

THE Soapbox

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My question for *Soapbox* #3 is this: Why are Christians so mean to one another so often? Shouldn't it be one of the great aspirations within the Christian community to talk together about things that really matter – but to talk in ways that are grace-filled? I have come to believe that the manner is as important as the matter.

Rather than modeling an alternative posture – one that shows respect for others, one that seeks unity above our differences – too often we Christians are among the worst of a mean-spirited style so prevalent in our contemporary culture. We look at one another with suspicion, fear, and quick judgment rather than abiding respect and kindness.

In a very fine short article in a most recent *First Things*, Chuck Colson says, “All Christians must bear the shame of the millennium just ended in which the world has been offended not by the scandal of the Cross, but by the scandal of division among us. . . . it is our shame; it belongs to everyone of us.” In a wonderfully helpful little book entitled *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, Rich Mouw says “when Christians fail to measure up to the standards of kindness and gentleness, we are not the people God meant us to be.”

The shame is that we often fail to engage the culture with the power of the cross of Jesus Christ – that great, compelling, and transforming mystery at the heart of our faith – precisely because we are too busy being critical of one another. That is a huge indictment, indeed a scandal, for which we are accountable.

There is an ugly meanness loose in our culture today. We see it in politics. We see it in the streets. We see it in our schools, those lightening rods for the sharp divisions in our society. But are we Christians offering an alternative?

As a leader of a Christian organization, I feel the brunt of just this kind of meanness within the Christian community, a mean-spirited suspicion and judgment that mirrors the broader culture. Every Christian leader I know feels it. While I pray that I am open always to thoughtful criticism and guidance from others, and while I truly believe I am not trying here to dumb-down our discussions to some kind of mushy relativism (anything goes, don't worry about the differences, whatever), nevertheless, you would be amazed at the number of downright nasty letters and e-mails that come across the desk of any Christian leader.

I have learned that it is difficult to be Christian in a secular world. You take a stand for traditional values, for example, and you are vilified as narrow or bigoted. But, you know, it is sometimes more difficult to be a leader in Christian circles. There too you can be vilified for just the slightest move that is displeasing to someone. Ideologically and theologically, by the way, these attacks come from both the left and the right.

Recently I received a letter criticizing two different decisions I had made. This writer held some deep convictions, to be sure, and I respect those convictions, and I respect his

need and right to express his concerns. I hope I learn from each such expression. But this letter was devaluing and belittling, full of accusations about motive and person, making sweeping generalizations about the dangerous future ahead for my university. This letter was hurtful, wrong about many of the facts, and flat-out mean. This writer was a Bible study teacher, he proudly told me, and yet his letter was vicious. And I thought, how can this be? What a shame, to use Colson's word. Here we sit, at a hinge-moment in history, when the modernist experiment is failing, when the culture around us is collapsing from within; here we sit with a profound vision of how to change the world through the power of gospel of Jesus Christ; here we sit with an opportunity to be culture-shapers, to be world-changers for Jesus – and our best energies are often focused on small and inessential differences, our best energies are devoted to being mean, judgmental, and controlling.

Paul says it over and over. If Christians cannot model another way, forget it. God will do his work in other places. Stop fighting with one another, he pleads! The world-changing power of the gospel will take root only with those who come together, treat each other with grace and love, engage the world as a unified voice!

In 1 Corinthians: "I appeal to you, my friends, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: agree among yourselves, and avoid divisions; let there be complete unity of mind and thought. . . . Surely Christ has not been divided!" In Colossians: "put on, then, garments that suit God's chosen and beloved people: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgiving." Paul to the Philippians: I am grateful "that you are standing firm, united in spirit and in mind, side by side in the struggle to advance the gospel faith."

I have come to believe that the world is watching us. The world needs desperately to hear the words of the gospel. The world needs to know that there is a center to truth found in Jesus, and that God wants all of his children to flourish.

But the world will pay no attention to our words until our actions speak loudly and boldly of grace, love, and unity. If we are going to represent a God of grace, our actions must be grace-filled. The world is watching to see that we show kindness to one another, that we bring hope and not fear, that we show forgiveness beyond judgment, that we respect others for their opinions even when we differ, that we show understanding even in the face of failure.

One last thought. Several years ago Max De Pree came to speak to our trustees at Seattle Pacific. Max, as most of you know, is a successful businessman and a prominent and wise voice on leadership. The day after Max and Esther left Seattle, we received a call from the hotel manager where they had stayed. This manager was amazed. He said that Mr. De Pree had made a huge impact on his staff. Everyone was talking about his kindness, about the generosity of his spirit. This manager thanked me for sending this guest. His staff would never be the same, he said.

I want to learn better how to carry myself with the posture of Max De Pree. Can we do this for each other, so that we experience the joy of love among us, but most of all can we do it to model grace and love for the world that desperately seeks a way out of its mean-spiritedness, its alienation, its viciousness? Our ability to be culture-shapers and world-changers for the gospel of Jesus Christ rests on how well we model Christian grace-fullness. Don't you think?

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