

The Erosion of Civility

What happened to civility, manners and courtesies, which are basic for a functioning society? The subject of civility has now become a topic of conversation. By 1996, academic conferences began to be held on the "erosion of civility", something that was previously unheard of. In the cover story of **USA Today** (Dec.16, 1996), "Excuse Me, But...Whatever Happened to Manners?", the reporter noted how impossible it is "to ignore the growing rudeness, even harshness, of American life." The same can be said about Canada.

The erosion of civility takes on many forms. Have you tried to phone your insurance company or government agency for information? Instead of getting a person on the line, you are told, "Please hold. Thank you for holding. Your call is important to us. We are sorry you are having to hold." The more polite these messages, the more frustrated you become, while you are forced to waste twenty minutes or so of your time while listening to Muzak you dislike.

Casualness erodes civility. Casual style in dress is in – open collar and no tie – and T-shirts almost everywhere, even in church. One can go to a store and buy jeans ready-made with spots and patches, cut short and unravelled at the edges. These jeans are not cheap. Those who wear them make a statement. They make known their rejection of elegance. Another example of casualness is getting married on the first tee on a golf course or on a beach.

There is the need to hurry, real or imagined, which has created fast food, available at all hours, and it begot eating and drinking everywhere at any time. Shops, public offices, libraries had to post "No Eating or Drinking" signs to protect their premises from accidents and the disposal of refuse.

Why the erosion of civility? I believe it reflects the spirit of our times. The key reason for the disintegration of our culture is the lack of knowledge of God's Word, the Holy Bible.

The Loss of Our Christian Heritage

Our culture has lost sight of the Triune God. The question is no longer, as Dostoevsky put it: "Can civilized men believe?" Rather: "Can unbelieving men be civilized?" He also said, "Without God everything is lawful." If this is true, then chaos rules. And everyone does as he sees fit (Judges 21:25). If God is not recognized, our society has only one "truth" left to declare. The German theologian Helmut Thielicke calls it "the truth that ultimately Nothingness prevails and the world is meaningless." If nothing is true, and everything is doubted and permitted, then the language of "good", "duty", and "freedom for" has lost out to the language of "freedom from". If God is no longer recognized, why submit to His Word? If this is so, the notion that all of us are individually responsible for our actions and the duty to keep a settled and objectively true moral code has lost its meaning. Moral restraint becomes weak when the focus is on the self. The Ten Commandments are then in effect replaced by the single commandment, "Be good to yourself". Where absolute standards no longer prevail, where divine authority has been expelled, reality disintegrates. In place of religious belief, secular fundamentalism takes over. This means that public life is to be inviolably secular; religious life is to be inviolably private. In his ***The Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare***,

Rene Girard points out that today primitive mythology is extolled to the high heavens, whereas the Biblical text, when it is not completely ignored, is reviled and disfigured. He notes, "It is fashionable nowadays to claim that we inhabit an entirely new world in which even our greatest masterpieces have become irrelevant." The loss of our Christian heritage has led to the victory of secular fundamentalism in the public education system. Biblical references, which formally penetrated deep into everyday awareness, have become incomprehensible, and the same thing is happening to the entire literary tradition of the Western world. The collapse of our Christian heritage which shaped our culture, left a huge vacuum waiting to be filled.

Postmodernism and Its Consequences

Postmodernism is filling the vacuum for now. It has become part of the air we breathe. Its new beatitudes are the pursuit of health and happiness, dieting and fitness. It has changed the meaning of religious faith. People blithely speak of religious belief as a "life-style" or as someone's (or their own) religious preference – as if it were something like a taste in food or sports, not truth or ethics. Consequently, too often Christians are given a schizophrenic choice, "It's okay to be Christian (or whatever), but just don't speak or act like one." Postmodernism means that nothing is absolute, one value is as good as another, and there is no difference between knowledge and opinion. We have no assurance that our principles are right and true for us, let alone for others. Morals too have become a matter of taste.

When you disagree with same-sex marriage, you're simply told it is their "sexual preference". No wonder many people are now uncomfortable with the idea of making moral judgments and imposing them on others. For example, a new form of professional combat, called "extreme fighting", which is attracting sellout crowds eager to see blood, is morally unacceptable. When you say this to someone, he may reply, "I don't agree with you. But it's only my opinion, of course."

