

Living With Our Differences

The Rev. Dr.
Peter G. James

2 Timothy 2:14-26

Sermon Series:
Kingdom Legacy

Rule #38: In visiting the sick, do not presently play the physician if you be not knowing therein.

I want to talk about civility today for reasons that will become clear a few moments from now. As I researched this topic, I came across George Washington's Rules of Civility this week. These rules date back to a 16th century set of precepts compiled for young gentlemen by Jesuit instructors. As a young school boy in Virginia, George Washington copied by hand a list of 110 *Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*. Some of these rules are rather amusing. Rule #4: In the presence of others, sing not to yourself with a humming voice or drum with your fingers or feet. Rule #13: Kill no vermin, or fleas, lice or ticks in the sight of others: if you see any filth or thick spittle put your foot dexterously upon it; if it be upon the clothes of your companions, put it off privately, and if it be upon your own clothes, return thanks to him who puts it off. Rule #38: In visiting the sick, do not presently play the physician if you be not knowing therein." Rule #54: Play not the peacock, looking everywhere to see if you be well-decked, if your shoes fit well, if your stockings sit neatly and clothes handsomely. Rule #71: Gaze not on the marks or blemishes of others and ask not how they came. Rule #100:

Cleanse not your teeth with the tablecloth.

Lest you think these 110 maxims are merely concerned with etiquette, ponder these rules. Rule #1: Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those who are present. Rule #56: Associate yourself with men of good quality if you esteem your own reputation; for 'tis better to be alone than in bad company. Rule #58: Let your conversation be without malice or evil. Rule #89: Speak not evil of the absent. Rule #110: Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.

I mention this matter of civility in light of the firestorm of controversy brewing right now in our denomination, PC(USA). The presenting issue before the church is whether practicing gay and lesbian people can be ordained to the office of Deacon, Elder or Minister of Word and Sacrament. The controversy concerns heterosexuality as well as homosexuality. The section of the PC(USA) constitution that has generated the most debate is the so-called "fidelity and chastity" clause. "Those who are called to office in the church are to lead lives in obedience to Scripture and the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of

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marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.” This section of our constitution makes a claim on everyone who pledges allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord.

It shouldn't surprise you that human sexuality is hotly debated in the church. Sexuality is one of the seminal issues facing our 21st century culture.

Sexuality may be the presenting issue in this debate, but the deeper issue concerns the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of scripture. We affirm three core beliefs at Vienna Presbyterian Church: “Jesus is Lord, Scripture is our authority and everyone is called to discipleship.” What does it mean to submit to Jesus Christ as Lord and to Scripture as our authority in all areas of our lives, including our sexuality?

The General Assembly of the PC(USA) met this past week in San Jose. This General Assembly, by all accounts, turned left. This assembly asks Presbyteries to remove the fidelity and chastity clause from our constitution, thereby making it possible for homosexual persons to be ordained to leadership. And some of you were hoping for a nice, little sermon on stress this morning!

Some will ask whether we should remain in the PC(USA). Everybody take a deep breath. Jesus Christ is Lord! Remember what Jesus said: Even the gates of hell will not ultimately prevail against the church.

Our leadership has not had time to meet on the issue. Personally, I resonate with what Presbyterians for Renewal have written called “Reshaping the PC(USA): PRF looks beyond the 218th General Assembly.”

I'm fascinated with the timing of today's sermon. We determined in March to preach from 2nd Timothy, oblivious to this year's GA. The 1st century church was likewise embroiled in a deep theological divide. We see a hint of that in 2:18, where there are those who believe Christ's resurrection is over and done with.

Our focus today, is how we deal with our differences. Next Sunday, we'll delve into the differences themselves. I'll speak more about this false teaching next week, but let me supply a preview. The major heresy facing the 1st century church, called Gnosticism, is making a comeback in our day, which has enormous implications for human sexuality.

Some of you want me to immediately launch into the differences. But that's not the subject of this morning's text. My first commitment is to preach the text, rather than ride my hobby horse on the issue. Our passage speaks about how we deal with our differences, what used to be called “civility.” We'll never make progress in dealing with our theological differences if we don't practice civility with each other.

Os Guinness asks a penetrating question in his thoughtful book *The*

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Case for Civility. “How do we deal with our deepest differences, especially when these differences are religious, racial and ideological?”

