

The background of the entire cover is an abstract, fractal-like pattern. It consists of intricate, swirling lines in deep red and black, creating a sense of movement and depth. The patterns are dense and organic, resembling perhaps a microscopic view of a mineral or a complex biological structure. The overall effect is dramatic and intense, fitting the title's theme of 'The End of Civility'.

THE END OF CIVILITY

CHRIST AND
PROPHETIC DIVISION

RYAN ANDREW NEWSON

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Christ and Prophetic Division

Ryan Andrew Newson

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY PRESS

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And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.

–Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation"

- 1) If peace means accepting second-class citizenship, I don't want it.
- 2) If peace means keeping my mouth shut in the midst of injustice and evil, I don't want it.
- 3) If peace means being complacently adjusted to a deadening status quo, I don't want peace.
- 4) If peace means a willingness to be exploited economically, dominated politically, humiliated and segregated, I don't want peace. So in a passive, non-violent manner, we must revolt against this peace.

–Martin Luther King Jr., "When Peace Becomes Obnoxious"

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

–Luke 12:49–51

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PREFACE

I have long been attracted to theological dissidents, to people who, intentionally or not, are willing to cause trouble as they live out their faith. Perhaps this is a result of my understanding of Jesus as a troublemaker. After all, my initial attraction to Christianity as a teenager was to the Jesus who challenged leaders and advocated on behalf of the excluded and marginalized. But I could also be attracted to dissidents because of my wiring, or my upbringing, or my location in history. Perhaps it's all of it.

In any case, I love examples like that of Will Campbell, who was a kind of traveling incarnation of “incivility.” I am attracted, for instance, to the story of Campbell at airport security. After going through the metal detector, Campbell was told to go back and put his wooden cane on the “roller” for further screening. Campbell agreed, and when the screening was finished, asked for the cane to be returned so he could continue on his way. The security officer refused, telling Campbell to get his own cane. “Now I have done what you asked me to do,” Campbell said, “so will you do what I’m asking you to do?” The officer asked if Campbell could walk without the cane. Campbell objected to the question, saying the officer was not paid to ask medical questions. Finally, the officer replied that if Campbell wanted his cane, he was going to have to walk back and get it himself. Campbell himself recounts what happens next: “Then I got down on my belly and crawled the length of the roller. With that people were hissing and booing him. ‘ . . . Making that poor man crawl to get his walking cane.’ Then, with feigned caducity I pushed myself up and with a palsied hand got the cane, gave it a sassy little twirl and walked on down the corridor, leaving him standing there to face the crowd.”¹

There is no question that Campbell sounds like a troublemaker in this story. I daresay I would have been more than a little annoyed had I been waiting in line behind him. But I also love it. I remain drawn to people like Will Campbell and countless others, some known and many unknown—the list continues to grow. I cannot fully explain my attraction to these people, other than perhaps this: I am drawn to their willingness to “cause trouble” when it is needed, when the purported neutrality of the status quo requires protest. I do not consider myself a person who, by disposition, enjoys conflict; but I admire those who are unafraid of it, and wish to be that way myself. To be sure, to invoke Wendell Berry, the path such people take is not the easiest nor the only way to come to the truth. But it is one way.²

Despite my attraction to such stories, I am aware that they are not without risk. The call of the prophet is to speak a word of truth, no matter how hard it may be to hear, but under the banner of the prophetic people can justify all manner of unnecessarily disruptive or outright toxic behavior. Such is the danger of the false prophet, of the person who is alienating for its own sake, who takes any criticism as a sign that they must be doing something right. While some people are wary of any disturbance of the peace, others seem to relish dissent for its own sake, failing to recognize that incivility is a tool that can be used for just *or* unjust ends. I wish to avoid that trap, neither praising civility *or* incivility for its own sake, but rather submitting both to theological scrutiny.

Even so, and without denying the possibility that “incivility” can become toxic, my primary goal is to convince people that civility is (at best) a neutral quality, that it is subordinate as a virtue (if it even is a virtue), and that it quite often reinforces oppressive ways of moving in the world, despite the appearance of comity—that civility can be a profound barrier to pursuing the work of liberation. As such, my primary audience is Christians who praise civility in ways that, I will argue, is not only unwarranted, but also can stymie the kinds of joyous struggle that disciples of Jesus are called to participate in. I will argue that we should be wary of appeals to civility that suggest or outright claim that the divisions in our world are not that big a deal, or that Christians, at least, should avoid harsh language for the sake of ecumenism or harmony. Such claims are not only inaccurate, but border on what James Baldwin called sentimentality, by which he meant the purely formal performance of “love” without any corresponding intimacy or desire for our lives to mutually, materially intertwine.³ My hope is to rob civility of its status as being “automatically good,” at least among a certain class of Christians, and thus to prevent unreflective appeals to civility from sidetracking necessary struggles for justice and liberation.⁴

My argument proceeds as follows: After a brief introduction to the problem of civility, which includes a working definition of the term, I begin with a genealogy of civility, describing the different kinds of “civility” that rose to prominence in the early modern period, and the way different expressions of civility assume contrasting visions about the good life. In chapter 2, I provide a reading of Jesus’ life and witness—a Christology—that orients and guides my theological critique of civility going forward. I argue that the prophetic Jesus provides a strong warrant for questioning civility as an automatically praiseworthy moral concept. Chapters 3 and 4 apply this theological conviction to civility, exploring the way many invocations of civility assume a picture of ideal humanity that is racist, sexist, ableist, and so on (chapter 3), and the way that the prophetic Christ enables a distinct application of virtue theory to civility (chapter 4). In the final chapter, I present an alternative theopolitical vision born of this Christology that can orient Christian living in a pluralistic society around liberation and contestation rather than ordered conversation. Along the way, I address various objections that arise in response to critical analyses of civility.

