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I visibly cringe every time the word “civility” is used around me. I hate it. On the face of it, “civility” is one of those things that everyone supports—like “patriotism” or “family” or “honor.” But our civility is often limited to whether or not we agree with the other person. As a follower of Jesus Christ, I am repelled by the word “civility” because it aspires to too little. We are called not to mere civility, but beyond civility to kindness.

For many in contemporary American life, no matter their politics or religion, “kindness” is equated with weakness. Certainly there is a kind of civility which can be a sort of conspiracy of silence in the face of injustice. The poet Czesław Miłosz warned about what can happen when the church becomes “a troop of boy scouts trained in an additional politeness useful to the authorities.” No, the prophetic word we are called to carry is “sharper than a two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12), and cannot be quelled into a polite silence by church or state (1 Kings 22:13-14; Amos 7:12-16).

The Bible defines kindness in terms of weakness, but a weakness wherein there is the power of Christ—the word of the cross (1 Cor. 1:24). In his letter to his protégé Timothy, the Apostle Paul declared: “Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness” (2 Tim. 2:23-24).

Notice, this kindness does not mean surrendering conviction, or silencing proclamation. Paul told Timothy to “correct his opponents,” to “teach.” The question is not whether the Lord’s servant will “fight the good fight,” but whether he will fight with carnal weapons or spiritual ones. Kindness is not a cessation of fighting; kindness is the way we fight.

The primal issue for everyone apart from Christ, including us, is not wrong opinions or affiliations but spiritual captivity. We speak with kindness so that our mission field “may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:25-26). We speak what Jesus told us to say, the way that he himself said it. We rage against the Reptile, not against its prey.

Much of the frantic outrage we see today is, in fact, a lack of confidence. The way of Christ is different, though. We have confidence in the ultimate triumph of Christ such that we are not driven to frenzy when people make fun of us or are hostile to our beliefs. Instead, we stand with the quiet tranquility of a triumphant Christ, who said calmly to his executioner: “My kingdom is not from this world” (John 18:36).

Shock and awe power is the way of the crucifiers. Kindness and gentleness is the way of the crucified. No form of Christian engagement sees Simon Peter’s Gethsemane sword-waving as strength and Jesus Christ’s Golgotha cross-bearing as weakness.

Civility is a start, I suppose. We are citizens of a Republic who should be able to disagree constructively, to seek to persuade one another of the best way forward in the earthly sphere. But we are also citizens of a Kingdom, from which the Spirit is conforming us to the pattern of Christ. One of the fruits of that Spirit is kindness (Gal. 5:22). The world is in need of a gospel that is good news, for sinners like us. And in God’s kindness, anyone, even the person railing against God right now, may one day be granted repentance and faith, may be our brother or sister in Christ, may even be a great leader of the church of the next generation (1 Tim. 1:15).

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A Better Way Forward

A few months ago I received a surprising email. The writer was apologizing for approaching me on Easter Sunday in 2016 over some political disagreements. She was a relative of a family in our church and had eagerly told me how wrong I was after she found out what I did for a living.

The conversation had been a bit awkward as I listened to her heated opinions while I waited for our kids to chase pastel eggs on our church lawn. But I’d largely forgot this episode.

Three years later, she wrote to me, remorseful for the way she had allowed politics to overtake her. In the years since that confrontation, she read some of my work, followed me on Twitter (!), and came to appreciate my ideas. I was quick to forgive and also apologized for the way that my own political opinions, expressed online during that heated season and in other forums, had often poisoned discourse among believers.

I have been thinking about this whole episode quite a bit as we prepare this issue for publication. Civility is a buzz word these days as an exhausted electorate warily stumbles toward another national election. And Christians—those who are charged with both declaring the truth and cultivating kindness—are, sadly, among the worst when it comes to civil discourse. This issue will explore why that is.

We feature important new research about evangelicals and civility as well as essays from leading evangelical voices such as Andrew T. Walker, Trillia Newbell, and Russell Moore. We also feature the example of Prison Fellowship and civility in action across party lines and an interview with Josh Deckard and Michael Wear about their experiences in the White House.

Of course, the first place we should begin is our own behavior. We need to look at our own hearts, listen to what we say, and watch what we type. Maybe we even begin by doing what seems hardest, what this lady who sent me the letter had the courage to do: say sorry. In a digital age, we have quick and easy access to shouting across our divides, but we can also just as quickly express remorse when our fingers have gotten ahead of our brains.

So I hope this issue is a blessing to you. It’s a discussion among friends about ways we can do better at being kind. How can we stand up for the vulnerable, share the gospel, and defend the truth in a way that is distinctly Christian? Our prayer is that the words in this magazine ignite a conversation for a better way forward.

Daniel Darling
editor, Light Magazine
Books

1. **Trusting God**  
   by JERRY BRIDGES

   In our day-to-day life, we encounter experiences that cause us to wonder why God would allow the terrible things we experience to happen. We question how this heinous act, this terminal disease, or this life-altering circumstance could possibly be used by God for our good. We begin to wonder if God is even in control. Is God allowing these things to happen? Does he turn away and let evil take its toll?

   This book should be a staple for any Christian’s personal library. Jerry Bridges tackles the topic of adversity and God’s sovereignty, and why it’s easier to obey God than to trust him. As you read through the chapters on God’s sovereignty over people, nations, and nature, you will begin to see how “God did not simply create and then walk away. He constantly sustains that which He created.” Because he is not only Creator but Sustainer of all, we can trust and ultimately rest in his plans, even when they’re difficult. ~AMANDA HAYS

2. **Who Is an Evangelical?: The History of a Movement in Crisis**  
   by THOMAS S. KIDD

   The word “evangelical” is likely one of the most misused and misunderstood terms in today’s culture. Pollsters, politicians, and pastors alike debate the correct meaning and use of the word, and media portrayals of evangelicals often miss the mark. In *Who Is an Evangelical?*, Thomas Kidd traces the history of evangelicalism to explain what it means to be an evangelical, how evangelicals arrived at this cultural and political moment, and how they can reclaim the spiritual legacy of generations past.

   As he tells the riveting story of the evangelical movement, Kidd examines the relationship between evangelicals and political involvement and draws lessons from the past for evangelicals today. He issues a clear call for evangelicalism to return to its roots as a spiritual movement that transcends race, nationality, and political affiliation. *Who Is an Evangelical?* is a much needed book for a movement in crisis, inviting evangelicals to come home to their calling as messengers of the “evangel”—the good news of the gospel. ~CONRAD CLOSE

   by HIDETAKA HIROTA

   Immigration has become one of the most salient topics in our politics today. We hear about dreamers, asylum seekers, and the border wall almost every day. But has it always been this way? *Expelling the Poor* by Hidetaka Hirota studies the earliest years of American history through immigration policy and examines how our past affects our present.

   Hirota narrates the story of Irish poverty, state pauper regulations, political parties, and how these formed American immigration policy as we see it today. He chronicles various states’ responses to the waves of immigrants that have arrived on our shores since the founding and argues that anti-Irish nativism was the stimulant for local, state, and national immigration regulation and enforcement in the 19th century.

   This book highlights the ways racism and nativism shaped American immigration policy in the 19th century, and the importance of knowing our history lest we repeat it. ~BROOKE KRAMER
Pushing Against a Culture of Contempt

A REVIEW OF LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Daniel Patterson

The term “dumpster fire” has been used so frequently as a metaphor over the last few years that Merriam-Webster decided in 2018 it warranted inclusion in the dictionary. It’s not difficult to understand why after even a cursory glance at cable television or social media. Americans seem to hate each other. Worse, hating each other seems to be the natural posture of our politics and, increasingly, a twisted sort of national pastime.

It is this reality that Arthur Brooks, a social scientist and former head of the conservative think tank American Enterprise Institute, seeks to address in his book, Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt.

Brooks traces his argument across 10 chapters. His basic line of reasoning begins by highlighting the needlessly hyperbolic ways we talk about politics and the resulting damage. Contempt is the coin of the rhetorical realm today, and an “outrage industrial complex” has built a business model around indignation. While some Americans think that strongman rhetoric is necessary, Brooks shows that it is aspirational and love-driven leaders who are ultimately the most effective.

Brooks channels Jonathan Haidt’s book The Righteous Mind to show that liberals and conservatives have different moral “taste buds,” and persuading others means crafting arguments in light of those taste buds most universally shared. From there, Brooks highlights the importance of real, human relationships and argues that anonymity “is a cancer that is wrecking our country, because it obliterates our ability to understand one another” (148).

Next, Brooks devotes a chapter to the public good of healthy competition, moves on to a chapter outlining how to disagree with one another in healthy way, and rounds out the book with a summary chapter that traces five “rules” to subvert a culture of contempt.

THE PROBLEM WITH A CULTURE OF CONTEMPT

What stands out as the most valuable aspect of Brooks’s book is his clear-eyed diagnosis of the problem of a culture of contempt. For example, Brooks is right to argue that social media has an isolating effect on individuals, which brings several other ills alongside. At the same time, social media fosters “motive attribution asymmetry” which is “the phenomenon of assuming that your ideology is based in love, while your opponent’s ideology is based in hate” (21).

Brooks is at his strongest in the book when he’s noting not just the individual problems of contempt, but the predatory business model built around it. “America is addicted to political contempt,” Brooks notes (28), but advertisers, television executives, social media designers, and others know that—and exploit it (212). Brooks, astutely, speaks of the problem in terms of drug addiction and of those seeking to commodify contempt as “political meth dealers” (29).

This isn’t hyperbolic language either. Studies show the way that certain social media behaviors and patterns evoke hormonal responses in the brain and how aspects of these platforms are engineered to be addictive. Furthermore, “social media intensifies our addiction by allowing us to filter out the news and opinions we disagree with, thus purifying the contempt drug” (30). In this respect, Brooks’s book serves as a sort of Surgeon General’s Warning that users would be wise not to ignore.

It’s going to take much more than mere civility or tolerance to breach this societal impasse. It’s going to take love—love that sees people first and foremost as human beings created in the image of God rather than avatars made in the image of one’s political friend or foe. It’s going to take courage—courage that is willing to stand up to someone on one’s own side for the sake of healthy disagreement. And it’s going to take wisdom—wisdom that realizes not only that “bad company corrupts good character” (1 Cor. 15:33), but also that there’s plenty of “bad company” to be found (and avoided) among those who agree with you politically.

