

# **Teaching Civility in an Age of Conflict**

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## Introduction

I stood in front of my class and the tension was palpable. People were on the defensive. I knew I needed to say something to diffuse the tension. The election season had brought out the worst in people and I knew that last night's results made at least half of my class unhappy. Being a native Californian and teaching in Kentucky, my Facebook feed had been inundated with strong attacks and support of the candidates and policies on both sides. Students on our campus had been hurt by some of the rhetoric of other students and others were unwilling to listen to how their rhetoric was hurting another. Here we were, brothers and sisters in Christ training for the ministry, yet there seemed to be a greater desire to promote a particular political voice than hearing how it hurt their brothers and sisters in Christ. I knew my class well enough that I knew I had students who were on both sides of the political divide and somehow, I needed to reunite my class. As I prayed about what I could say that would diffuse the tension and help us find a middle ground; something that both sides could agree on. Finally, I quietly said, "No matter how you voted last night, I think one of the things this election showed us is how many people on both sides of the political divide feel disenfranchised and marginalized. Our role as the church is to reach out and minister to those people."

As professors of mission preparing students for vocational ministry, we challenge our students to look at the world differently. We challenge our students to listen and learn from the cultural 'other'. We teach our students to make connections with those who are very different than themselves, those who have a different belief system, different lifestyles, and different language and culture. We teach our students to be culturally sensitive and to dialogue with others who are unlike themselves. Yet, in our own environment we often forget to apply those same principles when reaching out to those who are different than ourselves. It has never been more important for us to be able to teach civility in this age of conflict if we are to reach people for Jesus Christ.

In this paper, I first discuss some theological foundations I use for teaching civility to students. I then use cross-cultural training principles to help us teach students to learn to engage their cultural "other" in their own context.

## Theological Principles

There are two theological foundations that are important for helping our students learn to love others and respond in ways that are glorifying to God and his church. The first principle is to understand who we are as people created in the image of God, as image bearers in the world. Civility must be an extension of what we think of ourselves and of others. If we think of ourselves primarily as belonging to a group; white, conservative, liberal, feminist; and

those who do not belong to our group as the repugnant ‘other’ there cannot be civil discourse. We will seek to include or exclude based on whatever is the particular identity marker of our group. The starting point for civil discourse is our shared humanity as created in the image of God and bearers of His image. There are several facets to consider.

First, we are image bearers, created in God’s image to reflect his nature. God has created us as individuals with unique gifts and talents to participate in redemption in our unique way. Newbigin states, “*I believe that the reign of God is present in the midst of this sinful, weak, and divided community, not through prayer or goodness of its own, but because God has called and chosen this company of people to be the bearers of his gift on behalf of all people*”<sup>1</sup> We are bearers’ of God’s goodness to all people. As a missional community, we are image bearers who are representing God to the world. As individuals, we are unique image bearers who are able to reflect that image in our own unique way, in our unique network of relationships. What we do matters because as image bearers we are to represent God in the world.

When I talk about being image bearers to my classes, I often stop and ask my class if any of them have ever been servers in a restaurant. I then ask them what their fellow servers think about serving on Sunday. After 16 years and asking the question to over 6000 students the answer is always the same. People hate serving on Sundays because the ‘church crowd’ is stingy. Christians do not tip well and sometimes not at all, but may leave a religious tract instead of a tip. We have witnessed by our actions, but probably not the way that was intended.

How we live is important. The church, speaking in terms of you and me, is to represent the presence of God. Newbigin also argues that the church is in the midst of history as a sign, an instrument to further God’s reign in the world. It is not just about conversion, but the church is to represent the presence and reign of God, to represent and bring God’s love to both the righteous and unrighteous.<sup>2</sup> The church is to carry out God’s mission of redeeming the world to Himself. We are not just to do this inside of the walls of the church, but everywhere. I think part of the disconnect between how people behave in the walls of the church and how they behave on the pages of Facebook is because we see ministry or our commission as separated from our daily lives.

