

Seeking Wisdom at the Public Café

SCOT MCKNIGHT | Lessons on civility from the blogging community

I HAVE BEEN BLOGGING for more than five years, which, if you follow trends and facts in the Internet world, makes me a blogosphere marathoner. Most blogs last about a month and more than a million blogs close up shop annually.

For a blog to sustain an audience requires faithful and predictable posting, and most say five times a week is necessary; it requires variation of subjects discussed (the mono-topical blogs rarely sustain themselves); and it requires some personal revelation, which means the readers want to get to know the blogger and the regular commenters. In other words, for a blog to work requires discipline, study, and personality over the long haul.

Despite claims among some pundits that blogging is passé, blogs are here to stay. Blogs are both a source of information and a form of com-

munity. They provide an opportunity to interact immediately with information. At their best, blogs are the highest form of information—and sometimes news—media imaginable. If a good writer publishes an informative post, and good readers interact meaningfully, a blog can become community. Christians have the opportunity today to influence blogs and thus to shape culture by the way they communicate on those blogs.

But nothing tempts the commenter

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like anonymity. When we create an Internet identity we can avoid accountability. We can say whatever we want, knowing no one can call us out on it. We can respond to other commenters without using our (or their) real name, and commenters often take their cues for how to talk from the Glenn Becks and Michael Moores of this world. Blog administrators yearn for higher numbers of readers for the sake of advertising dollars, and they know that a good fight drives up numbers. All these factors in the blogging world create a perfect storm for incivility. Blogs can make shock talk shows look like a lesson in self-control.

I quickly learned that the blog world is a radical democracy. Anyone *in the whole world* with Internet access can weigh in and say anything that comes to mind. And when we are dealing with “anyone” we are not dealing with experts.

Understanding the community

In the first weeks of writing my blog I was surprised at the number of folks who were more or less uninformed about a topic but nonetheless had strong opinions and were willing to go toe-to-toe with those who knew a lot about that topic. Not a few times I was a bit offended by the sort of disagreements I was experiencing. When I pondered what was going on in those first few weeks—in which the learning curve was as steep as the first few weeks of marriage—I realized that I was following my own deep-rooted instincts as a preacher and professor, and I was understanding my blog as both a pulpit and a rostrum.

Consider these two images. The primary forms of communication in a pulpit are *kerygmatic*, or proclaiming, declaring, announcing, and persuading, and *didactic*, or teaching, informing, correcting, and shaping. It is only

a slight stereotype to identify the first form as directed at the heart and the second at the head.

Add to this mix of preaching and teaching the image of the rostrum, or platform for public speakers, which represents the classroom. Let’s imagine the classroom to be informal enough that the rostrum becomes a symbol of dialogue. The best classrooms mix teaching, preaching, and dialogue, and the best teachers draw out of students what is already inside them, or at least needs to be made more conscious.

These two images—the pulpit and the rostrum—point to the sense of control that the preacher, teacher, and professor possess. In these settings

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the preacher decides what to say, the teacher possesses the knowledge that the students need to consider, and even in the most dialogue friendly classrooms, the professor is a mentor who is guiding the students into knowledge and insight and discovery.

I quickly had to learn that a blog is not the same as the pulpit or the rostrum. A blog post might be written as a sermon or as a lecture or even an outline for a dialogue, but once the post goes public it can become a free-for-all. It can turn south, get ugly, or go ballistic faster than any other communication I know. I realized I needed another image to help me identify what was going on.

So, as I sat there and watched it happen (all along deleting inflammatory, accusing, and personally destructive comments), I arrived at an image that has worked for my blog. A blog is like a *coffee table conversation at*

a *public café*. If the pulpit gives the image of preaching and teaching and the rostrum the image of dialogue, the café table gives the image of personal conversation.

And with this understanding, I could establish appropriate rules for civility on my blog.

Establishing rules for civility

At a café some things aren’t said because they are inappropriate. On my blog I delete comments that are deemed to be inappropriate, which means I determine what is and what is not appropriate. When I delete a comment, I write to the author of the comment and inform him or her of my blog’s rule: “Imagine yourself

at a public café in conversation with another person. Say on the blog what you would say there. Say it on the blog *how* you would say it there. If you follow these simple guidelines, your comments should be appropriate.”

Most of the time this attempt to guide the commenter goes south. My own estimate is that 90 percent of such people then make accusations against me, suggesting I’m a control freak or a liberal or a conservative.