We may be in a moment where our society finds itself standing around a cultural dumpster fire. But Love Your Enemies is a helpful book that I hope may help clear some of the smoke.

Daniel Patterson is vice president for operations and chief of staff at the ERLC.
The essence of civility is not spinelessness but self-control,” according to Bruce Ashford, professor, dean, and provost at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, “it is the capacity to show love and grace particularly when we disagree with others and even when we dislike them.”

Civility is important because we live in a pluralistic democracy: We share government with people with whom we disagree. The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission recently carried out a study on evangelicals and the public square to advance healthy democracy in America. We paid close attention to civility: its importance, its deterioration, and the causes and effects of its rapid demise. The absence of civility is a warning, a symptom of some broader and deeper ailment. Civility is the proverbial canary in the coalmine: when it dies, we know there is poison in the air.

A TROUBLING TREND

In nearly 50 interviews with evangelical leaders, we did not hear a single positive estimation of the state of public discourse today. Similarly, respondents in a LifeWay poll commissioned for the project gave us a frank picture of public discourse. Worryingly, more than one-fifth of respondents believed that civility in political conversations is not productive, rising to almost half of those aged 18 to 34. A quarter said that if a political leader they supported insulted an opponent, they would be inclined to believe such insults were justified. A third admitted to engaging in “whataboutism,” or responding to a critique by citing examples of wrongdoing on the other side. Only around 40% said that they had spoken up publicly to disapprove of someone on their side for unacceptable words or actions. Evangelicals even appear to be comfortable with their news bubbles: Over half said they trusted news more if delivered by someone with similar views on social and political issues.

Analysts at LifeWay were able to find a strong correlation between a lack of civility and other traits. For example, those who believe the stakes of our political disagreements are existential are less civil. Higher levels of agreement with “If those I disagree with politically are able to implement their agenda, our democracy will be in danger” are associated with lower civility scores. Single-issue voters—and, specifically, those who vote solely on the basis of abortion—are less civil, perhaps because when we treat politics as a singular mission or define justice as the resolution of one overriding issue, we make more compromises in how we go about pursuing justice. Those who primarily get their news from social media or other online image- or video-based sources, especially YouTube, scored lower on the civility index.

Other factors emerged as drivers of incivility in our research, including the poll and our interviews with evangelical leaders. Our interviewees were extraordinarily concerned about the influence of technology, especially social media and smartphones. They believed that social media often replaced actual human-to-human relationships. They cited studies that social media increased anxiety and loneliness, especially for teens.
Three-quarters of our survey respondents said they regularly got their news from television—half from Fox News alone—and almost 40 percent from news websites (again, with Fox News’ website the leader by a wide margin) and from social media websites, such as Facebook and Twitter, compared to just over a quarter from a print newspaper or magazine. Half of our respondents check Facebook several times per day and, one-quarter visit YouTube with the same frequency. Despite that, the respondents were extraordinarily negative about the impact of TV, websites, and social media. Over half said television and news websites made public debate less respectful, and nearly two-thirds said the same about social media, compared to almost an equal number who felt the opposite about print news media.

One reason we so readily immerse ourselves in our media bubbles is to find reassurance amidst a morally confusing world, which points to another major factor in the breakdown of the American public square: the loss of moral consensus in American society. The breakdown in moral consensus heightens the temperature of public debate. Because we lack shared meanings, reasoned discourse seems impossible, and thus public discussion deteriorates into a shouting match, a performative exercise, or a joust rather than an exchange of ideas. We exchange monologues, but we do not dialogue.

Because of these social and technological conditions, we have lost forms of community with the decline in civil society, the decline in church membership, and the loss of moral consensus. But humans cannot live without community. When we lose one form of community, we invent others, as today we have invented new forms of community through social media and self-selected information bubbles, often reinforced by different historical narratives.

A (PROBLEMATIC) FORM OF COMMUNITY

That tendency in the political sphere has led to perhaps the greatest single manifestation of the problem we studied: our increasing tendency to look to political tribes as a new form of community, even of religious community. Our political tribes are bad for democracy. Because we isolate ourselves from information or news from the other side, we harden and accelerate political division and fuel polarization. We encourage ourselves to think the worst of our opponents and actively cultivate distrust in our fellow citizens. We blind ourselves to our own faults, listening to echo chambers that confirm our existing biases. This is not a problem of “partisanship,” because the actual political parties are institutionally weaker than they have ever been and are not the main drivers of political tribalization. Stronger parties would likely help moderate public discourse, not worsen it. At the individual level, political tribalization is rooted in ideological inflexibility matched with righteous certainty in our own wisdom, intolerance for the necessity of compromise, and impatience with the machinery of democracy.

In addition to the danger they pose to our system of government, our political tribes are bad for our churches, our souls, and our public witness as Christians. In our current moment, we cannot escape the conclusion that political tribalism is idolatry. If our political convictions line up entirely with the platform of one or the other party, when both so clearly advocate different forms of injustice, we betray our public witness and undermine the gospel. We also compromise the integrity and independence of the church by making our loyalty to a political agenda more important. When we give in to tribalism, we look to political activism to achieve true justice, confusing what Augustine called the City of Man with the City of God. But the public square cannot provide ultimate meaning, government cannot achieve perfect justice, and our political tribes cannot provide true community. We expect unreasonable things from government and invest political things with too much hope and meaning. We are lying to ourselves, setting ourselves up for disappointment, and through our actions preaching a false gospel to the world. As Richard John Neuhaus famously wrote in 1990, “the first thing to be said about public life is that public life is not the first thing.”

To view the Civility Report, visit erlc.com/democracy.

Paul D. Miller is a professor of the practice of international affairs at Georgetown University.

1 Bruce Ashford, One Nation Under God, (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), Kindle edition, Location 1054
Forty days before the Election Day 2016, I was on assignment at a Wisconsin rally. My media badge gave me access to an elevated, partitioned area behind a metal fence. I knew people would mistake me for a “fake news” liberal.

The mood was electric, animated with enthusiasm for their candidate and contempt for his opponent. Once the rally began, a section of the crowd above the media platform shouted a slur in unison at the mention of the opponent’s name.

As a writer for senators, governors, businessmen, athletes, dissidents, reality

A Culture Saturated With Incivility Needs a Recovery of the Golden Rule

Nancy French
television stars, and television personalities, my camouflaged words have appeared in just about every publication.

Once, I published a provocative political piece right before I went to a doctor’s appointment. When I sat down in the waiting room, I heard my words coming from the television mounted in the corner. My article had gone so viral that the famous news personality was reading my article live on the air. He then asked the president at the time to respond to the argument I’d laid out.

I enjoyed anonymously dropping cultural bombs, sitting back and watching the aftershocks. I dismissed efforts aimed toward civility. I wasn’t in a civil mood. My candidate had lost, and I was opposed to many of the policies of the current administration. Civility isn’t always warranted, I reasoned. After all, Jesus famously called the Pharisees “whitewashed tombs” and turned over those tables in the temple. Plus, the other party frequently mischaracterized mine—they deserved the pushback.

A CULTURE OF PUSHBACK

Here’s how “pushback” sometimes works in the arena of blogging, social media, and internet punditry. A writer scours the news and finds a liberal or conservative who did something ludicrous somewhere across America. Then, they write articles lamenting this act. Look what liberalism has wrought. Or, You thought conservatives were bad? Check this out. This is called “nutpicking,” where the pundit picks the most extreme voice and pretends they represent a whole movement.

Writers frequently paint their political opponents’ views in the least charitable light, demolishing laughable presentations of their arguments instead of interacting with the most eloquent and powerful.

They use hyperbole too: words like “fascists” to describe Democrats; “socialism” to describe policies that weren’t really socialist; the phrase “war on ___” (women, values, children, marriage) to amp up the urgency of a particular topic that would’ve better been handled soberly and with consideration.

I admit I’ve participated in all of these practices, to one degree or another. Plus, I’d make pieces memorable (read: clickable) by sliding in the knife of sarcasm and twisting. I was under the impression that “my side” was more righteous and virtuous, so it was fine—almost holy—warranted, I reasoned. After all the rhetoric, I thought a great deal about that. Sometimes, we treat politics as if it were in some sort of special category demanding acrimony, rudeness, and deception as a baseline of operation—as if the normal rules of conduct do not apply, and we get a pass for deception or rudeness as long as we’re on the right side of an issue.

We’ve operated that way for too long, and the results are culturally stultifying.

Are the stakes high? Yes. That’s why we need to speak out against injustice and argue our points passionately in the public square.

But it’s time to go back to basics.

The Golden Rule doesn’t make you weak. It does not prohibit righteous anger. It doesn’t cede ground on issues. It isn’t feeble. It does, however, give good parameters as we wrestle over the issues of the day.

In The Gulag Archipelago, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn observed, “the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts.”

He added, “This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years.”

It’s time for some oscillation.

At that Wisconsin rally, my fellow conservatives mistook me for an enemy.

As Christians, we need to stop doing the same thing to any of our fellow Americans. The good news is that a pretty simple formula exists for this, and you don’t need any specific advice. The Golden Rule applies to all situations, including dating. Just treat your girlfriend the way you would want to be treated.”

I’ve thought a great deal about that. Sometimes, we treat politics as if it were in some sort of special category demanding acrimony, rudeness, and deception as a baseline of operation—as if the normal rules of conduct do not apply, and we get a pass for deception or rudeness as long as we’re on the right side of an issue.

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The Golden Rule applies to all situations, including politics.

THE GOLDEN RULE APPLIES TO ALL SITUATIONS, INCLUDING POLITICS.
“Be careful” was the cryptic text I received from a respected Christian leader and a close friend after a series of politically charged tweets I posted online in 2016. “I think most people agree with you, but you need to watch the way you tweet things. You could offend some people.”

He was right. So I took it down. I hope I’ve learned a few things since then. My moments of incivility online (there have been more than one) underscore how easy it is to let our thumbs engage before our minds have caught up, to allow the passions of the moment and the speed of the news cycle influence us in ways we regret.

Since Adam and Eve’s blame shifting in the Garden, humans have been particularly adept at hurling insults at each other, which is why the Bible, from beginning to end, is full of admonitions to carefully choose our words. But today, the ease of our communication platforms erases the necessary gap between what we think and what we say in public. We can, and often do, say whatever is on our minds. And not only can our words online get us in trouble, they can unnecessarily offend brothers and sisters in Christ and, more often than not, cause us to sin against God.