To be sure, this argument will stand in need of correction and response; I do not here (nor ever) assume this is the last or best word written on the subject. But I do hope it will be a helpful, or at least interesting, intervention into the conversation about civility and Christian theology. If that goal is accomplished, it will be due in no small part to a host of people who have read parts of this argument along the way. Rebecca Barrett-Fox and Kristopher Norris read a draft of the paper this book grew out of and offered helpful criticism and feedback, as did several respondents at the Society of Christian Ethics, including one particularly helpful anonymous peer review. At that same meeting, conversations and comments from Simeon Ilesanmi, Kirk Nolan, Eric Schnitger, and Andrew Wright were encouraging. My friend and colleague Jennifer Garcia Bashaw read parts of the book and provided helpful feedback. Alicia Myers was also encouraging at key moments in the writing process, when I wasn’t sure I would continue. Indeed, I am grateful for all my colleagues at Campbell University—Adam, Glenn, Jessica, Kathy, Thomas—for their support. My friends Adam Barnard, Scott Looney, and Matthew Johnson listened to me discuss various ideas related to this book for years. For their patience alone, let alone their insight, I am deeply grateful. So too am I grateful for Brandon Bayne, who talked with me often about this topic (and many others besides!), directing me to several articles and books that were illuminating, challenging, and provided greater depth and complexity to my argument, especially chapter 3. Brandon was incredibly generous with his time; for that,

and for his wisdom and friendship, I am thankful. My friend Molly Brummett Wudel, herself a model of generous and prophetic pastoral leadership, introduced me to the wonderful commentary, *Gospel in Solentiname*, for which I am truly grateful. Yet again, my wife, Rebecca, read the entire manuscript and offered numerous insights and suggestions for improvement. She did not need to do that, but I am lucky to be with someone willing and able to do so. It remains inspiring to watch her do this work, and it was her encouragement, more than anything else, that kept me working on this book rather than giving up and watching more reruns of *30 Rock*, especially in the thick of a pandemic. Each of the people named here made the book better than it otherwise would have been, though I do not presume they would agree with every argument I make here—although I hope they do!

I would like to thank the people at Emmaus Way in Durham, for reminding me once again of the joy of the open table and the liberation of God. You all may not know it, but I have in many ways been restored to myself over the past few years with you. That means the world.

I am also grateful to the people at Baylor University Press for encouraging me to pursue this project, seeing it through to press, and helping make it what it has become. Cade Jarrell, in particular, was an insightful and supportive editor all along the way.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to my alma mater, Wake Forest University School of Divinity. I do so not only because I am grateful for the theological education I received there, nor because it was the place I truly learned the pleasures of faithful incivility. More than anything, I do so because as I wrote, I found myself recalling, quoting, and pointing to many teachers, friends, and colleagues who are living out the vision I attempt to describe here. Their names and examples haunt the pages that follow, sometimes explicitly, other times not mentioned by name but inspiring what and how I wrote. But in all cases, I found myself recalling with fondness the fissiparous, cantankerous, dissident, loving, fierce, deeply serious, and yet whimsical community that has passed through that school. And so I dedicate this book to the uncivil ministers, theologians, administrators, chaplains, poets, politicians, activists, biscuit makers, musicians, philosophers, and organizers who continue to make good trouble in this lovely, hurting world. I hope some of you will find this book helpful, or at least find it to be a faithful reflection of the good work you are already doing.

INTRODUCTION

“I object to your tone.”

“This is not about my tone, or your tone, Father Flynn. It’s about arriving at the truth.”¹

—John Patrick Shanley, Doubt

In the summer of 2010, the conservative reaction to Barack Obama’s presidency was largely organized around the budding Tea Party movement, which advocated for lower taxes to the point of near elimination and expressed inordinate concern with the national debt. The Tea Party began as a well-funded political operation rather than an authentic grassroots movement, but as it grew in influence people caught up in its vision gained a reputation for being uncompromising in their stances and biting in their rhetoric. On August 28, political commentator and Tea Party sympathizer Glenn Beck hosted a “Restoring Honor” rally, which aimed to energize the electorate in anticipation of the midterm elections (during which the Republicans would win massive victories throughout the country). In response, on October 30—three days before election day—Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert hosted “The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” in Washington, D.C. While the rally was mainly meant to satire the Tea Party and Beck, there was also a deeply sincere stance presented to the 215,000-person crowd: it is fine if people disagree with one another, but people must remain careful about *how* they disagree. Regardless of the substance of one’s position, one should always strive toward reasonability, moderation, and civility.