However, the great commission is not just about vocational ministry or about ministry done in the church. It is for every believer. Our primary calling is to make disciples, to be image bearers no matter where we go. We are to

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1 Leslie Newbigin. *The Open Secret*. 54.

2 Ibid., 110, 139.

make disciples in our going; whether this is going to work, to the store, to a restaurant, to the gas station, to the DMV, no matter where we go we are to make disciples, to be God's image bearers in the world.

I remember when this really hit me for the first time. I had just returned from 15 years on the mission field to marry my husband. I was reading through the New Testament and came to Matthew 28:18-20. I thought to myself, "Been there, done that! No longer applies!" And in that moment, the Lord spoke, "What has changed?" I realized I had read this as a call to full time vocational ministry rather than the primary call on my life, to make disciples. My vocation may change, but no matter where I am, my primary calling was to make disciples.

Shortly after this God decided to give me an object lesson. I had a job cleaning rooms at the inn where missionaries were in transit on their way home from the field. As I was cleaning a toilet one day I remember asking God, "OK, Lord when are you going use me again?" And the answer was, "I am using you, and if this is the ministry that I intend for you for the rest of your life, are you willing to be content in this calling?" It changed my perspective to see cleaning rooms as my ministry versus my job. From then on, as I cleaned the room I prayed for the family, their safe travel, for their comfort as they stayed the night. I looked for ways to make the room feel special and for the guests to feel loved. So many times students are anxious to get through school or a job so they can get into 'real ministry' rather than seeing ministry is where God has them for now. We need to reimagine our jobs as where God has sent us to be image bearers. Can you imagine if everyone in our churches understood this? What would happen if we gathered the people in our churches and asked about the ministries outside the church that they were involved in? Or in September we called up teachers and commissioned them for their ministry? Or office workers? Or medical personnel? You get the picture. Not only would it require a radical change in how most people in the church view their vocation, but also how those in vocational ministry view their role.

This same principle also applies to our interaction on the internet, especially social media. Far too often people can divorce themselves from the pictures, opinions, or articles that they post on social media. However, just as in physical spaces, we are to be image bearers in cyberspace. We need to be intentional about how we use social media to be image bearers. For example, I belong to a large Facebook social media group Women for Tri, which encourages women in triathlon events. People post triumphs, questions, training successes, and race results. Last year I reentered the world of triathlons after a five year hiatus. I have discovered it has taken me a lot longer to get back into triathlon shape at my current age than when I was younger. For the first time in my life I DNF'd (Did Not Finish) at two longer races. I was extremely disappointed. I

remember thinking I didn't want to really post my failure to finish my races. But after reflection, I realized that far too often we tend to project the image we want people to see on social image rather than vulnerability. I realized that there were a lot of younger athletes on the page that could be helped by my reflections and how I handled disappointment. I chose to be an image bearer to the group as I reflected on what I learned about myself and attitudes that God had graciously given me. Just as in physical space, we are image bearers on cyberspace. We can choose to use this space to divide people by our rhetoric or to build relationships by our postings. Rhetoric or relationships.

The third aspect of being the image of God is that this is the good news of the gospel. We, all of us, are created in God's image. The person who may think differently about a particular subject is not an issue, but an image bearer. John Wesley understood this and thought of people not as "lost" but as people whom God has created in His image. As Snyder notes, "This means that the first word in evangelism is not bad news but good news-not, 'You are a sinner,' but 'You bear God's image.'<sup>3</sup> The first thought in our interaction with others should not be to a category of people or an issue, but as someone who is created in the image of God.

If we say that we love God, we must also love the one who is created in his image (1 John 4:19-21). Period! It doesn't mean we have to accept what people have done, or what they believe, but we need to remember that every human is a unique reflection of the image of God. But we tend to objectify people in our debates. I have felt this often in the debate about women in the church. Many times when people are talking about 'the women issue' I have wanted to raise my hand and say, "I am not an issue, I am Sue, a real person." When we reduce people to liberal, conservative, left, right, gay, straight, feminist, racists, we have put people into a category and we have dehumanized them. We now respond with rhetoric rather than relationship. When Jesus says to love our neighbors as ourselves he is requiring us to treat others as people we know. We need to ask, would I want someone to treat my husband, wife, brother, sister, friend, like this? Would I say this to one of them? Until we personalize our responses we have dehumanized a person created in God's image.