LEARNING TO SLOW DOWN

The apostle James didn’t have Twitter in mind when he wrote in James 1 that every follower of Jesus should be “slow to speak, slow to anger, quick to listen,” but his injunction to a first-century church applies to the way we conduct ourselves on the various social media platforms at our disposal.

Slow to speak doesn’t mean we don’t ever speak. Some have recommended that perhaps Christians shouldn’t spend time at all online, while others have advocated a kind of digital fast. I think there are good arguments for both of these approaches,
but we should assume that public digital platforms are here to stay. Whether we like it or not, we are not going back to a more analog time. And yet James recommends slowing down our communication.

To be slow to speak (or tweet or post or gram) is to pause and take time to think about the words we are using. It means resisting the urge to let it all hang out as a stream of consciousness for all the world to see. It’s the self-control to not engage in meaningless debates, even (and perhaps especially) if we think are right.

To be slow means we weigh our words, knowing their power. James would later offer a powerful warning in James 3, comparing the power of words to a ship’s rudder, a flame, and a wild horse. Our words can bring life or death. This is particularly important, I think, for Christians who have a sizeable platform. They can lead God’s people into rhetorical temptation through their online incivility, giving unspoken permission for their followers to do the same.

Again, this doesn’t mean we never speak. At times, we need to raise our voices online in order to stand up for the vulnerable or speak a word of truth to the church. But every time we do it, we might ask, Am I the person to speak here? Do I have all the information? Can I do this in a redemptive way? This is what it means to be quick to listen—getting all the available facts about a news story or situation before opining—and this is what it means to be slow to anger. So, before you fire off that angry tweet, slow down, listen, and hear.

CIVILITY MATTERS

Some might counter by asking if civility is even a worthy value, especially when our timelines are often filled with the news of much injustice and corruption. How can God’s people be silent when bad things are happening?

But the Bible never pits civility against courage, as if these two virtues are enemies. In fact, Peter seems to think they must coexist. In 1 Peter 3:15, he urges the people of God to be ready to speak up to share the gospel and defend truth, participating in the public exchange of ideas for the sake of the gospel—with “gentleness and kindness.”

In other words, Christians are not only tasked with speaking up and speaking out, but with a distinctly Christian way in which we express ourselves. God doesn’t just care that we speak, but how we speak. People should not just know we are Christians by our principles and propositional truth, but by our words.

Sadly, this is not how Christians are known often enough. We have often convinced ourselves that civility is a sign of weakness, rather than strength, and that courage equals incivility. We have much for which to repent in the ways we frequently conduct ourselves online, the ways we treat our fellow human beings, and the ways we neglect the humanity of those with whom we disagree.

The loudest person in the room isn’t the most courageous, and the angriest tweeter isn’t the one who is actually changing hearts and minds for the gospel. Jesus doesn’t need more jerks online, but winsome, humble, open-handed, brave truth-tellers. Civility won’t always earn us an audience, and even the kindest words can bring scorn and persecution. But to watch our words isn’t weakness; it’s strength. And it displays a confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit who uses the gospel to persuade and does a work greater than 280 characters could.

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Dan Darling is the vice president of communications at the ERLC.
A Vision for Christian Public Witness

JUSTIN GIBONEY SEEKS TO INSTILL COURAGE AND KINDNESS THROUGH THE AND CAMPAIGN

Joy Allmond
n 2016, AND Campaign co-founder Justin Giboney, a Democrat, spoke to people in his political party with what many—in both major political parties—seem to lack the courage to speak: biblical truth.

“We can’t afford to be a party that disregards, disrespects, or ignores its faith-based community,” he told the cheering crowd.

“Whether its sanctity of life, issues regarding gender identity or family structure, as biblical Christians, those things don’t change for us. We can’t have a strong country without strong communities. And we can’t have strong communities without strong families. And we can’t have strong families without strong values.”

A CRISIS OF COURAGE

Giboney might be described as a prophetic voice to the Church today—but he says it really started two generations ago with his grandfather.

“He was a preacher during the civil rights movement who understood the courage needed to be a Christian with a public witness,” he recalls.

“Part of the reason we have Christians on both sides not standing up for what they should is because we have a crisis of courage. One of the things the AND Campaign tries to say as a group is how important courage is in confronting injustice and advocating for human flourishing. We have to carry the cross. And that’s the lesson I learned from my grandfather that I carry with me still today.”

The mission statement of the AND Campaign is: “To educate and organize Christians for civic and cultural engagement that results in better representation, more just and compassionate policies and a healthier political culture.”

As part of their mission, the AND Campaign works to facilitate civility in political engagement, mobilizing the Church on both sides of the aisle to collaborate for the flourishing of humanity—to the glory of God.

A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN PUBLIC WITNESS

Giboney, 38, now an Atlanta attorney by trade and political strategist, played football at Nashville’s Vanderbilt University, where he majored in social policy and philosophy. He stayed at Vanderbilt to complete law school, then started working in medical malpractice in Atlanta.

It was soon after the start of his legal career that he got into politics, running a campaign for a local candidate. It was during this season of his young adult life when he noticed the need for convictional kindness in the face of political opposition.

“I needed to do something to help Christians on both sides of the aisle—not necessarily to leave their parties, but to find their identities in Christ and carry that out in their public witness.”

Noting that the left is generally about justice and the right is generally about moral order, he says biblically speaking, the two should not be separated.

“My thought was, as Christians, we’re supposed to be about both,” says Giboney.

“Too often, we let our political parties and ideological tribes take one of those away.”

Earlier in his law career—and shortly after this conviction took hold—he started meeting with pastors, church planters, and artists in the greater Atlanta area to discuss ways to build bridges with Christians on both sides of the aisle to make strides in Kingdom work.

The AND Campaign was born—and co-founded with Michael Wear, former White House director of faith outreach. As a key member of AND leadership, Giboney has addressed the Trinity Forum, a mostly conservative faith-based think tank, about voter’s rights.

AS PUBLICLY ENGAGED CHRISTIANS, WE MIGHT BE IN TWO DIFFERENT PARTIES, BUT WE’RE ON THE SAME TEAM. AND WE DON’T HAVE TO AGREE ON EVERYTHING, BUT WE SHOULD AGREE ON BIBLICAL ESSENTIALS.

“I got a great response from them,” he says. “It’s a topic republicans normally don’t pay attention to. We’re not trying to go into spaces and preach to the choir. We’re trying to get Christians on each side to understand they can do better within their party.”

FINDING OUR IDENTITY IN OUR FAITH TRIBE

And speaking of political parties, Giboney says, Christians should strive to not find their identities in their political tribe, but in their faith tribe: the Kingdom of God.

“Political parties are merely tools to promote human flourishing and protect
human dignity,” says Giboney. “As publicly engaged Christians, we might be in two different parties, but we’re on the same team. And we don’t have to agree on everything, but we should agree on biblical essentials.”

Giboney acknowledges that politics do carry a level of importance because it touches on issues that impact lives, “but too often, it goes further than that. By design, we become just another player in a tribal war.”

He says in our broken nature we are tribal, and the one question every Christian should ask themselves is, Who is our real tribe?

“My answer is the body of Christ—not these political parties, which will always let us down,” he says. “Particularly in a world of Twitter pile-ons, we should never allow ourselves to get into a mob mentality.”

There might be one upside to tribalism, Giboney says, but only when one within a given tribe is willing to challenge his or her tribe.

“Are you willing to hold your tribe to the standard of the Bible?” he says. “Saying something witty to the other side doesn’t change anything, because the ‘other side’ isn’t listening. We would get a lot more done if we corrected our own side. And then develop some allies within another ideological tribe or political party.

“If you don’t criticize your own tribe, you don’t have credibility with the other side,” he continues. “We can’t be worried about making our tribe look bad or taking blame for wrongdoing. The goal should always be getting to the solution and being faithful.”

**Kindness Goes a Long Way**

While Giboney says Christians should speak to and challenge their own tribes with biblical positions on issues, kindness and civility in conversations with people who disagree can go a long way.

“We have to be willing to lose,” he says. “We can’t just say anything we want to say or treat the opposition the way they treat us if we’re treated harshly. We need to get away from being so focused on winning. The gospel is clear there are limits where we can take it with regard to how we treat other people.”

Ultimately, Giboney says, the world is watching Christians on both sides of the political aisle, and we bear witness to the gospel through the way we interact with one another.

“How we react in the midst of controversy or disagreement says a lot about who we serve,” he explains.

“When we react with grace, power, and determination—but also with compassion, it speaks volumes about our Master. And if we’re going to be about our Master’s work, we do it in the way he would do it, and not let ourselves be taken away by bitterness and tribalism.

“It’s not about us, it’s about whether he’s getting glorified in the process.”

Joy Allmond is a Nashville-based writer.
New Resource from ERLC Staff

The Age of AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity
by Jason Thacker

Available now at most major retailers.
ARE CHRISTIANS CALLED TO DEPOLARIZE THEIR CULTURE?
REASONING FROM SCRIPTURE AND NATURAL LAW

Andrew T. Walker
t’s an obvious truth that American culture seems frayed to the point of tearing apart. From politics to social media, Americans are bombarded with messages of fear and contempt. It’s a lucrative industry to fuel resentment in America. If you talk to just about any person, they’ll tell you that they do not remember living at a time prior, where people are so quick to erupt about, well, anything. It’s a convulsed, fractured age where agitation and paranoia are commodities constantly traded among competing ideological, religious, or political visions. At the same time, people bemoan the loss of civility. They pine for the old days.

THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANS IN DEPOLARIZING CULTURE

One way that Christians can help bring calm to their culture is through depolarization. On a foundational level, I would define depolarization in the following way: Depolarization is the act of defusing contempt and misunderstanding through honest, empathetic, and reasoned discourse. It is an act of de-escalation. But are Christians called to this in our current culture?

There are two ways to answer this. First, Christians must be the first people who traffic in love, kindness, charity, and understanding. This is not a pragmatic argument inasmuch as the fruit of the Spirit. This means, by default, that basic virtues endemic to Christianity have the capacity to depolarize where there is tension.

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IS DEPOLARIZATION WORTH IT?

Given the deep division in America, is depolarization a worthwhile pursuit? I certainly believe it is. Entrenchment and resentment are not a lasting formula for civic health. Democracy is nourished when disagreement does not produce contempt for fellow citizens. But is there hope for this to happen in America? There are many ways to answer this question.

