no sense, for it is only when we are in relationship that we understand the importance of putting the needs of others before our own.

We make sacrifices, argues Carter, not simply "to make our social lives easier," but "as a signal of respect for our fellow citizens, marking them as full equals, both before the law and before God." Civility, therefore, is much more than just empty politeness. By treating others civilly, we submit ourselves to one another and to the principles of humanity that underlie our common life together. The crisis of civility, Carter continues, is "part of the larger crisis of morality. And because morality is what distinguishes humans from other animals, the crisis is ultimately one of humanity."

Learning how to treat fairly those with whom we disagree is a hallmark of moral and emotional maturity. I still remember my college philosophy professor admonishing us, "There will be no ad hominem attacks on anyone in my classroom!" The rule was simple—we were to disagree with each

other and do so vigorously; yet we were to show respect for the persons whose ideas we were engaging.

With but a moment's reflection we can all easily recall violations of the implied social contract of mutual respect. My brother, Dwight, while in seminary in Massachusetts, once attended a Boston Bruins game with several Canadian students. The Edmonton Oilers were in town from Alberta. Because he is in a wheelchair,

Dwight had to sit in a different section from his friends. When he arrived at his seat, two Boston fans introduced themselves and they began chatting amiably with him. When Dwight mentioned he was at the game with friends from Canada, one of the men swore at him offensively. Both then turned their backs to him and did not

speak to him for the rest of the game. While funny in retrospect, such public offenses whittle away the bonds of common decency that cement us together as people.

When anonymity comes into play, things only get worse. Most of us feel free to say outlandish things to the faceless customer service representative on the other end of the phone. I have said (and gestured) things to drivers that I wish I could take back. Cowardly bloggers post incredibly inhumane comments they would never have the courage to say to another person's face. The more our technology tears asunder our face-to-face culture, the more we unquestioningly accept violations of basic public decorum. Our growing lack of civility reveals a culture whose moral center is disintegrating. ➤

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Individualism and the Decline in Social Capital

A growing chorus of scholars and cultural commentators decry the growth of individualism and the destructive effects it has on community and our sense of common humanity. In their classic book, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah and a group of sociologists describe how our pervasive individualism has compromised our moral compass. In effect, our hyper self-reliance prevents us from recognizing

how our decisions affect anyone beyond ourselves. Bellah writes that we are unable to make moral sense of our lives because we've torn apart the "social integuments" that hold us together as a people. The book includes scores of profiles of

everyday Americans who struggle to commit to meaningful community because "in the end you're really alone, and you really have [only] to answer to yourself."

In his landmark work, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Harvard sociologist Robert D. Putnam identifies a decline in "social capital" among Americans, referring to the many social connections that affect the productivity, health, and well-being of individuals and groups. Using bowling leagues as a metaphor for this societal change, Putnam notes that increased technology, suburbanization, and the development of mass culture have caused a sharp decrease in the number of "joiners" to institutions and clubs that serve as our cultural glue. Our reduced participation in PTA, church, and recreational clubs has disconnected us from friends, family, neighbors and, ultimately, from a sense of the common good.

As well, Putnam notes that

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Americans today go to church less often than the previous generation did, and that the churches we go to are decreasingly engaged with their surrounding communities. Newer churches plant themselves not in neighborhoods, but on busy streets in order to be more accessible to the people who drive from miles away to attend. Such churches become regional facilities where members from far away buzz in and buzz out. Thus our churches often reinforce broader culture's loss of social capital.

As social capital continues to decline, our churches have a profound opportunity to serve as home to people living in a culture lacking moral and social capacities. Instead of expanding online initiatives or seeking more creative ways to engage one another through webinars and satellite connections, perhaps

we in the church should offer what modern people desperately crave: namely physical spaces where we can meet each other face to face, share one another's burdens, pray for one another, and form one another in the Christian virtue of neighborly love. Again, intimacy demands civility—and our local churches are just the places where intimacy, civility, and love should thrive.

Our Temporary Communities

Our struggles to truly connect with one another are limited not only by our long tradition of individualism and the resulting decline in social capital, but also because we are always on the move. The average American family moves every five years, and the resulting dislocations disrupt even the possibility of steady community life and ongoing vital relationships. Sociologists often judge social mobility to be a sign of economic growth that provides opportunities for personal advancement. But there is a downside

to this constant motion.

In his book *Restless Nation: Starting over in America*, James Jaspers concludes that frequent geographic relocations distort our ability to relate to our surrounding environment and to others. The average home today is more than twice the size than in the 1950s, while our families have gotten smaller. But bigger is always better, and we are willing—even eager—to move away in order to move up. Such mobility begets social instability, however; as a result, Americans tend to place little emphasis on building up a community's institutions, focusing rather on individual achievement and the accumulation of wealth and status.

When we value the material over the relational, give ourselves over to excessive consumerism, and move frequently because of career promotions or the promise of a bigger home, we simultaneously tear apart the relationships that inculcate in us civic virtue. When we consider our environment to be impermanent, we are less than eager to dive into the social institutions that provide meaningful connections with others.

People on the move are more likely to hold their communities at arm's length, reluctant to risk intimacy among those who will soon disappear from their lives. When relationships become temporary and instrumental, as opposed to vital and intimate, we lose our connections and the concomitant call to self-sacrifice and civic virtue. While there are always exceptions to the rule, the trends over the past fifty years reveal a crisis in our common life together.

