

## Though Every Grace My Speech Adorned

*Scottish paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13:1–3*

Though every grace my speech adorned  
That flow from every tongue;  
Though I could rise to loftier strains  
Than ever angels sung—

Though with prophetic lore inspired,  
I made all mysteries plain;  
Yet, were I void of Christian love,  
These gifts were all in vain.

Though I dispense with liberal hand,  
My goods to feed the poor;  
Or, firm to conscience and to truth,  
A martyr's fate endure:—

Nay, though my faith, with boundless power,  
Ev'n mountains could remove;  
'Twere all in vain, should I be found  
A stranger still to love.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

## *In the Nick of Time*

### Civility

*Kevin T. Bauder*

*[This essay was originally published on January 21, 2011.]*

Civility is in vogue again, at least for a few moments. The nation has been traumatized by another mass murder. A psychopath in Arizona cut down half-a-dozen innocent people, including a federal judge. A congressional lawmaker and others were left injured.

Everyone agrees that the murders were evil and even monstrous. It goes without saying that these acts violated the canons of civility—murders always do, whether they are one or many, whether the victims are federal officials or innocents in the womb.

The surprising thing is that someone has now speculated that uncivil political speech played a significant role in provoking the murders. The public—by which I mean the masses who are always eager for a facile explanation, particularly if it shifts the blame to someone else—has decided to treat this suggestion as a genuine insight. The result is that pundits and politicians are tripping over themselves to eschew rudeness. Civility is *nouveau chic*.

Certainly incivility can provoke violence. Rudeness provokes reactions, and those reactions sometimes escalate into physical altercation. If you are rude enough often enough to the wrong people, one of them is likely to take a poke at your nose.

That is a different matter than suggesting that incivility incites violence. Is an unhinged person more likely to commit murder simply because a politician or pundit was not nice to a public figure? Little or no evidence supports this thesis.

In fact, American politics draws from a robust tradition of incivility. Thomas Paine accused George Washington of being either an apostate or an imposter, treacherous in private friendship and hypocritical in public life. Thomas Jefferson hired pamphleteer James T. Callendar to hound John Adams for presidential corruption. The Federalists later used Callendar to pillory Jefferson, propagating the charge that he was the father of Sally Hemings's biracial children. Decades later, cartoonist Thomas Nast (inventor of the modern Santa Claus) depicted Abraham Lincoln as a hairy ape or baboon.



*In the Nick of Time* is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

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*Harper's Weekly* famously listed epithets that were hurled at Lincoln: "Filthy Story- Teller, Despot, Liar, Thief, Braggart, Buffoon, Usurper, Monster, Ignoramus Abe, Old Scoundrel, Perjurer, Robber, Swindler, Tyrant, Field-Butcher, Land-Pirate."

American political rhetoric has always been bumptious, though exceptions have existed. One of the exceptions, and one of the most civil presidents in American history, was George W. Bush. He was also one of the most maligned. His political opponents tagged him as stupid, a draft-dodger, a liar, a murderer, and a monkey. They picketed his public appearances, tried to shout him down, and threw things at his home. None of this led any crazed Leftist to begin shooting Republican lawmakers.

In view of the mauling that President Bush had to take, the current calls for civility come across as hypocritical and self-serving. By choosing this moment to furrow their brows and to wring their hands, the ones doing the calling leave the impression that they are manipulating a tragedy for political gain. That may seem hypocritical, but it is actually the smaller part of the problem.

The hypocrisy runs far deeper. Incivility is not limited to the sphere of politics, but has become a dominant mode of public behavior. Athletes, talk show hosts, celebrities, and other public figures are expected to act like jerks.

Hollywood cannot seem to market a movie without turning the protagonist into a bad boy. If he is young, then he has to be a punk. If he is a police officer, then he has to be a rogue. If he is a soldier, then he has to be a rebel. If he is Peter Jackson's Aragorn, then he has to violate the morality of truce-making in order to behead the toothy Mouth of Sauron. Whoever he is, he has to display a measure of contempt for whatever legitimate authorities exist in his life.

For more than a generation, American civilization has been prepossessed with the notion that one is entitled to have one's own way simply because one demands it. The more public one's demands are, the more obnoxiously made, and the more they are seen to inconvenience the object of those demands, the more likely they are to succeed. Dogged, shrill insistence has proven to be the best way to wear down one's opposition. Consequently, civil disruption has become a normal political process.

Marx and Engels provided the rationale for incivility. People who hold power are in the grip of ideology, they said. Such people are blind to the injustices that they commit. Their consciousness needs to be raised, and that happens only when they are forcibly confronted. Entrenched authority cannot be reasoned with: it responds only to demands backed up by threats.

In Marx and Engels, the threat entailed physical violence. In the case of a deprived teenager, the threat might involve a mere, whining annoyance. In between lies a range of incivilities, many of which are being practiced in present-day culture. The idea is simple: if you can't make your case well enough to persuade, then assert your demands more and more forcibly until your opposition concedes.

This tactic has been embraced today by both Left and Right. Therein lies the problem. Incivility can prove to be extremely effective among those whose primary motivations stem from the appetites. A conservative, however, values both careful thought and ordinate affection, and these are undermined by every appeal to appetite. Conservatives above all people ought to value civility.

By definition, conservatives are supposed to be conserving something. Appetites such as rage, envy, panic, greed, and ambition, however, necessarily produce destruction. By invoking such demons, conservatives effectively cut the moral framework from under those things that they should most wish to conserve.

Conservatives believe in a transcendent moral order. That order includes places for the various stations, roles, ranks, and classes that human beings occupy. Among other things, the transcendent moral order requires a sharp distinction between licit authority and the illegitimate applications of power. Conservatives in general, and conservative Christians in particular, must conduct themselves so that they do no damage to lawful structures and licit authorities. Consequently, words like *respect*, *restraint*, and *deference* ought to characterize a conservative demeanor.

Christians bear a yet greater obligation. They must remember the doctrine of Providence, the notion that God is working in and through all worldly events. Christians believe that history is a story told by God in which they themselves occupy a place. For them to respond to providential events with rage or panic is effectively to disavow a part of their faith.

Calling for civility changes nothing. Like all fads, the current interest in civility will soon fade. What just might change something, however, is a determination on the part of conservatives—especially Christians—to demonstrate genuine civility over the long haul.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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