As someone who also believes in “Natural Law”—the idea that an objective morality exists and is knowable despite our inability to perceive and follow it correctly—I believe depolarization is a virtue extending from a pre-existing moral commitment to respect and civility. Both of these are twin pillars for human communication and civilization. The ability to communicate and to do so peaceably requires a mutual willingness to listen to the other. A function of simple reciprocity, depolarization reflects the sense of justice each of us desires when entering the public square and how we want to be treated.

This first reason for why I believe depolarization is worthwhile is what I would call instrumental in nature—that depolarization is useful for something it produces.

Speaking as a Christian, I believe depolarization is not simply instrumental, but an obligation worthy for its own end, because it is an ethical principle embedded within the Christian tradition. In Proverbs 15:1, Solomon writes, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” The Apostle Paul writes in Colossians 4:6: “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” And as mentioned above, it is a function of the Golden Rule that Jesus commanded of his disciples in Matthew 7:12: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

As a Christian, I care about depolarization because the civility I expect from others, I owe also to others. I am commanded by Holy Scripture to be kind and gracious. But to get at the very heart of Christianity—the cross—it is appropriate to say that there was no greater depolarizing act than what happened at the cross, where God removed the enmity and polarization between us and himself through Christ’s atoning death (Rom. 3:21-26; 8:1).

But more centrally: Am I hopeful, in a generic sense, that depolarization can occur?

I think it can, but again, I return to the Christian tradition, where in Matthew 26:41, Jesus keenly observed a truth of human nature: “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”
What does this mean? It means the better angels of our nature are irreparably subverted by our malevolent angels—it means that hope for depolarization is a perennial goal that we aspire to, despite what our nature is bent toward.

I am not saying that depolarization is possible only if one becomes a Christian. This is because I believe in common grace, which is a dispensation of divine favor that God bestows on creation that is accessible to all persons, regardless of their religious belief, allowing society to perpetuate itself with a modicum of decency, restraint, and virtue.

**PRACTICES THAT MAKE DEPOLARIZATION POSSIBLE**

So if I believe in depolarization as a dispensation of common grace that makes life possible, or even unifying while living in an ideologically fractured society, what are the practices that make depolarization possible?

I think it begins by removing the beam in our own eyes, before we take the speck out of our neighbors’ eyes (Matt. 7:5). It is to acknowledge our propensity for hypocrisy—that we never see ourselves...
in error, but someone on the other religious or political spectrum always is.

Practically, what civic habits must we catechize ourselves with if we hope to create a more peaceful, depolarized culture?

**Worldview exposure.** We need to be exposed to worldviews other than our own so that we can simply understand. Depolarization is an educational process as much as it is anything else. Sometimes those we disagree with will have something very thoughtful to say that we might agree with. This will help us learn that our ideological opponent is not necessarily an enemy, nor are they a horrible person as our culture often suggests. If humanity is the same species, it means that regardless of our differences, we also share profound commonalities.

**Empathy.** Relatedly, we must develop empathy as a civic instinct. We live in a pluralistic world with diverse opinions. There are reasons why people hold the opinions they do, often for instinctual reasons they are aware or maybe not aware of. To get a hearing with the person we disagree with, it’s really important to understand as much as possible where he or she is coming from, and what has shaped him or her in the past. We will never be persuasive if we fail to demonstrate empathy.

For example, I strongly disagree with same-sex marriage as a moral and policy principle. But it’s important that I understand why people think same-sex marriage is an appealing policy idea so that I don’t ignore or brush off the opinions they have reached after much deliberation. If I want to change their minds, I need to actually get a sense of their worldview.

This is not about conceding or compromising your convictions. It’s about understanding someone. It’s possible to disagree with a person about same-sex marriage, or who may be in a same-sex marriage, and still see his or her humanity.

Treating the person you disagree with as either a monster, as morally irredeemable, or as an imbecile will get a conversation nowhere. This is a matter of common courtesy and vitally important for living in free, diverse societies. What’s more, this is a matter of Christian decency.

**A return to reason.** The prophet Isaiah wrote, “Come, let us reason together.” To reason means to analyze an issue with sound judgment. It requires an atten-

**OUR LORD COMMANDS US TO BE PEOPLE FIERCELY COMMITTED TO TRUTH WHILE AT THE SAME TIME FIERCELY COMMITTED TO LOVING OUR NEIGHBOR.**

tiveness to our worst proclivities—our malevolent angels. Before we characterize our opponents, let us ask ourselves: On what motivation are they acting? Is it possible their position is grounded in logic, history, and plausibility—rather than animus?

**Truth-telling.** If depolarization is to occur, it means we must truthfully represent the views of those with whom we disagree. Ever notice on social media that accusations and insults usually come in the form of caricature, generalization, stereotype, or projection? Each of these can fail to live up to a threshold of truthfulness that the ninth commandment requires. Christians are to tell the truth. This means any temptation to distort or malign someone’s argument fails to live up to the expectations set down for us in Scripture.

The problem is that in a politicized context where wins and losses are on the table, the drive to win dictates whether truthfulness gets a hearing. This should not be the case.

**Policing our ranks.** Depolarizing our world means restraining and calling out the excess that exists on each respec-
Without Love, Apologetics Fails

Bearing witness with gentleness and respect

Rebecca McLaughlin
On Jan. 9, 2019, *Christianity Today* published my review of Peter Williams’ excellent new book, *Can we trust the Gospels?* Williams makes a compelling case for the trustworthiness of the New Testament accounts of Jesus’ life, and I was eager to commend the book. But when CT posted the review on Twitter, the *Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science* took aim, and fired:

“You cannot trust the gospels about anything factual. Just like how we don’t use Harry Potter books to teach physics we don’t need the Bible for morality (or anything else). It’s a quaint, ancient book displaying the (understandable) ignorance of our ancestors.”

The comment was a charged grenade, thrown over the Christian/atheist fence. In such a situation, our instincts shout, “Fight back!” We feel the illegitimacy of the comparison and the insult to our sacred text. We want to honor Christ and defend his name. And, if we’re honest, we feel the insult to ourselves:

**Love is both the scriptural response to our enemies and the best way to win them for Christ.**
we are not dumb, clinging to quaint fic-
tions. But following Jesus means curbing
our instincts.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT HOW WE
SHOULD ENGAGE WITH OUR OPPONENTS?

Love
First, we must listen to Jesus’ unsettling
words in the Sermon on the Mount: “Love
your enemies and pray for those who per-
secute you” (Matt. 5:43). Before we open
our mouths to defend our faith, we must
ask ourselves, “Am I loving my enemy
that is in you; yet do it with gentleness
and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15).

Honoring Jesus before those who disbe-
lieve in him is a vital task to which we are
all called. We must give reasons for the
hope we have, and not wallow in intellec-
tual laziness. But those reasons must be
given with gentleness and respect.

What does that look like when some-
one is comparing the Bible to Harry
Potter? Truth be told, I felt the tempta-
tion to go in guns blazing. I can often
feel frustrated in conversations with
people who hold beliefs that I know to
be indefensible—especially if they are
claiming an intellectual high-ground.

There’s a piece of me that wants to
take them down, to feel the satisfac-
tion of conquest. Too many times, I’ve
let that instinct lead. But I know how
little anyone is persuaded by attack, and
that love is both the scriptural response
to our enemies and the best way to win
them for Christ.

A LOVING ATTEMPT AT ONLINE CIVILITY

My best attempt at love on Jan. 9 was
to affirm what I could of my opponent’s
jibe, sidestep the name-calling, and
return to the main point of the book:
“The Gospels are certainly ancient!
But @DrPJWilliams point is that if
you subject them to the same kind of
analysis as you would other historical
documents from the ancient world,
they actually stand up remarkably
well—better, indeed, than many
texts we take to be authoritative.”

Of course, the Dawkins-fan respond-
er disagreed, and we went back and
forth. At every stage, I tried to see the
best in his or her comment, while also
offering a counter case. My interlocutor
claimed that Jesus never actually exist-
ed: a claim that most dyed-in-the-wool
atheist historians would laugh at. But
mocking and shaming them wouldn’t be

If we are truly following Jesus,
we’ll seek to win non-Christians,
not to own them.
loving my enemy. Nor would failing to tell them the truth. So, gently, I noted that few atheist historians would take that view and said (sincerely): “I’d be very interested to read a careful, skeptical review of @DrPJWilliams book that took time to evaluate the evidence he presents.”

He or she responded, “Secular scholarship already exists in this matter. Don’t need review of a book. You need data and analysis. You can find all the info online. Academic [sic] journals are superior to book since the formal [sic] attempts to eliminate bias—books do not or at least aren’t required to.”

I replied, “Agreed! Can you point me to the academic journal articles you have in mind? If they are recent and published in leading journals, I’d be quite curious to read the best skeptical scholarship on this question.”

I could have added the sarcastic phrase, “I’ll wait.” But I didn’t. I wasn’t there to own this person, but to win them.

Meanwhile, other Christians had started weighing in, like spectators at a boxing match, cheering their champion, and adding their own punches to the fight. In the end, the Dawkins-fan retreated from the field. This person had no answer to my gentle question. But I fear the Christian pile-on had also not left him or her feeling loved.

In an increasingly aggressive public square, it’s easy to think that what we need is more attack. And in one sense we do. If we Christians do our homework, we’ll find we hold the cards of reason in our hands, and we must be prepared to play them. We need more scholarly, rigorous, accessible books—like Peter Williams’—to train our team. We need to raise our intellectual game. And we need to find the thousands of Christian professors whom God has raised up in the secular academy and learn from them, so that our arguments are drawing from the best of Christian thought, and we’re not guilty of recycling half-truths and indefensible claims—like the atheist claiming Jesus never existed.

But when we go on the offense with our apologetics, it must have love at its heart, and gentleness and respect on either hand. People like me, who are prone to intellectual point-scoring, must fight this temptation just as we would fight lust or laziness.

This does not mean we should not clearly disagree and marshal every neuron to the fight. We must. Indeed, Christ’s love compels us. But if we are truly seeking to draw people to Christ, our gentleness must be evident to all (Phil. 4:5). And if we are truly following Jesus, we’ll seek to win non-Christians, not to own them.

Rebecca McLaughlin is the author of Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World’s Largest Religion.
Compelling Christian Witness in a Secular Society

Lessons from Paul for the Contemporary Church

Rico Tice
What does it look like to bear witness to Christ in a city that seems far from him? Contemporary culture is almost entirely secular, and the contemporary church is struggling to witness effectively to the truth it has been handed down.