The Visual Media

Nothing illustrates the erosion of civility better than television and the handheld remote controls through which viewers graze "at will in the flickering pastures of one greener channel after another." It assumes that real learning takes place via images. And it is mainly devoted to consumption and entertainment. It promotes that the central thrust of our consumer culture that you must "buy in order to be." Advertising has become the scientific management of public opinion, especially during elections.

Escalation of violence and human folly is the preoccupation of the media, the obsession of the news. The way TV presents the news help viewers to avoid the trauma of meaning and questioning. After seeing a famine in Darfur or the ruins of Basra, Iraq (in a mere three minutes), they pass at one to a game show or soothing sports. TV show producers do not hesitate to parade the most outlandish perversions, the most degraded appetites. They combine artistic brilliance and technological innovation with crass vulgarity. Meanwhile they are dumbing down culture and the English language.

One wonders whether there is still anything left in our culture that can be exploited for its

shock value? Nothing seems to shock us anymore, least of all intimate revelations of personal life. Abuse is the currency of all reality shows. Lynne Truss observes that people who are encouraged to be vulgar and rude to each other in contrived and stressful situations are TV's bread and butter. Irreverence became the monopoly of the clever and the bold, free from compassion. They poke fun at anything held sacred by Christians, and speak with an amused smile about Christians who believe in absolute truth. Many TV shows give that impression that easygoing promiscuity is the normal patterns of sexual relations. The ideology of "nonbinding commitments" makes a virtue of emotional disengagement. As a consequence, personal relations have become increasingly risky – most obviously, because they no longer carry any assurance of permanence. The social consequences of the erosion of civility are loneliness, alienation, boredom, as well as the loss of respect for women. Popularity has now replaced purity as the measure of a young woman's social value. The devaluating of women is clearly demonstrated in all the pornography available on the internet and cable television. Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, observed that America is awash in pornography right now. And he stated that it is "a very glaring and graphic symptom of the problem we face in this country." And ***The Grand Rapids Press*** (July 22, 2007) states in a feature article titled, "LOOK AT Me Sexiness Seen as Power as Adult Entertainment Becomes Mainstream" that pornography "used to be relegated to a video hidden in the bottom drawer or a magazine under the mattress. Today, it's part of everyday life."

The Erosion of Manners

The erosion of manners, the increasing inability to relate to people with a minimum of courtesy or even awareness, is a vast and under-acknowledged problem of social immorality. The elderly are addressed by their first names. Small children brusquely inform their teachers, "That's none of your business!" Everyone is now called guys. My wife and I were in a restaurant and a young waitress came to our table and said, "How are you guys, what do you want?" Pastors are often called by their first names. What is so important about courtesy? It is the most elementary way of showing that we are aware of the presence of other people, and of the impact we may be having on them. For example, it has become common now not to respond to any sort of request if the answer is "no". Increasingly, if someone applies for a job and fails to get it, they are not notified to that effect; they never hear anything at all. People are also fired indirectly. They are asked to pack their belongings, and are shown the door with companies refusing to let them know why and wherefore. Are manners important? They are! If we can't talk about the morality of manners, we can't talk about the morality of anything. Manners are based on an ideal of empathy, of imagining the impact of doing something for the sake of other people that is not obligatory and attracts no rewards. As Mark Caldwell puts it in his ***Short History of Rudeness***, "Manners are what is left when serious issues of human relations are removed from consideration, yet without manners serious human relationships are impossible."

Political Correct Language

In our postmodern culture it has become politically awkward to draw attention to absolutes of bad and good. In place of manners, we now have doctrines of political correctness, against which we offend at our peril. The Official Political Correct Dictionary and Handbook informs

men that they should not hold a door open for a woman. The dictionary called it "the male door-opening ritual ...a cynical symbol patriarchal subjugation." Even the word "guy" is too sexist for ***The Nonsexist Word Finder Dictionary of Gender-Free Usage***. Instead of saying "Hey, you guys!", we could replace it with "Hey, you people." As a result of "political correctness", our society has revived the spirit of the Medieval inquisition with speech police at work, punishing individuals and corporations for words on certain topics quaintly called "sensitive". For example, in 1991 Stanford university was reported to be working on "speech code", in which such words as "girls" and "ladies" were forbidden as "sexist"; instead of "girl," the word "pre-woman" had to be used. Some extreme feminists insisted that the word "woman" should be spelled "womyn", and others wanted the word "wimman".