### **Wesley and Radical Hospitality**

The second theological foundation for civility is hospitality. I think right now the church is facing very difficult issues with people on both sides of those issues. It is very easy in our words and actions to divide rather than unite. It is easy to create a caricature of people and then label them as the 'repugnant

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3 Snyder, Howard in *World Mission in Wesleyan Spirit*. 63.

other' and exclude them from our group. Note the contrast to this harshness and exclusion that is promoted by some on social media to the welcome that Christine Pohl so eloquently states about Wesley's view of hospitality:

*"Many of John Wesley's most profound words of invitation and welcome occur when he is communicating God's love and welcome to sinners in need of grace. The tenderness and warmth by which he invited others into new life in Christ runs through his sermons and letters. He was passionate and compelling in his efforts to portray a God who genuinely welcomes all who would come to Jesus. He invited those who were strangers to God to find a divine friend. In powerful contrast to the spiritual apathy of so much of his society, and in response to the distance of persons from God, Wesley invited people into vibrant relationship with a loving and living God"*<sup>4</sup>

This message of love and welcome to all contrasts starkly with the rhetoric of hate and exclusion found in so much of the media today. How can people hear about a God who welcomes them and loves them when they are rejected by those who claim to be God's people. George Hunter in his book on evangelism notes, "People have to belong before they can believe."<sup>5</sup> In today's ever increasing post-Christian environment, the way many people will come to Christ is as they are welcomed by those who love Him. The very foundation for welcoming others is based on the fact that God created us in His own image (Gen. 1:26).

None is to be excluded from this welcome. When Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, one of the things that is often overlooked is that Jesus never identified the man who was robbed, he was just a 'certain man'. We know nothing about his background, his ethnicity, his nationality, his hometown, his parents, his family, his wealth, his religion... all we know is that he was someone in need. I think this was very deliberate on Jesus' part, any kind of status markers would have allowed some in the audience to exclude him from their help because he didn't belong to their group. But all we know is that he was someone in need. When we think of hospitality, I think this is what Wesley meant. We weren't just to offer hospitality to people we know or can gain from, or who can repay us; we are to offer hospitality to those who are in need, to those who have different worldviews, those whom God brings along our paths, to our Facebook feed, to our twitter feeds, and Instagram accounts

This radical hospitality often requires deliberate choices to provide opportunities to welcome people. When I was hired at Asbury, my husband and I began to pray about where we should live. While at Biola we had my classes over each semester, hosted student meetings, and hosted department

4 Christine Pohl.

5 George Hunter.

parties. We estimate that we hosted approximately 4000-5000 students in our home while we were at Biola. When my husband and I were looking for a house in Wilmore we had two criteria; it had to be within walking distance of the campus and it had to have a large room where we could host groups of students. In a way that it was evident that God was leading us, we found the house that we eventually bought. As we renovated this house several people have implied that we were foolish to buy the house as a financial investment, since we will never get a return on our investment. But the Lord did not lead us to invest financially in a house but to invest into the lives of students to create a place of welcome; not only for students, but for our neighbors in Wilmore as well. Hospitality doesn't always make economic sense.

We need to learn ways to show hospitality no matter where we are interacting. Whether it is in our churches, in our homes, or in social media. The question we need to ask is how can we show hospitality in this situation, to these people, in this conversation. The following are a few principles from cross-cultural training that can be used in teaching students to engage their cultural 'other'.

### **Practical Application**

#### *Don't stereotype, humanize*

The first principle is to humanize. We learn about stereotypes and ethnocentrism when we talk about cross-cultural missions. However, this same principle needs to be applied in our conversations about groups in our own culture. Far too often it is easy to vilify people or a position when they belong to a category, a class of people. They are gay, or liberal, or feminist or \_\_\_\_\_ fill in your own category. We can also do this when we speak of the 'unsaved' or even the poor. By placing people in categories we problematize them or their opinions as problems that we need to fix or address. We need to talk about people. People who do not have homes. People who have immigrated to the United States. People who think that gay marriage should be legalized, or who have married a same sex partner. We need to give names to people, neighbors who are married, divorced, or who have recently immigrated.