I then read the email respondent’s comments a couple of times, sit on them for an hour or so, and then write back along these lines: “Thanks. Your response is not encouraging of your ability to see the kind of civility we are trying to create. I may be biased, but it is my blog and years of blogging guide me in what I’m saying to you. I will now officially put you on our spam list. Your comments

will be blocked. Anytime you want to come back, you are welcome but you will have to live by our image of a conversation at a café shop.”

As you might guess, this rarely wins agreement.

The goal of my blog is to create civil conversations about Jesus and about orthodox theology and about sports and (sometimes) about politics. Keeping some of those topics civil can be immensely challenging, and one reason is that civil conversation is not easy for some of us.

Preachers, teachers, and professors are not natural conversationalists. Those of us in these professions preach and we inform, but our role makes us natural one-way communicators. Many Christians absorb the preacher’s, the teacher’s, and the professor’s styles of communication as well. A blog, though, is a conversation, not simply preaching and teaching.

Promoting civil conversation

What, then, are the marks of a civil conversation? Consider the following observations.

First, a civil conversation *requires a safe environment*. Blogs create a culture, they create a virtual community, and they create an environment where likeminded people gather daily. Some blogs create a culture of biting, sarcastic criticism of liberals or conservatives. If you wander onto one of those blogs and drop a civil, peaceful comment you might get denounced. Other blogs (like some churches) create a right-or-wrong and if-you’re-wrong-then-out-you-go culture. In contrast, blogs that promote a civil culture create an environment where the commenter feels safe enough to say what she or he wants to say.

Second, a *civil culture requires*

shared virtues. A culture only requires shared ideas or ideology, but a civil culture requires shared virtues. Evidence of this and a listing of such virtues come from a now largely ignored part of Western history—the seventeenth-century French salon, of which scholar Benedetta Craveri writes in her wonderful study of that culture,



The Age of Conversation. The virtues she outlines are present in all civil conversations, whether in the French salon or at your local coffee shop or in your local home Bible study group: courtesy, a desire for mental exercise, chivalry, amiability, cheerfulness, and even playfulness.

People who display these virtues or who are at least committed to growing in these virtues can create civil, redemptive conversation. When the issues that press against us with alarming political power emerge in a conversation, such virtues are pressed into service so the conversation isn’t derailed into a political rally or a heated debate. Civil conversation

arises when people are committed to one another in order to enjoy the art of conversation.

Third, a civil conversation is *created by a good topic and a good question*. Good questions don’t ask for yes or no answers, and they don’t ask simply for information. They invite participants to probe further, to look inside, to ponder the Bible, and to consider their own theological tradition and beliefs. Civil conversations ask open-ended questions in a safe environment so the audience (in this case blog commenters and readers) can think and then express what they think.

Here’s a continuum of questions from bad to better: 1) Do you believe in nuclear warfare? (This question seeks an opinion.) 2) What are the various Christian proposals for nuclear warfare? (This question prompts for information.) 3) What do the Bible and the Christian tradition say about the proposals for nuclear warfare in our world today? (This question pushes respondents to think aloud with others.)

Fourth, civil conversations about good questions *require the spirit of exploration*. There are times when we want answers and we want them right away: What’s the best router for my family’s home computer? But a conversation does not simply seek answers: it is a mutual gathering for mutual exploration. It encourages different people to experiment with ideas, and it encourages others to interact with those ideas. It prohibits censure and denunciations. Instead, a conversation assumes the virtues described above, and it assumes that each person participating is intelligent enough to probe the question. It also assumes that if the

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answer were simple there would be no reason to have a conversation.

Fifth, a *Christian* civil conversation means that the participants *are seeking wisdom*. The goal is not just to learn something new or to be informed, but to grow by listening to others, to explore aloud so others can help us grow. A civil conversation about a good topic is the best place I know for us to learn civility that is aimed at wisdom. Another way of saying this is that the aim of Christian conversation is truth, and by truth I mean that which conforms to the gospel of Jesus Christ and how that gospel can shape all we believe, think, and practice.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee's magnificent study of human character, Atticus, a man of great character and civility, sits on the front porch with his daughter, Scout. She has just experienced her first day of school, and one could only call the event a cacophony of voices and opinions and prejudices. Displaying wisdom befitting of Solomon, Atticus gives Scout some advice that would benefit anyone who writes, reads, or comments on a blog. "First of all," he says, "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—"

"Sir?"

"—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

Civil conversation flows out of what I have called the Jesus Creed in other writings: the two great commandments—the call to love God and to love others. Loving others requires that we listen enough to climb into their skin, that we treat them as persons made in God's image, and that we engage them for the purpose of seeking the truth of the gospel in Jesus Christ.

Civility and the Jesus Creed are companions and they meet up often at the local café. ■