We are not the first generation of Christians to face such challenges. The ancient city of Corinth was pagan in its beliefs, and the church was being tempted to compromise in its witness. In 2 Corinthians 4:1-6 the apostle Paul addressed these issues head-on, teaching us some vital lessons for our witness today.

GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY

The first thing the apostle Paul would want us to know about Christian witness is that we are not in charge of the results department. God is!

We will never hold out the hope of the gospel with confidence unless we understand that unbelief is a spiritual problem that requires a spiritual solution. Paul writes, “the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4).

We have an enemy, the devil, who is at work in the world, blinding people to the truth about Jesus. He truly is the god of “this world,” focusing our minds on the here-and-now and keeping us from thoughts of eternity. We don’t have any power in ourselves to overcome such spiritual blindness; that requires a miracle that only God can perform. That is why our first task in Christian witness is to pray for the Lord to bless our labor.

The truth of God’s sovereignty is the source of our confidence in our witness. He is performing the miracle of opening blind eyes. If we ever doubt this to be true, we need only look at our own lives; it’s a miracle he has performed for us. “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

When we lose sight of God’s sovereignty in our witness, we become increasingly dependent on our own efforts and despondent when we don’t see the fruit we would hope for. Such witness, over time, points to our own skills and service rather than the Christ we claim to profess.

GODLY INTEGRITY

In a culture that’s hostile toward the Lord Jesus, we will be tempted to distance ourselves from him and to misrepresent his Word. Warnings of God’s wrath and calls to repentance are rarely heard in pulpits today.

Against the temptation to such compromise, Paul insists on godly integrity. He writes, “we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2).

Godly integrity doesn’t go unnoticed by unbelievers, and can be in itself a powerful witness to the truth of the gospel. Recent research into public perceptions of Christians and the Christian faith in the U.K. was published as “Talking Jesus.”
Conducted by the Barna Group, this research found that 67% of people have a Christian friend who they like. Often, when unbelievers get to know us, they like us. The integrity of our character commends the message of the gospel that we wish to share.

Even in the public square, those who might be considered “opponents” of the gospel cannot help but notice Christian integrity. Consider these words, published in the _London Times_: “The Church stands for revealed truth and divine inspiration or it stands for nothing.” They were not written by an evangelical leader; they were written by the prominent journalist Matthew Parris.

Parris was writing about the appointment of a man in a same-sex partnership as a bishop in the Church of England. Parris, himself in a long-term same-sex relationship, opposed the move and criticised the church for compromising on biblical doctrine.

When we compromise our integrity in our witness, we are easily blown about by whatever wind is prevailing in the culture of the day. We may gain popularity as we say and do whatever will please our secular contemporaries, but we will lose credibility. Gaining a hearing with unbelievers is a worthwhile task, but only if we are willing to speak the truth when we have the opportunity.

**GOD-GIVEN CREATIVITY**

We are called to make the most of opportunities to witness about Christ. But we are also called to **make** those opportunities—to use our God-given creativity to commend Christ to those who don’t know him as Lord.

When Paul writes about our proclamation of the gospel, he uses the language of service. “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord,” he writes, “and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5).

For a culture that is increasingly individualistic, selfish, and therefore lonely, the distinctively generous service of Christian believers is both attractive and compelling. By drawing alongside others, listening to their concerns, and responding to them with Christlike acts of service, we will find more and deeper opportunities for Christian witness.

At All Souls Church in central London, we have a ministry called Tamar, reaching out to women who have been trafficked into London for the sex industry. Our neighborhood of Westminster is the U.K.’s capital for this kind of modern slavery. Teams from the church befriend women, help them to find freedom from their circumstances, and share with them the good news of spiritual freedom in Christ.

When we fail to pursue creative ways of engaging with those around us, we find ourselves speaking to an ever-smaller group of people. But by
The integrity of our character commends the message of the gospel that we wish to share. Drawing alongside and serving others, we show the character of Christ as we speak the Word of Christ. Lost sheep don’t make a habit of coming to us; it will take hard work and innovation to seek them out.

Sovereignty, integrity, and creativity are like the three legs of a stool. Together they provide a stable platform for effective witness. Remove one, and we will leave our message weakened or even lost altogether. Yet, if we faithfully fulfill our calling to compelling witness, we can trust to the Lord his work of opening blind eyes and shining “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

Rico Tice is associate minister of All Souls Langham Place, London, U.K., and founder of Christianity Explored Ministries.

1 https://www.tamarwestminster.org
In June 2019, there was a Twitter backlash against the Black Hat security conference and its decision to confirm Rep. Will Hurd (R-Tx.) as a keynote speaker. Black Hat is a technology event series founded in 1997. Many within the national security and cybersecurity fields, along with many long-time attendees, voiced their disgust that Black Hat would choose to highlight Hurd given his pro-life convictions and voting record. Black Hat decided to rescind the invitation, bowing to public pressure.

While the issues of abortion and cybersecurity seem to be separate, the canceling of Hurd’s keynote is a prime example of a phenomenon in our society called “cancel culture.” This happens when a group seeks to cancel someone or something often based on a single disqualifying factor. These factors can be as simple as a past tweet or article, or as large as a deeply held religious or social belief. Those who seek to cancel someone will use anything to silence any dissenting opinion or thought, which leads to a breakdown of civil discourse and a weakening of our social fabric.
Unfortunately, cancel culture is the norm now. In our society, one’s position on an unrelated issue can lead to a fallout. Even one tweet or offhand comment has the potential to ruin one’s career or family, especially in the hands of those who are seeking to discredit someone.

WHAT IS CANCEL CULTURE?

Simply put, cancel culture is the boycotting or silencing of someone or something with the threat of financial or popularity loss. The case of Black Hat reveals that many believe hosting someone with differing ideas affirms everything that a person has ever said. In these cases, shaming in order to enact change is a tactic used to silence opposition rather than engage in a conversation or debate over the things most important to us. This reveals that the public is not able to maintain a pluralistic understanding any longer.

Cancel culture became prominent after the rise of social media in the mid-2000s, which gave those without a public megaphone the ability to share their thoughts and ideas with anyone across the world. In the last few years, social media has increasingly been abused to shame those some disagree with on fundamental issues. We have to acknowledge that technology, like every tool, will be misused, abused, and manipulated.

This cultural phenomenon reveals the deep longing for power and control that each of us have, as well as the lack of honest dialogue in our society that can strengthen our own understanding in the face of dissenting views. We would rather lord our perceived superiority and intellect over our neighbor rather than love him by giving him the respect he deserves as an image-bearer of God (Matt. 22:37-39).

But Scripture speaks of the Christian, not as a proud person who exploits power for his own gain, but rather as one who imitates Christ, who willingly laid down his life on the cross for his enemies (1 John 3:16). The Bible teaches us that humility and the ability to be “quick to hear, slow to speak” (James 1:19)
should be the foundational characteristics of a redeemed individual (Col. 3:12).

In a broken society marred by sin, we are all naturally drawn to power, especially the power of “canceling” someone because it makes us feel as though we are in control. But instead of seeking power, we are called to live under the reign and rule of God alone, recognizing that each of us falls short of God’s glory. Our pursuit should be one of laying down our pride, power, and person. We are each corrupted and broken (Rom. 3:23) and are called to submit to God alone.

**THICKER SKIN AND INTELLECTUALLY HONEST DIALOGUE**

In addition, defining someone’s worth based on the issues we disagree with does immense damage to our credibility in the long run because it shows we are unable to engage one another’s ideas as presented nor have a rich debate about what is true. We show that our ideas only have longevity if we continue to force them on people rather than withstanding the refining nature of deep and thoughtful engagement. We would rather cancel someone or something than take part in honest dialogue.

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**As Christians, we are called to push back against this culture and to stand up for the dignity and rights of our neighbors, especially those with whom we disagree, as we seek to persuade them of the truth of God’s Word.**

Engaging ideas dissimilar to our own means listening to someone’s views with respect, especially if we disagree. Just as Christ doesn’t define our dignity based on one sin or one particular issue, neither are we to condemn another based on one thing. We are more than our ideas, beliefs, and failures. Christians of all people should understand this because we were bought with a price by the blood of Christ—blood that is powerful enough to completely wash us clean, not just clean up an isolated stain.

As we engage one another, we must champion the dignity of every individual, which will often mean having the courage and moral fortitude to withstand criticism and hard questions. In order for each of us to grow and mature, we must be able to defend our beliefs rather than run from the opposing position. Christians should take this challenge to rise to the occasion and give a reason for the hope within us, with confidence in the God of all wisdom (1 Pet. 3:15).

**ENGAGING THE CANCEL CULTURE WITH RESPECT**

Just as we are called to give a reason for the hope within us, we are also called to do it with gentleness and respect because those we engage with are not simply ideas but human beings made in God’s image. As our society increasingly becomes more divisive, we must take important steps to love our neighbors in our online dialogue. One practical way of doing this is by seeking to understand one another’s ideas or positions rather than caricaturing them. This will mean that we read widely and listen intently to those with whom we disagree. We must attempt to represent their ideas for what they really are rather than being intellectually dishonest about what our neighbor believes. Representing their views in a way that they would agree with goes a long way in showing your credibility and love. This is the beginning of convictional kindness. We engage others in truth but also in love.

Cancel culture will only lead to a segmented society and to a breakdown of civility and public discourse. Ultimately this can lead to a weak trust in one another as well as the erosion of our democracy. But, as Christians, we are called to push back against this culture and to stand up for the dignity and rights of our neighbors, especially those with whom we disagree, as we seek to persuade them of the truth of God’s Word. We must care more about loving God and our neighbor than we do about being right or popular. Instead of seeking power in vain, we should submit to the One who has already won the victory, as we represent him to those in need of the grace that will cancel their sin.

Jason Thacker is an associate research fellow and creative director at the ERLC.
Can Justice & Civility Coexist?

Seeking the Welfare of Others with Love

Trillia Newbell
As image-bearers, we have the privilege of reflecting God in every aspect of life, including in the public square. Specifically, we are to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) as we care for the orphan and widow, protect the vulnerable, and seek justice. These are all things that the Lord does that we can participate in and speak to as we bear his image in our communities, churches, on social media, and beyond.

