

## **Civility and the Common Good**

Before the Christian Life Commission • February 7, 2005

*By Bill Ratliff*

When the organizers of this event suggested the topic of “civility”, I suspect they were using the term in its most common meaning, that being “politeness” or “courtesy”. Certainly, the growing partisan political atmosphere both here in Texas and, even more so, in the nation’s capitol, is deteriorating to the point that at times it can hardly be referred to as “civil” discourse. Some parts of the citizenry are beginning to reach the point of saying “a pox on all your houses”. While this deterioration of civil discourse is unworthy and distressing, it is only one of the unfortunate outcomes of a larger problem for those of you attending this meeting.

It may come as a surprise to you that some of the most acrimonious and un-Christian rhetoric emanates from organizations which march under the banner of “Christian” or “family values” based organizations. Every citizen has a right to participate in the political process. Unfortunately, in order to advocate for this so-called Christian or family values agenda, some of these groups, flying under the Christian flag, not only enter the world of political campaigns, but are some of the most egregious violators of any code of decency and civility in their campaign tactics.

Only a few years ago, an organization purporting to be founded on Christian principles, produced and distributed campaign materials opposing a number of candidates. At the time, I went before the media and took them and their financial backers to task for putting this “political pornography” into the very Christian homes they purported to represent. It was bad enough that the material was disingenuous and untruthful. It was even more objectionable that it used photographs and illustrations which were so vile as to disgust any responsible person.

One cannot follow the news these days without reading and hearing warnings about something called “identity theft.” You, of course, recognize this as a nefarious activity wherein someone acquires another’s driver’s license number, social security number, credit card number, or other identification and uses those items to enrich themselves at the victim’s expense.

I assume it is safe to say that, like me, everyone here today considers himself or herself a Christian. That being the case, it might surprise you to learn that, to a very real extent, each and every one of us is being routinely subjected to identity theft. In fact, I can almost assure you that, as we speak, our identity is being used, and I cannot help but believe, in many cases being used in a way which we would not approve.

Let me explain.

Many practicing Christians consider themselves “conservatives.” To a large extent, they have adopted that mantle because of a few strongly held beliefs, such as concern about the moral decay of our society in general, support for prayer in public settings, opposition to abortions on demand, opposition to recognition of same sex marriages as simply an

acceptable alternate lifestyle, and opposition to legalized gambling. There certainly may be other issues about which individual Christians may legitimately have strong feelings based on their faith.

You may be surprised to hear, however, that there are groups who advocate for their definition of a conservative agenda, and who purport to fly under the cover of the Christian banner to do so. They present themselves as advocates for Christian ideals, and do indeed pursue the type of issues I just mentioned. However, they then use this identity to advocate for other so-called conservative causes which, I believe in many cases, are inconsistent with our Christian faith.

For instance, were you aware that some of those self-identified Christian-based groups take the position that Texas public schools should be prohibited from beginning classes before the last week in August? Now, you may have personal opinions either way about this matter, but does anyone really believe that Christ would have had an opinion on this subject?

I wonder if you were aware that another self-identified Christian-based group's position was that the Legislature should reduce the number of election dates in Texas. Maybe a good idea, but is it really a subject of concern to Jesus the Christ?

Or were you made aware that a self-identified Christian-based group's position is that the Legislature should not expand the state's franchise tax in order to raise funds for the financing of Texas' public education system, and that property tax appraisal increases should be capped at 5%? Once again, while you personally may or may not agree with these positions, can these be subjects about which the Son of Man would take a stand?

I seem to recall an instance in the Gospel where a group of men attempted to trick Jesus into taking a position on taxes, and Jesus deferred by saying they should render unto Caesar that which was Caesar's. That doesn't seem to square with these groups' supposedly Christian position on taxes.

I have mentioned these issues in order to illustrate some of the positions on which our identity is being used, and about which I doubt we would find consensus as to a "Christian" position, even in this room. And, if these were the only kinds of issues being presented by those claiming a Christian viewpoint, there would be little cause for concern. Unfortunately, such is not the case.

Were you aware that there are those self-identified Christian groups whose position is opposition to early childhood and headstart public education programs for children who come from underprivileged homes? I wonder how Christ would have viewed this position. Perhaps he would consider a modification to his admonition to "Suffer the little children to come unto me," such as, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, but not if it is to give them early preparation for a good public education."

It concerns me greatly that you and I, as self-avowed Christians, are allowing our faith to be used to support un-Christian positions. There is no better illustration of this than the positions taken regarding funding of social services.

There are those purportedly Christianbased groups who see no inconsistency in their willingness to sacrifice the health and welfare of underprivileged children and elderly citizens on the altar of low taxes. Texas is one of the two or three lowest tax states in the nation, and yet there are those flying under the Christian banner who say we must eliminate children's health insurance for hundreds of thousands of poor Texas children rather than having all businesses pay their fair share of taxes. Just this week, a "conservative" legislator was quoted as saying he was sick and tired of hearing about how the Children's Health Insurance Program covers 175,000 less poor children today than it did two years ago.

There are those who insist we cannot address the marginal quality of nursing home care for our most vulnerable senior citizens because we must remain one of the two or three lowest tax states in the nation.

There are those flying under the Christian banner who agreed with cutting funding for the state's child protection agency rather than asking Texans to pay a few more dollars in taxes, only to recoil in horror when they heard that there was an unconscionable increase in child abuse and neglect over the last year.

I wonder whether any of you here could help me reconcile these positions with that of Christ's when he told us, "In as much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me also". The Christian faith to which I subscribe is not the one being represented by these advocates. A famous philosopher once said, "Every civilization will be judged by the way that it cares for its helpless members." When we reach our final judgment day, are we prepared to be judged by this standard?

Ladies and gentlemen, as Christians our identity is being stolen and used by these groups. We are being represented as agreeing with these positions and these outrageous political tactics without our knowledge or consent. Unfortunately, since these groups do advocate for some of the issues which are important to many Christians, the entire Christian community is sitting back and acquiescing to a false identification and false representation. As a result, we are an unwitting participant in the "Incivility" of politics and its distinctly un-Christian behavior.

You might wonder what impact this misrepresentation of the Christian faith is having. I can tell you without hesitation, there are many good people in government who cringe at the thought of a visit from "The Christians." Their reluctance to engage in such meetings is not a lack of faith – most of these same officials are indeed members of a Christian fellowship of some kind. Their reluctance is based on prior experience with these advocates, their advocacy on issues which have no foundation in faith, and their all too often un-Christian attitude regarding their fellow man and regarding the over zealous tactics they practice to win their objectives.

You have now heard my assessment of a dilemma for those of us who would be proud of the title “Christian.” But what can be done? Unless we are willing to let these groups continue to misrepresent our faith, it is up to us to take back our banner. We must gather fellow Christians and let the world know that our Christian positions are those which we believe Christ would have endorsed. If they wish they certainly have the right to advocate for other issues, but they should not be allowed to do so while hiding behind the Christian faith.

It is time that Christians recapture the title, the identity and the banner from those who would use it for their own self-serving purposes.