The "Big Sort"

People on the move have the opportunity to choose where they wish to live, and increasingly, Americans are choosing to live among others who share their distinct political and social convictions. In his recent book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*,

Bill Bishop describes this “way-of-life segregation” as a profound threat to our humanity, as Americans become more and more unwilling to engage with people who do not see the world in precisely the same way they do. We value our choice in everything from clothing styles to neighborhoods, from religion to political priorities—and we increasingly choose to live among people whose worldview is most compatible with ours. The result is that we have developed overwhelmingly homogeneous communities that shun individuals who disagree with the dominant political or social opinion. In the 1976 presidential election, approximately 25 percent of American counties were decided by landslide. In 2000, it was more than 50 percent. Our country has become so ideologically polarized that people seldom even live near those who disagree with them anymore.

Bishop tells the story of how his predominantly liberal community in Austin, Texas, resented a politically conservative resident’s presence on the neighborhood listserv online. One resident posted this comment regarding the lone conservative: “While your opinions are yours to have, this list isn’t the place for them.” The rejected neighbor responded by lamenting the “balkanization of America” and then remarked, “The most valuable thing that I learn daily is the capacity to respect people with whom I have disagreements. I hope not to be exiled to some place where the vast majority agrees with me.” Eventually the lone conservative removed himself from the listserv because he learned that civic virtue in his neighborhood was essentially dead. By purposefully constructing communities where everyone agrees, we don’t learn how to disagree with each other well, or civilly.

The result is that we disagree, not with our neighbors, but with distant politicians, television pundits, and opposing ideologues. Often our disagreement takes the form of epithet and grandstanding invective. We launch rhetorical salvos into cyberspace at people with whom we have no relationship. The more we practice such careless forms of argument, the more our civilization crumbles, and the more our common humanity erodes. Our civic virtue, cultivated through the regular practice of civility in the form of self-sacrifice for the sake of communal solidarity, is deteriorating.

The Uncivil Church

In his chapter on megachurches, Bishop argues that “American churches today are more culturally and politically segregated than our neighborhoods.” He pins this devel-

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opment on the fact that evangelical Christians committed themselves to the “homogeneous unit principle” in the 1970s and ’80s. That principle of church growth emerged from the missionary work of Donald McGavran who discovered in India that people “like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers.” When the homogeneous unit principle was applied to growing megachurches in newly developing suburbs, racial, linguistic, and class uniformity was supplemented with consistency in taste, lifestyle, and political belief.

The end result is that we worship with people we agree with. And when disagreement flashes, many of us handle it poorly. For example, we hold our political convictions so inviolably close that we find it

difficult to worship with people who belong to a different political party. One pastor friend referred to the different priorities between “candidate” John McCain and “senator” John McCain in a sermon illustration after the 2008 presidential election, and two families left the church.

Recently, Fox News commentator Glenn Beck encouraged Christians to look for the phrase “social justice” on their church’s website. “If you find it,” he said, “run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words [for Nazism and communism]. Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes!” Beck’s point: if someone in your church disagrees with your political point of view, gird up your ideological loins, call him or her a name, compare that person to Adolph Hitler or Joseph Stalin, and leave.

I bring up Glenn Beck with both trepidation and purpose. The mere

mention of his name raises our ideological hackles. We either love him or hate him—and that is precisely my point. The assumption of incommensurate worldviews has so invaded our culture, yes even the church, that feasibly we could group our congregations into “pro-Glenn Beck” and “anti-Glenn Beck” phalanxes, forgetting that we all gather together, in the name of Jesus Christ, for common mission.

Politics belongs in the church because people are in the church, and we are all political animals. We are not all supposed to agree. At the same time, we must preserve the bonds of unity in the face of deepening division for the sake of the gospel.

If Glenn Beck is right, then we should all leave our Covenant churches right now, for the word “justice” is all over our website. But in truth, the church should never follow the lead of a culture that has lost its moral center—its understanding of civic virtue. The church cannot sacrifice the cause of Christ on the altar of political ideology. All Christians must doggedly combat ideological balkanization and refuse to allow the ephemeral differences of political party, social class, or cultural taste to deter us from our mutual call to preach and live out the gospel.

Christians are Republican and Democrat, Independent and Libertarian; conservative and liberal; red state and blue state; urban and rural; rap and rock-n-roll; pro-Israel and pro-Palestine.

If we cannot discuss these issues together, if we allow our ideological preferences to sever our fellowships, we are following a culture of individualism and polarization that has abandoned civic virtue and the requirements of Christian love that find voice in civility. God couldn’t care less whether we voted for Obama or McCain. God cares that Christians fight tooth and nail to preserve the bonds of Christian unity for the sake of Christ, the only hope of humankind.

Jesus prays in John 17:22-23: “That they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me.” Regarding this passage, my pastor, Peter Hawkinson, says, “If our differences lead us to become divided, it is because we have lost Christ at our center. For this reason I imagine that the risen Christ is still praying with passion and longing for his church.”

The sacrament of Holy Communion draws all Christians together in common mission. Let us love one another, working patiently through our differences for the cause of Christ. Let us be civil to each other, sacrificing our own agendas for the unity of the church. Let us form one another in the virtue of neighborly love so that the world might see Christ in us and turn to Jesus, the hope of redemption. ■

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