The second step to humanizing is to build a relationship. This means getting involved with groups of people who are different than ourselves. I belong to a home group in Kentucky in which I listen to people who were raised in a different part of the country. I get to know my neighbors, hire people or get involved in the local groups of similar interests, in my case triathlon clubs. If our networks are only people who are like ourselves, we will never humanize

people who have different opinions and values. I live in an area where we often take our dogs to a public beach. While our dogs play together, these have been some of the best times to listen to people who are different than myself.

When I teach this to my class, we talk about what it must have been like for John and Peter to hear that the Samaritans had received the gospel. Or how the church must have felt when they heard Peter had eaten with Gentiles. These were the 'repugnant other' for Jewish people and they could not imagine 'those people' being included as part of God's people. I ask them to think of who they think of as their 'repugnant other', their 'Samaritans.' I also ask them to think of people for whom they had stereotypes. Then in a living out of the gospel assignment, I ask them to start a conversation with someone they would not normally hang out with. Someone that they look at as the 'other.' On a small evangelical campus it is sometimes the athletes who are chosen, sometimes the popular kids, sometimes it is just someone from another dorm. They then are to write about the misconceptions they had about the person and what happened when they listened to their 'other.' Most found that they had misconceptions about this group and found them more like themselves than they imagined.

### *Listen and Learn*

The second principle is to listen and learn from people different than ourselves. We often teach in missions that we need to spend time learning the language and learning the culture. But we don't apply that same principle when we are in our own cultural arena. We need to be able to understand issues from different perspectives and find our common humanity. Many times what we hear as rhetoric is really based in fear. For instance, I sat with a neighbor on the beach when I started my Sabbatical to catch up. He and his partner had been married for several years. He shared that many in his community were living in fear and he personally was in fear that he and his partner may lose their marriage license. My neighbor knows where I stand in my own beliefs, but I can share in the fear and hurt that he is experiencing. We all know fear, loss, and pain, and we need to listen to these fears. What was often expressed in anger on both sides of an issue is really fear and we need to be able to listen to people's fear. We need to listen to people who fear losing health care, fear violence, fear losing family. These are real fears and we need to listen to understand.

Let me give a cross-cultural example. The community I worked with in S.E. Asia, constantly feared harm from spirits. Their question was who was going to protect me from the spirits. This was not a question I understood



or could relate to. However, my brothers and sisters in the church knew how to answer that question and were effective in their ministry because they understood those fears.

Far too often the church is addressing the wrong question. Abortion? The issue for many women on the prochoice side is not about whether killing a child is right or wrong, but rather why should men control my body? Or how can I afford to raise a child? When 60% of children raised in single women households live below the poverty line, perhaps the church is asking the wrong question. Or at least not all of the questions. But if we only vilify people who have a different view on an issue, rather than listening, we may not address other questions that need to be answered. The same could be said of the people who self-identify as homosexual, people who are in our country illegally, etc. It is only by listening to people who hold views different than our own that we can really understand the issues and the fears.

Listening to another's story is to provide opportunities for people different than ourselves to tell their stories, their experiences. For instance, students at Asbury organized a series of fireside chats in which minority students were given an opportunity to tell the stories of their experiences at Asbury. I was impressed by the number of students who came to listen to their stories. None of us likes to hear how our words and actions might have hurt another, but we need to be willing to listen to how we might have unintentionally hurt others. We have to be willing to accept that another person's experience is different than ours, particularly when we are the majority. Most of us are ignorant of people's experience. I don't know what it is like to be a single mother, or what it is like to struggle to put food on my table, or have to choose when I take my children to the doctor because I can't afford it. I need to listen to those who have felt left behind, who can no longer find good jobs, who find their beliefs are no longer widely held by others.

