

## *‘Living faithfully in our culture’*

### **4. Faithful in our Conduct**



*But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. **But do this with gentleness and respect**, (1 Peter 3:14-15a)*

Christians are called to be different and yet in our ‘cancel’ culture the pressure for us to pursue a path of looking-in, lashing-out, or just looking-like the world around, is immense. How might we display a ‘convicted civility’ which models Christ and points to him?

*Human dignity, the unconditional requirement that we attend with reverence to one another, rests firmly on this conviction that the other is already related to something that isn’t me. And without that conviction we are in serious trouble. (Rowan Williams)*

#### **Introduction: We are in serious trouble!**

We in Britain are entering a dangerous social condition in which the direct expression of opinions that conflict—or merely seem to conflict—with a narrow set of orthodoxies is instantly punished by a band of self-appointed vigilantes. We are being cowed into abject conformity around a dubious set of official doctrines and told to adopt a world view that we cannot examine for fear of being publicly humiliated by the censors. This world view might lead to a new and liberated social order; or it might lead to the social and spiritual destruction of our country. How shall we know, if we are too afraid to discuss it? (Roger Scruton)

I have spoken to young people who tell me they are terrified to tweet anything that they read and re-read their tweets because they fear they will be attacked by their own. The assumption of good faith is dead. What matters is not goodness but the appearance of goodness. We are no longer human beings. We are now angels jostling to out-angel one another. God help us. It is obscene. (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie)

The *old* tolerance:

*Accepting the existence of different views*

‘the policy of patient forbearance towards that which is not approved’ (Scruton)

The *new* tolerance:

*Acceptance of different views*

The old tolerance is the willingness to put up with, allow, or endure people and ideas with whom we disagree; in its purest form, the new tolerance is the social commitment to treat all ideas and people as equally right save for those people who disagree with this view of tolerance. (Don Carson)

Tolerance isn't about not having beliefs. It's about how your beliefs lead you to treat people who disagree with you (Tim Keller)

### 1. The need for a 'convicted civility'

- 'Convicted' = a passionate intensity e.g. Paul in Athens (Acts 17) -attitude of provocation & appeal for repentance

- 'Civility' = 'public politeness': 'it means that we display tact, moderation, refinement and good manners toward people who are different from us.' (Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*)

- Are we able to listen, *really* listen to a counterview?
- Are we able to describe without reverting to stereotype or caricature?
- Do I understand what a person is saying so that if I repeated it back to them, they would say, 'yes, that's it'?

Oliver O'Donovan notes that 'to "communicate" is to hold something in common, to make it a common possession, to treat it as "ours," rather than "yours" or "mine"'.

A 'civil' listening is not only enshrined in the common law principle of *audi alteram partem* (listen to the other side), but is surely an implication of Jesus's commands to love your neighbours as yourself ([Mark 12:21](#)); to do others what you would have them do to you ([Matt 7:12](#)); and to love your enemies ([Matt 5:44](#)).

### 2. Creation: dignity as image bearers

- The distinctiveness of Christian dignity:

Late antiquity is so important because here we witness the white sparks of friction, as now-familiar cultural norms for the first time confronted what were once unquestioned institutions and experiences such as slavery, sexual exploitation, and poverty. This history reminds us that what to us seems unthinkable was once unquestionable. (Kyle Harper)

- The dignity of difference:

All human beings are worthy of respect in so far as they are the creatures of God. Creatures have a value transferred to them as what a good God brings to be; the creation of a good God is itself valuable. This value warrants respect. Such respect remains appropriate, whatever the intellectual and moral failings for which one might rightly be criticized or condemned, in so far as through them all one remains God's creature.

Because creaturehood is the grounds of its attribution, this worthiness to be respected is presumptive and unconditional. It makes no sense to ask whether anyone is worthy of the respect due God's creatures since there are no particular conditions for it. It is not the sort of thing that needs to be proved with reference to any particular characteristics that one might display. All persons are worthy of it simply in so far as they exist as creatures and that status—the status of creaturehood—can be assumed from the mere fact that one exists. The respect due God's creatures is extended to everyone, therefore, but not because of any set of features or capacities that such people hold in common. (Kathryn Tanner)

What I recognize in recognizing the dignity of the other is that they have a standing before God, which is, of its nature, invulnerable to the success or failure of any other relationship or any situation in the contingent world. (Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*)

## 2. Fall (or, rather the denial of it): The inhumanity of humanism

But philanthropy and solidarity driven by a lofty humanism, just as that which was driven often by high religious ideals, has a Janus face. On one side, in the abstract, one is inspired to act. But on the other, faced with the immense disappointments of actual human performance, with the myriad ways in which real, concrete human beings fall short of, ignore, parody and betray this magnificent potential, one cannot but experience a growing sense of anger and futility. Are these people really worthy objects of all these efforts? Perhaps in face of all this stupid recalcitrance, it would not be a betrayal of human worth, or one's self-worth, if one abandoned them. Or perhaps the best that can be done for them is to force them to shape up.

Before the reality of human shortcomings, philanthropy—the love of the human—can gradually come to be invested with contempt, hatred, aggression. The action is broken off, or worse, continues, but invested

now with these new feelings, and becomes progressively more coercive and inhumane... The tragic irony is that the higher the sense of potential, the more grievously real people fall short, and the more severe the turn-around will be which is inspired by the disappointment. A lofty humanism posits high standards of self-worth, and a magnificent goal to strive towards. It inspires enterprises of great moment. But by this very token it encourages force, despotism, tutelage, ultimately contempt, and a certain ruthlessness is shaping refractory human material. (Charles Taylor, 'A Catholic Modernity')

### 3. Redemption

The gospel removes pride, probably the greatest barrier to a sensitive yet clear exchange of ideas.... It tells us that we must never think we are beyond sin and the need for repentance and renewal. There's the humility we need. The gospel removes cynicism and pessimism as well.... We should, therefore, never think anyone is beyond hope of change. That gives us the patience we need, grounded in hope. The gospel removes indifference.... For Christians, the uncomfortable question is this: If we have been loved despite our flaws, and if we have discovered the greatest thing in the world in Christ, how can we be either abrasive or quiet about it? That knowledge produces the tolerance, but more than that, it produces the love we need. Lastly, the gospel removes fear. While we should be concerned to not needlessly offend people, the assurance of God's love and acceptance should give us the courage to face criticism and disapproval. (Tim Keller, *Uncommon Ground*)

### Conclusion: The need for spaces and places

#### Further Reading:

Timothy Keller and John Inazu, *Uncommon Ground: Living Faithfully in a World of Difference* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2020)

Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).