The difference between us and God is that we battle with sin, while he is perfect. There are times when we might be tempted to squash our perceived opponent rather than lovingly share truth and entrust it all to the Lord. So, how do we pursue civility and justice? Is it possible to seek the welfare of others in a loving way? Does civility require disengagement?

**SEEKING JUSTICE CIVILLY**

With God’s help and power, we can seek justice in a civil way because we know that ultimately it is the Lord who fights for us. Our goal in the pursuit of justice should not be to win a fight. Our goal should be to see the Lord’s will be done and for justice to prevail. The trouble is, we often seek justice by espousing the same evil words and anger that reflects the world and not the Lord. It also reveals a lack of trust in our God.

It isn’t a surprise to the Lord that we would struggle with the temptation to take justice into our own hands rather than entrusting it to him. Paul instructs us in Romans 12:17-19 to “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”

You and I can indeed seek justice for others through our justice system, church discipline, and a number of other means. We are not, however, to do so by evil means—slander, coercion, blackmail, gossip, and other forms of evil. Instead, we are to “give thought to what we do” and ask whether or not it glorifies and honors the Lord.

God will not allow injustices to remain unpunished. He is a God of justice, and vengeance belongs to him. The Lord will judge his people (Heb. 10:30). If we know this to be true, then we can pursue justice with grace and truth. He will judge and punish. He will take care of all the injustice in the world. We may not see it happen today, but we know it’s coming.

The knowledge of God’s ultimate justice should humble and sober us. This isn’t a time to bask in the impending misery of others. We should mourn. But we can also rest, because trusting in the character and promises of God brings us peace. Knowing that we don’t have to play God takes the burden of ultimate justice off of our shoulders so we can speak and act in love.

**EXERCISING CIVILITY AND JUSTICE**

As image-bearers we can also reflect the Lord as we exercise civility and justice. Civility doesn’t look like shrinking back, but it does look a lot like love. God has told us what it looks like to do good in the world. We are to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8, emphasis mine). The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in love (Psa. 86:16; 103:8; Joel 2:13), and is full of compassion toward the underserving, which is all of us (Psa. 116:5; 119:156; Hosea 1:7). The Lord is the defender of the weak and father to the fatherless (Psa. 68:5). We are to do and be likewise, emulating God’s character.

Here’s what we know for sure: not a single one of us will walk out our faith perfectly. We will not love perfectly. We will speak words that are harmful and tear down. We will white-knuckle our plans and shake our fists in anger when others don’t adopt our views and beliefs. We won’t always speak the truth in love, but by the grace and power of God we can do more good than harm. As we seek justice, you and I can ask the Lord for a love for our neighbor that manifests itself as civility.

The good news for you and me isn’t that we will get this right at all times but rather that we can change. The really good news is that Jesus paid for every past, present, and future unloving thought and deed of ours (1 John 4:10). So, too, we are called to a radical love that includes loving our enemies. And the kind of love that God calls us to—the love that loves our neighbor as much as we love ourselves—that must come from him.

The next time you and I have an opportunity to step out in faith to speak or act for the vulnerable or to stand up for truth, let’s do it—but not to win a fight. Let’s do it in such a way that reflects our faith and trust in God’s character, and in such a way that those we interact with, whether they ultimately agree or not, walk away more aware of the grace and mercy of God through our love for them.

Trillia Newbell is the director of community outreach for the ERLC.
Recently, Russell Moore sat down to have a conversation with one of his all-time favorite authors, Marilynne Robinson. She is a Pulitzer Prize winning author and was interviewed by the president of the United States, Barack Obama, in the New York Review of Books, a couple of years ago. She is a mainline protestant, United Church of Christ, with whom Moore would disagree on many different theological issues, but she is someone that has benefitted his life in many ways through her writing and keen observation of human nature.

Russell Moore: Marilyne, I had given Gilead to a friend and had recommended it strongly. I was surprised that when she read it, she came back and said that she was waiting all the way through for the reveal, expecting that John Ames, the minister in the book, would be revealed at some point as sinister. It seemed to me that there was something kind of parabolic in that. In light of the scandals and frauds that we sometimes see associated with clergy, and also just a basic cynicism, it seems that much of what you write about, implicitly in your fiction and often explicitly in your essays, is a deconstruction of that sort of cynicism—the idea that everybody is really motivated by self interest. Would that be fair?

Marilynne Robinson: That’s very fair, indeed. I think that’s such a toxic idea. It makes people mean-spirited. I just
I think that if a sort of ethos of costly grace were instilled in us, we would find it alarming, rather than satisfying, to make up dreadful stories about one another.

-Marilynne Robinson
because a lot of people are much more religious than anybody simply observing from outside would know—is the act of grace. And I truly feel that the act of grace from the human side is difficult. It is expenditure; it is a demand that one places on one's self. It is always easier to do the not gracious thing or think the not gracious thought. I think that if a sort of ethos of costly grace were instilled in us, we would find it alarming, rather than satisfying, to make up dreadful stories about one another and so on.

We have forgotten the joy of the capacity for acting graciously. People do not enjoy their lives in a very essential way because they can't get to a place where they feel as though they have a wealth that allows them generosity, the ordinary kindnesses that one has the opportunity to engage in.

**RM:** I appreciate the way that you emphasize communal bonds, but you also spend a lot of time talking about the good that comes with a kind of individualism, a kind of integrity. So you think that there is a way that we can balance community and the individual in a way that we are failing at right now?

**MR:** In the 19th and early 20th century in America, individualism meant people who were self sufficient in the sense that they made their own judgments about things, and they carried their own weight and so on. It did not mean that they were selfish; it didn't mean that they were out for number one. That's a kind of meaning that has come into the language. We have lost the ability to say that Abraham Lincoln was a great individual in the sense that he could weather things, he could see beyond immediate miseries and so on. Strength is what individualism used to be associated with. It has become very much associated now with selfishness of a kind. We are so fantastically made, so strangely and wonderfully made. We should learn that we have gifts; we should learn that we have strength. We should learn that we really are unique; our purpose is not to camouflage ourselves so that we fit into some imagined general other.

**RM:** [Parts of our conversation] caused me to think about a line in *Gilead* when Reverend Ames says, “That’s the strangest thing about this life, about being in the ministry, people change the subject when they see you coming, and then sometimes those very same people come into your study and they tell you the most remarkable things. There is a lot under the surface of life, everyone knows that. A lot of malice and dread and guilt and so much loneliness where you wouldn’t really expect to find it either.”

I think that’s true. And I think that Marilynne Robinson has done remarkable work in showing us something of what John Calvin would call depravity, but also beyond that the grace of a God who is immortal, invisible, and God only wise.

To hear the full interview, visit russellmoore.com/category/podcasts.

Russell Moore is the president of the ERLC.

Marilynne Robinson is an American novelist and essayist.
How to Read the News with Discernment

Joe Carter
that, as with most spiritual disciplines, biblical discernment contains both a passive and an active element. We must rely on our union with Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But we also must develop our understanding of Scripture and our ability to make critical judgements about how to apply what we learn.

Let’s look at a few necessary steps for developing the skill of discernment when reading the news:

Consider what you believe about the news. Which is more important to us, God’s Word or the news? What if someone were asked to determine that answer by observing our habits? The uncomfortable truth is that we often spend far more time reading news articles than reading the Bible. And we spend more time watching news programs than actively acquiring wisdom. How would your life differ if you changed your news consumption habits to develop wisdom and understanding?

Understand that “news” is a product for consumption. The term “news” is most commonly used in our daily lives to mean information about current events that is delivered to the general public by the news industry. The news industry produces one product but sells two: they produce news content that they sell to news consumers (i.e., you), and they package the attention of news consumers (again, you) that they sell to others (usually advertisers but sometimes nonprofit donors).

For the news industry, you are both a consumer and a product. But in the age...
of social media you have also become a free distributor. Your friend who daily shares the content of a cable news show on Twitter and Facebook is essentially an unpaid intern working for Fox News or MSNBC. That means most of us are an unofficial part of the media and will be held responsible to God for how we use the news to promote or degrade the understanding and truth.

Unfortunately, many of us don’t even bother to read the news we share. As philosopher Michael P. Lynch has noted, current research estimates that at least 60% of news stories shared online have not even been read by the person sharing them. We can’t be discerning if we are spreading a product that we have not even taken the time to evaluate.

Guard your mind. You may consider yourself an “independent thinker,” but if you are a news consumer, you’re conditioned to “think about” whatever issues the news industry has decided you will think about that day. This is especially true if you engage on social media outlets like Twitter, where a recurring joke is to ask, “What are we upset about today?” Most of us, if we are honest, use outlets like Twitter as a shortcut to find out what agenda the news industry has set for the day.

Christians don’t need to believe the news industry has nefarious motives to find this agenda-setting function troubling. Whether we are getting our news from Fox News or NPR, the picture of reality being drawn by the news industry is not likely to match the reality produced by our Creator. The Bible commands us to set our minds on things above, not on earthly things (Col. 3:2), which is impossible to do when we’re tuned into around-the-clock “headline news.”

Consume less news. Most news product is the mental and spiritual equivalent of junk food. By consuming less of it, we won’t necessarily improve our health, but we can limit its negative effects on us. But what if we miss something? The late media theorist Neil Postman offers this response:

If you are concerned that cutting down your viewing time will cause you to “miss” important news, keep this in mind: each day’s TV news consists for the most part, of fifteen examples of the Seven Deadly Sins, with which you are already quite familiar. There may be a couple of stories exemplifying lust, usually four about murder, occasionally one about gluttony, another about envy, and so on. It cannot possibly do you any harm to excuse yourself each week from thirty or forty of these examples. Remember: TV news does not reflect normal, everyday life.

News is for reading, not watching. If you are an American, you likely get your news in the worst way possible—through the medium of video, specifically television news. Studies show that more than half of adults in the U.S. get news from TV. We can improve our ability to discern the news by shifting our habits of consumption and obtaining the bulk of our news in printed form (including online text), listening to radio news sparingly, and avoiding TV news like it’s spreading a plague.

The primary reason for developing this preference is the way each medium communicates information. TV has a lower informational density than a newspaper. All the words spoken in an hour of TV news could fit on a single page of a newspaper, says Postman, so TV viewers are getting much less news content than newspaper readers. Postman also notes, “The grammar of images is weak in communicating past-ness and present-ness” and prefers change rather than stasis. That’s why, says Postman, violence finds its way on television news so often—it is a radical and attention-grabbing form of change.