The three foundation stones of a civil society

1. *Respect*

The first foundation stone is respect for individual human beings and their dignity. The Christian view of civility supports the dignity of every individual. All people are to be given respect simply because they are human beings. We show respect regardless of differences of belief, race, status, income, intelligence and age. A society that does not respect the individual will generally treat human beings as things. People need to be treated with respect, not because they have earned it, not because they are always kind or easy to get along with. We show respect because we are created in the image of God. God did not create trash. All people, whatever their condition and whatever their achievements or failures, have eternal worth, a value beyond our ability to calculate. Since we are created in God's image, we are held responsible for whatever we do. The first created human being, Adam, was called to account for his fall into sin. He could not hide from his responsibility. God asked Adam and in him all of us, "Man where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). Psalm 8 speaks of the dignity of the individual. "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings, and crowned him with glory and honor" (Ps. 8:5 NIV). Through the Incarnation of the Son of God, human beings have been lifted up to a place of immense significance. Our high position in creation is all of grace. Thieliicke remarked, "God does not love us because we are so valuable; we are valuable because God loves us."

Beliefs have consequences. Because every person deserves to be treated with respect, we ought to consider the way we treat each other. The way we behave toward each other, even in minor things, is a measure of their value as God's image bearers. We then continue to remember there are other people in the world besides us. And the little things count. It is to say "thank you" when someone holds the door open for you. It means not to be rude. As Henry James wrote: "Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind."

2. *The family*

The second foundation stone is the institution of the family. It is the original and best department of health, education, and for fostering civility. No institution surpasses the healthy family in its capacity to transmit to each new generation Biblically formed virtues on which the success of every other institution of society depends. Without them, respect for the dignity of

each individual will be undermined and sooner or later lost. Where families fail to form, or too many break down, the effective transmission of the virtue of honesty, civility, self-restraint, concern for the welfare of others, justice, compassion and personal responsibility is imperiled.

Family is not a "lifestyle choice". It is not one of the various free-ranging styles of conducting relationships and bringing up children. Tragically, the reality is – post-Christian ideologies hostile to marriage have made the single-parent family and even same-sex marriage socially acceptable. But the breakdown of the family unit has a measurable social impact, and the costs are counted in broken relationships, and damaged lives. People now disappear from each other's lives without explanation or regret.

What our society needs is a solid Biblical foundation for a healthy family. When the family structure breaks down, our society will be in a dire peril. As the British evangelical reformer Lord Shaftesbury (1801-85) put it: "There can be no security to society, no honour, no prosperity, no dignity at home, no nobleness of attitude towards foreign nations, unless the strength of the people rests upon the purity and firmness of the domestic system.... At home the man is trained to be a good citizen."

3. *Effective government*

The third foundation stone is a fair and effective system of law and government. A society without an effective government and without laws based on God's Word will turn to anarchy. And law without a Christian basis degenerates into rules and mechanical legalism. Political scientist, Glenn Tinder, noted, "A nation that does not dare to make moral judgments is surely living under the shadow of nihilism." He is right. We need laws that restrict evil and promote the common good. But moral issues were not on the agenda during the last Canadian election campaign. Politicians shied away from the word "immoral", lest they are accused of racism, sexism, elitism, or simply lack of compassion.

An effective government recognizes the supremacy of the Triune God. With this in mind the *Belgic Confession* (Art. 36) states, "We believe that our gracious God, because of the depravity of mankind, has appointed kings, princes, and magistrates; willing that the world should be governed by certain laws and policies; to the end that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained, and all things carried on among them with good order and decency." We need laws because none of us is virtuous all the time, and some people will be deterred from wrongdoing only by the threat of punishment: for example, a fine for going over the speed limit. We need a system of laws to accomplish many of our common ends – such as safely crossing the street. Above all, Canada needs laws to protect the lives of God's image bearers from conception to natural death.

Will civility stifle debate or freedom of speech? Far from stifling debate, civility helps strengthen debate because of its respect for the individual as God's image bearer. And far from curtailing freedom of speech, it keeps freedom of speech alive as civility in speech is constructive for the sake of the common good.

What can we do as Christians to reverse the erosion of civility? We must address it head-on, starting at home. If we do not address it from a Biblical perspective and practice what we

teach, we will fail the next generation.

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