*Be Honest, be vulnerable*

One of the hardest things to teach to Western missionaries is to be vulnerable and honest. It is hard for many of us to be dependent, but at the same time we cannot have true partnership unless we also receive. In our own cultural context, we need to be honest with ourselves and ask what we are afraid of if a certain policy passes or changes. We need to look beyond our anger and look at our fear. True friendship is never one way. Just as we listen to another person's concerns we can also express ours, not as right or wrong, but as our fears. After I had listened to my neighbor about his concerns for his own marriage, I expressed mine about how some of the new laws would undermine the advances that Title IX had made for women in sports and education. As a woman athlete, I was concerned that now I would be competing against

physiologically developed men who identified as women. I was concerned if gay men were a protected class, I would once again be competing against a privileged class of people. Because I listened to his fears he also listened to mine and I was able to bring viewpoints that he hadn't heard in his own circle of friends.

### *Find Common Ground*

Finally, in building relationships we can find common ground. We might not agree on specific issues, but there is a middle ground in most issues. We might not agree on abortion, but we can agree that children should not be raised in poverty and talk about ways the church could address this. We might not agree on immigration, but we can talk about ways in which the church can help people who have come to our country find the resources they need. We may not agree on health care, but we can agree that the sick and the infirm need to be taken care of and discuss how the church can help with this. We may not agree about how welfare is handled, but we can agree that we need to help the poor even if we disagree on the means to do this. We might not agree on the death penalty, but we can agree that prisoners are created in the image of God. When we polarize issues, rather than see people in need, we may miss the vast middle ground in which we can build bridges. If we only stay on our one side of an issue, people may never be able to see and relate to an image bearer of God. We need to ask, what is more important, being on the right side of an issue or bringing someone onto the right side of a relationship with God? Sometimes we may win a debate, but lose the relationship.

### **Conclusion**

The gospel of Jesus Christ does not say that we are to be on the right side of political issues, it says that we are to be on the right side of relationships with God and people. There are no boundaries in the Kingdom of God. When Jesus said to "love our enemies" he included everyone, even those who disagree with us. No one is to be excluded from our love. When we chose to love our enemies, to treat them with kindness, to listen and learn from them to find middle ground, we might just discover that they have become our friend. When this happens, the world takes notice. This is exactly what happened in the unlikely friendship that formed between Barry Corey, president of Biola University and Evan Low of the California Assembly, chair of the LGBT caucus as reported in the Washington Post. The relationship started in the assembly with a legislative debate that pitted a conservative college's religious freedom against LGBT student protections. Both sides feared what the passing

or failure of the law would mean. It was a win-lose situation. However, Evan and Corey, in the process of listening, became friends. Listen as they reflect on how their friendship formed:

What happened? Two leaders on opposite sides of a divisive ideological issue decided to talk to each other. We listened to each other's perspectives. We listened while wanting to learn rather than listening while waiting to respond. Generous listening helped deconstruct some of the wrong impressions we had about the communities we represented. Breaking bread sometimes breaks barriers.

We both had notions that informed our initially defensive stances toward the other. It's amazing how quickly biases can be overcome when relationships are prioritized, when you realize the person you once thought an adversary is in many ways like you, with a story and passions and ears, and a hope that we can make the world a better place.

Do we agree on everything? No. Do our ideas of how to make a world a better place align? Not on every issue. That's okay. But what we have discovered, in getting to know one another, is that two people do not need to see eye-to-eye in order to work shoulder-to-shoulder....Few problems are best addressed by homogenous groups, closed off to the voices of alternate views.<sup>6</sup>

The article concludes, "Relationships like this, whether on university campuses or in the halls of government, are crucial in a democracy that thrives insofar as its citizens know how to disagree without demonizing and work together for the common good without diminishing differences."<sup>7</sup> Civility can only be achieved when we prioritize relationships over issues. It can be achieved only when we as image bearers reflect the generosity and hospitality of God to others who were created in God's image.

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6 Evan Low and Barry H. Corey. "We first battled over LGBT and religious rights. Here's how we became unlikely friends." *Washington Post*. March 3, 2017.

7 Ibid.