Arm yourself against “fake news”. Almost everyone in America agrees that so-called “fake news” is a problem. A study by Gallup and the Knight
Pray for guidance. We should ask God to open our hearts to his Word and allow us to see any specific issue clearly. We should also continuously pray, as did the psalmist, “I am your servant; give me discernment” (Psa. 119:125). For every minute we spend consuming news products, we should spend a minute in prayer about how we discern the news. And if you don’t have time for that much prayer, you don’t have time to be wasting with the news.

Joe Carter is an author and an executive pastor at the McLean Bible Church Arlington campus in Arlington, Virginia.
How Should Christians Advocate?

Prison Fellowship’s Christian Witness and the Battle for Bipartisan Criminal Justice Reform

Heather Rice-Minus
At the end of an exhausting day of advocacy, I stood face-to-face with a congressional staffer whose boss refused to vote for a bill that might’ve changed the lives of thousands of people sentenced for federal drug crimes. Prison Fellowship supported the bill, and although it passed through committee, the opposition displayed during the vote guaranteed that it would advance no farther. The sense of failure stung.

Though we ended up on opposing sides of that bill, I recognized that we shared key values. I asked the staffer to sit down with me. Perhaps together, I suggested, we could see which of Prison Fellowship’s goals the senator could support. To my surprise, she said, “You are my team, and I would love to do that.”

Advocacy is a hard job, with many more defeats than victories. On difficult days, that conversation reminds me that even when disagreements surface, much still unites us. Everyone wants to be heard and valued, and when we engage with civility, we earn the right to be heard in return.

**CAN CHRISTIANS BE ACTIVISTS?**

For some, Christian activism seems like a contradiction in terms. After all, how can the fruit of the Spirit—like love, peace, and gentleness—thrive amid the acrimony and ambition of professional politics? But it can be done, and, I would argue, the murkier the water, the more important it is for Christians to wade in, committed to exemplifying the way of Jesus.

For Prison Fellowship, advocating as Christians means that we care about the whole person made in the image of God. Behind bars, we minister to the soul by sharing the gospel, distributing Bibles, and offering programs based on the truths of Scripture. For decades, we have also advocated for reforms that affect prisoners’ daily lives. In doing so, we follow the pattern of Scripture. Jesus preached about the Kingdom *and* made sure his listeners had enough food.

Likewise, Prison Fellowship has called for incarcerated people to have greater safety from sexual assault, protection from undue
Everyone wants to be heard and valued, and when we engage with civility, we earn the right to be heard in return.

infringement on their religious liberty, fairer sentencing for crimes, and more access to rehabilitative programs and education. Often, we have built coalitions that span wide political or ideological divides by finding just enough common ground to make progress on these issues.

**SEEING THE IMAGE OF GOD IN OUR OPPONENTS**

Considering the whole person extends to our relationships with those in the political sphere. We are committed to caring more about the well-being of the person across the table than about scoring points or trumpeting soundbites. This is a conviction we inherited from our founder, Charles Colson, a veteran of Washington’s bare-knuckled political brawling, who, after coming to faith, wrote that Christians who love their country should “spend more time washing feet than waving flags.”

For Prison Fellowship, “washing the feet” of our opponents means that civility is our default posture. We strive to listen and find common ground. We don’t stray from our core convictions. We tell the truth. But we also look for the foundational values—like basic human dignity or the importance of proportional justice—that we and our opponents hold in common. Even when, at the end of the day, we disagree on a policy, this commitment to listening and finding commonalities allows us to build a relationship of trust and respect for the long term.
THE UNEXPECTED POWER OF CIVILITY

Policy advocates often demonize their opponents. They assume that anyone who has reached a different conclusion has flawed logic, ill intent, or both. Everyone stays in their ideological trenches, lobbing missiles across no man’s land. Many are wounded that way; no one wins. But when we keep an open mind to the experiences and priorities that undergird others’ positions, we can have true dialogue about criminal justice reform and other critical issues.

A verse that I keep in mind is James 1:19-20: “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (NIV). Jesus’ ministry exemplified this. He told stories and asked questions, inviting listeners into a conversation that brought down their guard and led them closer to the truth. Our human instinct is to lecture and argue, but Jesus’ way is ultimately much more persuasive.

Our approach faced a significant test in 2018, when we linked arms with Democrats, Republicans, faith-based organizations, law enforcement groups, conservatives, and progressives to advocate for passage of the FIRST STEP Act, the most significant federal criminal justice reform in a generation. These strange bedfellows found they agreed about the need to bring hope to prisoners, families, and communities. It wasn’t an easy process; objections and obstacles along the way could have caused the bill to founder at any point. But there were countless constituents having thoughtful, respectful discourse with our country’s leaders about why the federal system needed to change. And ultimately, the bill passed with overwhelming bipartisan support.

CIVILITY BEGINS AT HOME

Civility is not just needed in the halls of Congress. We need it in our town halls, neighborhood meetings, churches, and Facebook pages. We can’t hope for change at the national level that we are not willing to practice at the dinner table. Our leaders follow the culture—not the other way around. If we want them to behave with civility and respect, they must first see it in us. If we want them to pursue justice reform that restores people, then they need to hear how much we care about it. Change flows upward.

It doesn’t take training as a professional lobbyist to persuade our leaders; it just takes passion born of personal conviction. Prison Fellowship has a corps of Justice Ambassadors who advocate for change. Many of them are like Beth, a woman whose husband went to federal prison for a first-time, nonviolent offense, leaving her struggling to make ends meet. Or like Quovadis, a former prisoner-turned-pastor who knows how badly prisoners need restorative programming.

By telling their stories, these everyday heroes turn hearts. Thousands more have signed petitions, written letters, or joined prayer walks to show their support for justice that restores. Step by step and conversation by conversation, they are bringing our nation closer to that common ground.

Heather Rice-Minus is the senior vice president of government relations and church mobilization at Prison Fellowship.
Why
LIBERAL
DEMOCRACY
fosters
HUMAN
FLOURISHING
Ordering government to promote justice,
defend religious liberty, and uphold freedom
Josh Wester
Throughout our nation’s history, the virtues of this political arrangement have been questioned from all sides. And recently, there has been considerable debate among social conservatives in the U.S. over the long-term viability of liberal democracy. Central to that debate is the question of whether or not liberal democracy itself is to blame for the evident and increasing moral decay in American culture. In light of the present controversy, it is fitting to ask again whether democratic liberalism is something worth defending.

Why liberal?

Liberal democracy does not exist because of some divine decree. It is simply an approach to government that has developed over time, and as such it is hardly infallible. Still, there are good reasons for Christians to continue to embrace liberal democracy as a helpful approach to government.

The “liberal” (from the Latin word Libertas meaning liberty) part of liberal democracy refers to the tradition of classical liberalism that sprung from the political theory of the 17th-century
English philosopher John Locke. At the time when Locke was forging his political philosophy in defense of individual liberty, he was doing so against the backdrop of an English monarchy that could rightly be described as tyrannical. And in defending the rights of an individual to exercise a large degree of self-rule and autonomy, one of the most important things Locke was defending was the idea of religious freedom.

Prior to the advent of classical liberalism, defenders of the English monarchy argued that the king’s right to rule had been established by God. And because the power of the crown came by virtue of “divine right,” there were very few checks on its power. The king, wielding the authority of heaven, held the power to tell his subjects not only how they should live but how they should worship. In such an environment, religious freedom was unthinkable. Religious nonconformity posed a significant threat to the power of the state because the king’s power would be diminished if his subjects were to reject the idea that his right to rule came from God.

Classical liberalism sought to limit such intrusions upon the freedom of individuals. It articulated a new vision of government authority, not one based on divine right but one based on natural law and natural rights—a vision of rules and liberties patterned after God’s design of humanity. Instead of the crown granting certain permissions to its citizens, classical liberalism understood freedom and equality to be fundamental (God-given) attributes belonging to every individual. And instead of the uniqueness of the monarch, classical liberalism placed an emphasis on the equal value of all people.

In advancing the concept of limited government, classical liberalism envisions a government that lacks the authority to limit the basic rights and liberties of its citizens to think, speak, live, and worship according to the dictates of conscience. This certainly comports well with the Christian understanding of the individual. Christians believe that every person is made in God’s image and therefore bears an inestimable worth and is fundamentally equal. Moreover, religious freedom is also a deeply Christian—particularly Baptist—conviction; God is not interested in a worship coerced by the state but seeks true worshipers who respond to the gospel in repentance and faith (John 4:23; Mark 1:15). For nearly three centuries, the rise of Lockean liberalism has represented a positive advancement for religious freedom in the modern West.

**Democratic Liberalism**

The same is true for the “democracy” part of liberal democracy. Democracy at its root, refers to rule by the people. In a democracy, government is formed by the people and is therefore accountable to the people for the way it wields its power. In the U.S., we live in a representative democracy—sometimes called a democratic republic.

Keeping with the theme of equality, it is noteworthy that our government is made up entirely of citizens. Those vested with the power of elected office are chosen from among the citizenry, and even those granted lifetime appointments to roles in the judiciary remain citizens. In a healthy democracy, no person is above the law, and the law applies to everyone in equal measure.

Though democracy is not essential to preserving things like liberty and equality, the fact that our government is made up of citizens who are directly affected by the laws they pass, and that those elected to office must face regular elections where their leadership is scrutinized and contested, goes a long way toward preserving those things. A regular cycle of free and fair elections is meant to ensure that those elected to office...
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS ALSO A DEEPLY CHRISTIAN—PARTICULARLY BAPTIST—CONVICTION; GOD IS NOT INTERESTED IN A WORSHIP COERCED BY THE STATE BUT SEEKS TRUE WORSHIPERS WHO RESPOND TO THE GOSPEL IN REPENTANCE AND FAITH.

act in the interest of the people. And since the Founding, our nation’s commitment to democracy has proved a faithful safeguard against tyranny.

Must we keep it?

On the one hand, Christians need not be overly concerned about the future of liberal democracy. The New Testament prescribes no specific political philosophy or vision of government which Christians must strive to enact or preserve. Indeed, within its pages one finds only the most basic description of the role of government (e.g., to promote justice and punish the evildoer), along with the assurance that the institution of government was established by God.