Let’s go to the text. Paul warns Timothy in verse 14, “Avoid wrangling over words which does not good but only ruins those who are listening.” The word “ruin” in the Greek, *katastrophe*, is where we derive our English word “catastrophe.” These verbal wrestling matches are having a catastrophic impact on the first century church. Paul continues in verses 16-17, “Avoid profane chatter. It will lead people into more and more impiety and their teaching will spread like gangrene.” A few verses later, in verse 23, he writes, “Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies. You know they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome.”

Civility has fallen on hard times. Pushy, ill-mannered people are everywhere. AAA reports a sharp rise in incidents of road rage in our country. Loud, obnoxious fans are standard fare at sports venues.

The loss of civility will, no doubt, play a prominent role in this year’s presidential campaign. The year 2008 promises to be the nastiest election ever. Reasoned discourse will take a back seat to in-your-face sound bytes.

Why are we so rude? In this self-indulgent era, we have lost the virtue of obligation to others. We use self-expression to justify meanness. The anonymity of big city crowds contributes to the

cause. Anybody with a computer can join the nastiness. The lack of face-to-face communication makes it easier to say anything you want. Surely you’ve noticed the plethora of disembodied, rude bloggers out there in cyberspace, who write things they would never say in person.

Civility is not mere manners. Os Guinness writes, “Civility is not to be confused with simple niceness or mere etiquette. It is tough, robust, substantive concept...that is critical to both democracy and civil society.” Civility provides the framework in which our differences can be taken seriously.

Civility doesn’t mean we cannot critique another person’s point-of-view. Paul doesn’t argue for a lowest common denominator religion that glosses over our differences. Civility demands that our differences be taken seriously.

Richard Mouw writes in his book *Uncommon Decency* about a gathering of seminary professors in which an instructor reported that at his school the most damaging charge one student can lodge against another is that the person is being “judgmental.” This professor said, “You can’t get a good argument going in class anymore. As soon as somebody takes a stand on any important issue, someone else says that the person is being judgmental. And that’s it; end of discussion. Everyone is intimidated!”

Mouw goes on, “Is the call to civility just another way of spreading this epidemic? If so, then I’m against civility. But I really don’t think that this is what being civil is

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all about. Christian civility does not commit us to a relativistic perspective. Being civil doesn't mean that we cannot criticize what goes on around us. Civility doesn't require us to approve of what other people believe and do. It is one thing to insist that other people have the right to express their basic convictions; it is another thing to say that they are right in doing so. Civility requires us to live by the first of these principles. But it does not commit us to the second formula. To say that all beliefs and values deserve to be treated as if they were on a par is to endorse relativism—a perspective that is incompatible with Christian faith and practice. Christian civility does not mean refusing to make judgments about what is good and true. For one thing, it really isn't possible to be completely nonjudgmental. Even telling someone else that he or she is being judgmental is a rather judgmental thing to do!"

Paul's antidote for this loss of civility is stated in verse 15: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by Him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth." The phrase "rightly explaining" or alternatively "rightly dividing," literally means "to cut straight." It refers to a stone cutter's chiseling into stone or farmers plowing fields. It is critical for stonemasons to make straight cuts into stone and for farmers to plow straight furrows. Someone who rightly divides the word of truth is scrupulously straightforward in dealing with the word of God. We need to talk straight with each other, in contrast

to the crooked methods of these false teachers.

Paul writes in verses 24-25, "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, correcting opponents with gentleness." These false teachers enjoy sowing arguments that breed quarrels. Paul admonishes Timothy to sow peace and correct those who disagree with him with gentleness. Have you ever noticed the speed with which most debates shift from discussing the issue to ad hominem personal attacks? We attack the beliefs of the person making the argument rather than the substance of the argument itself. Our focus must be on what people say rather than on the people who say them.

William Wilberforce spent his entire career in the House of Commons seeking to abolish slavery in the 19th century. Wilberforce said, "'God Almighty has set before me two great objects; the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners" (morality).

Jesus places a premium on civility in the kingdom of God. We've been talking about the kingdom of God for months now. I've said repeatedly the kingdom of God isn't only a place believers go after they die. "The kingdom of God has come near," Jesus said. The kingdom of God may not be of this world, but it's for this world. Jesus doesn't expect his followers to arrive at unanimity on the issues, but he does expect us to treat one another with civility.

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