Yet on the other hand, any serious Bible reader knows that the scriptures have a great deal to say about the value of a person and the nature of human life. Thus, it is obvious that a society’s political arrangements can substantially help or hinder the pursuit of justice and human flourishing. In this regard, liberal democracy has provided a helpful framework for American government to pursue these ends across multiple centuries.

I am not insensitive to the criticisms levied against liberal democracy by its contemporary critics. I readily concede the point that preferable alternatives to the liberal order may present themselves or be discovered in due course. But for now, there is no extant political ideology that better accords with the Christian principles of human dignity and religious liberty, more successfully upholds freedom and equality, or more effectively maximizes the potential for justice and human flourishing. In this fallen world, democratic liberalism might not be essential, but it is certainly worth defending.

Josh Wester is director of research in the ERLC’s president’s office.
WHAT SHOULD CIVILITY LOOK LIKE IN POLITICS?

A CONVERSATION WITH TWO FORMER WHITE HOUSE STAFFERS
JEFF PICKERING FROM THE ERLC’S POLICY STAFF
RECENTLY INVITED TWO FORMER WHITE HOUSE
STAFFERS, JOSH DECKARD AND MICHAEL WEAR,
TO THE LELAND HOUSE FOR A CONVERSATION
ABOUT CIVILITY AND WORKING IN POLITICS IN
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Jeff Pickering: Where are you from? And when did you move to Washington, D.C.?

Josh Deckard: I’m from Cincinnati, Ohio, born and raised, and I moved to Washington when I was 20 for my first job that was actually in the White House with President George W. Bush.

Michael Wear: I’m from Buffalo, New York, a proud Buffalonian. I came to D.C. when I was 18 for college at George Washington University and just never left. My first paid job was with President Obama’s first inaugural. I helped oversee the National Prayer Service held the day after the inauguration at the Washington National Cathedral.

JP: Both of your first jobs were in the White House, that’s a remarkable story to share.

MW: There are things I know now that would have helped me on the job, but the upside of it was that I was just happy to be
for a lot of folks, getting to the White House is the result of a career of plotting and strategizing. I just wanted to make the most of every day because I knew it wasn’t going to last. Working in the White House you always know there is an end date.

JD: That’s right, I completely agree. One of the things I am thankful for is that when I started I was surrounded by humble people, specifically Chief of Staff Andy Card and President Bush. I had a chief of staff who would go and tap a career employee on the shoulder and invite him to lunch. Career employees told me they had been working there for three decades and no chief of staff had ever even engaged with them. The president was sure that we knew that to whom much is given, much is required.

JP: Neither of the presidents you served had easy terms, there were arguments and debates both over the substance of policy and the controversy of politics. Is the conflict America sees on TV real in the lived experience of someone on the inside an administration?

MW: Unfortunately, I think increasingly so. Partisanship and conflict has seeped into the interpersonal relations of many in D.C., including elected officials in a significant way. There are relationships that defy this trend, like Barack Obama had with Tom Coburn, but things have coarsened. The ability to get news from sources that affirm your biases is actually affecting our politicians, too. Our politicians are more able to only hear from those who agree with them and to view elections as not about persuading the folks that they are seeking to represent but just churning out more folks that already support you. There is real conflict in D.C. that strikes down into the interpersonal.

JP: How do you define civility?

MW: Civility pertains to how we treat one another in public, which now the former head of Fuller Seminary calls it a kind of public politeness. I have referred to it as public grace. Civility is what grace looks like in public. To refer to Scripture, I think of Peter’s admonition that we would want to keep our tongues from evil, our lips from deceitful speech, and civility is how we recognize the dignity of other human beings through the words and the actions that we interact with them in public. It is a way that we communicate the dignity of other people, of strangers, in public.

JD: It boils down to the principle of the second most important commandment which is to love your neighbor as yourself. It boils down to love. It is also consider others better than yourself, look at to the interest of others before your own. Civility is from a motivation of love and service toward others.

JP: Is there a time that you saw that kind of civility in action in the White House?

JD: This is going to sound like nonsense: I don’t remember a day were I didn’t see it in action. President Bush had a mindset that we are going to treat everybody with respect, whether we disagree with them, whether they treat us poorly, whether they say things about us that aren’t true. We are going to treat them with love, with kindness, and with respect. In my departure letter from the White House, one of the things I wrote to him is that very few people in life are the same person in public as they are in private. Privately he is significantly more kind and compassionate and a thoughtful person than even transpires on TV.

MW: The president I served is someone who occupied the office, similar to what Josh said, with this incredible grace. It was an honor to work for him every day, and he set the tone. There were times when the impulse outside of the building would have been why aren’t you hitting back, why are holding yourself to a higher standard than others seem to, and the president would reel that back and remind folks of why we were there. I think of [the] speech he gave at the National Prayer Breakfast in 2010 where he laid out his vision of civility in public life. Another that sticks out is during the inauguration weekend, the president held a dinner in honor of John McCain whom he defeated for the presidency. In light of everything that has transpired since, I think it is even more meaningful as a show of public grace that people deserved dignity even when you disagree politically.

JP: Is there a time when you didn’t measure up to your own standard of civility?

JD: I sadly can think of too many times. I was a baby believer then and look back on that time with great fondness and some regret in how I treated certain people. I remember sitting on Air Force One flying down to Waco talking to the president, and I was very fired up about something and said “I hate,” in mentioning a specific group of people. And he corrected me. He said, “Josh, you don’t hate them, you can’t hate people, and we need to love people who are different than us, who think differently.
than us, even if they don’t deserve it.” Having the leader of the free world correct you graciously is quite something, but I was wrong. I was thinking about these people being wrong, but I was being self-righteous and arrogant and that was a wonderful lesson that I am super thankful for.

MW: I can think of meetings I was in, and often it was subtle, making the argument that, you know, isn’t completely honest or doesn’t completely respect the point of view of your opponent, but you know you could trip them up if you just position their view in this way and leave this fact out. Repeated occasions of those kinds of rhetorical maneuvers undermines the civic dialogue for everybody; it makes it so that our politics become a technique of maneuvering rather than public service and a mission of mutual inquiry into what is best for the public. I think we often talk about civility as just being nice when really civility is about the rules of the road that enable civic involvement for everybody.

JP: Is civility in politics a cover for being a moderate? Can you be a strong conservative or a true progressive and be civil?

MW: I just think that is terribly misguided. I think there are a lot of uncivil moderates. And there are a lot of civil people who have strong convictions. What’s necessary for civility is an essential amount of humility that suggests that I may believe in my political views a great deal but not so much that I believe that the ends justify the means. Incivility at its worst form is a kind of public hatred. From the Christian perspective, we believe politics are important, but it is not ultimate, and if we are sacrificing faithfulness through dishonoring the dignity of our fellow citizens and fellow human beings by resorting to uncivil tactics to achieve some kind of political end, that can sometimes reflect a form of idolatry.

JD: Yes, well said, especially his point that politics obviously are important but not ultimate is something we all need to keep in mind. I’m as conservative as it gets, and yet, as I mentioned earlier, some of my best friends are Democrats. The guy I had lunch with on Friday is as liberal as it gets. I doubt we agree on a single policy and yet, we were able to talk about his girlfriend, my wife, my children, our current jobs, other things going on in the world today. We were able to touch on policies that are being debated in the public square today, and he has his position and I have my position, but we were able to talk. He is not a Christian, but we were able to talk with mutual love and respect for one another.

JP: I want to look ahead because a lot of what we do at the ERLC is equipping Christians to think about how to apply kingdom theology to moral discipleship. Looking forward, how can Christians from opposing political parties model civility for the watching world?

JD: I think it is John 13, “love one another as I have loved you, so that all men will know that you are my disciples,” right? I used to think that to be a Christian meant you had to be part of a specific political party, and now I’m so thankful for the church I am in today. The zip code we meet in is actually the second most diverse zip code in the entire country; over 90 nationalities are represented. We have people who voted for a variety of candidates over the 10 years we have been a church. And yet, we come together because we love Christ. I think that it is fascinating to the outside world. I’m thankful for God’s wisdom in creating the local church to display his glory and his kingdom.

MW: That’s right. I’d just add, I think the frustration that some folks have with civility is that it is sometimes invoked only for the other side or used to deflect from substantive political disagreements. We have to realize that only invoking civility to put down the other side, whoever that may be, is one of the greatest threats to civility today. The norm of civility cannot withstand partisan or ideologically selective invocations. Civility is best invoked first as a matter of personal reflection, second to your own side, and then on your political opponents. Be willing to call out incivility, even if it works against your own short-term political interests. That’s not just going to help our politics; it is actually a witness to where your security and faith is. Our culture needs people who are willing to uphold principles even when it seems to work against their short-term political interest.

JP: I love that. Michael, Josh, thank you so much.
You Can Help Us Advance the Kingdom

Dear Light Reader:

I hope you are enjoying this issue of our award-winning magazine. Our culture is in dire need of Christians who are informed about the most pressing issues of our day, can speak constructively to a watching world, and will act courageously in the public square. The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission exists to equip pastors, church leaders, and thoughtful Christians with helpful ways to understand the world around them and engage the culture without losing the gospel.

In the last year, this has taken several forms including our largest-ever conference centered on caring well for victims of sexual abuse, a convening in our nation’s capital on the need for more courage and civility, and a public event to encourage Christians to take a stand for the lives of the preborn in our nation. Our content has helped Christians understand what it means to be a Christ-follower in our fallen culture, to be the salt and light this world needs. And our resources have provided tools for ensuring the gospel remains the focus in our lives, no matter the context we find ourselves.

In the coming months, we have an ambitious agenda to take our pro-life ministry overseas for the first time, to Northern Ireland—a place where abortion was decriminalized in October 2019. That culture is facing a challenge like never before, and we want to be there to bolster the church for their new reality. At home, we’re busy preparing helpful guidance for Christians who want to engage the public square constructively in 2020.

All of the above and more is made possible through the resources provided by the cooperating churches of the Southern Baptist Convention. At the same time, we are able to enhance our work because of gifts provided by individuals like you. If every person who utilizes ERLC content were to donate today, we would be able to reach more churches, place more life-saving ultrasound machines in pro-life ministries around the country, and equip Christians globally.

If the content of this magazine or the work of the ERLC resonates with your heart and you feel moved to come alongside us, we would be grateful for any contribution you can make. Your investment will help us expand our reach and provide more ways to helpfully point people toward the Kingdom. Visit ERLC.com/donate, or use the attached envelope.

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Director of Strategic Partnerships, ERLC
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