For instance, during the rally wrestler Mick Foley received a “Medal of Reasonableness” before yelling “Civility is cool!” People held signs that advocated for no political or economic policy, but rather for a way of arguing with one another, sporting slogans such as: “Moderation or Death,” and “Yes We Can . . . Disagree without Demonizing.” Colbert played his part as a Beck-like figure, incapable of speaking without contempt for his “opponent,” Stewart, who concluded the rally with a sincere speech asking people to retain civility as they disagreed.² Overall, the tone of the event reflected the public tenor of Barack Obama’s presidency, and anticipated Michelle Obama’s oft-repeated line from the 2016 presidential campaign, “When they go low, we go high.” In many respects, this rally represents a particular moment in time, one that the United States has moved past in the intervening decade. And yet the inclination to focus on matters of tone and rhetorical style rather than substance has lingered, even as the forces that gave rise to the Tea Party movement remain as strong as ever. One need look no further than many people’s initial (and ongoing) objection to Donald Trump, which seemed as much to do with the way he spoke in public—his name-calling and boorish manner—as with any policy he pursued.

Indeed, over the past few years the United States has been in a near-constant argument with itself. Born of ideological and material currents that span decades (if not centuries), struggles that have previously been swept under the rug, ignored, or proclaimed “solved” have reemerged in the public consciousness, leading to intense and necessary fights about justice, the common good, and who is included in the “commons.” Examples of these struggles include the uprisings for Black lives that took place in the summer of 2020 and the backlash to those protests in the form of misguided fears over “Critical Race Theory”; the continued unchecked power of neoliberalism; movements seeking the redistribution of wealth to benefit the poor, especially with regard to just wages, housing prices, and health care; the restriction of and xenophobic reaction to migration as people from the global South are pushed and pulled by economic factors well beyond their control; and the rise of unwarranted skepticism regarding vaccinations and mask mandates. Actually, to call this situation an “argument” is too generous, since to have an argument requires that people agree on the goods, goals, and rules that frame the engagement. What the United States is experiencing is more like cacophonous disagreement. Rather than directly addressing any one of these particular issues, many commentators have sought to blame this situation on some other feature of our society: social media (a popular, and easy, target) as the driver of division, bad actors sowing division between otherwise peaceable neighbors, a general

lack of virtue among people, an unwillingness to listen to one another, and so on. There has also been a rise of people laying the blame on “populism,” usually ill-defined and with little awareness of the different types of populism or the historical origins of the term in the United States. Of course, blaming societal division on a so-called excess of democracy reflects a distrust of the people that is as old as the United States itself.³ More plausible analyses of societal tension focus on political deracination and economic exploitation (especially by way of neoliberalism), and the ways these trends have decimated our ability to flourish.⁴

But one explanation for why people are at odds with one another is unavoidable in our cultural context, frequently mentioned as the cause of our troubles and which can be summarized in a single phrase: a loss of civility. For a great many political commentators, pastors, theologians, and politicians, the primary problem that underlies societal discord is more basic than questions of policy or material conditions, and it involves the way people argue. We will always disagree, so the sentiment goes; that is inevitable. But in a pluralistic society, it is imperative that those arguing remain civil with one another as they disagree. People should pursue social change with seriousness and vigor, but civility maintains the bonds of affection that hold the country together. Such invocations are often tinged with a measure of nostalgia, claiming that people of previous eras maintained civility as they discussed matters of great importance, and everyone was the better for it.⁵ But whether or not calls for civility imagine a bygone era where civility reigned, they tend to lament a lack of civility *today*, and the need for its reclamation in the future, lest society devolve into some form of agonistic, anarchic chaos. It is for this reason that calls for civility are a common ground even for people who otherwise disagree on fundamental political and theological matters.⁶ Indeed, one reason appeals to civility are so popular is the way they purport to be apolitical. “I’m just talking about *how* we should fight in a pluralistic society, not any particular policy. I’m concerned with decency.” For this reason calls for civility can tend toward a “both sides” rhetoric, condemning people getting entrenched in separate “camps” and proclaiming a pox upon “both” houses, insofar as “both” engage in purportedly harsh language.

And yet, appeals to civility are complicated and often serve to mask one’s commitment to particular policies and ideals. While they may carry the semblance of reasonability and moderation, calls for civility are not nearly as neutral or innocent as they sometimes position themselves to be, nor is civility itself as useful as is promised by its loudest defenders. In August 2017, the limits of civility were put on stark display following the events that took place

in Charlottesville, Virginia, when white nationalists marched through town, chanting “Jews will not replace us!” and “Blood and soil!” In the wake of an overtly racist rally to defend a statue of Robert E. Lee, which resulted in the death of Heather Heyer, some used this moment to call for “both sides” to return to civility. For instance, Senator Orrin Hatch tweeted these remarks on August 17: “Above all, I believe in the virtue of civility. While I have strived to demonstrate compassion, comity, and respect throughout my public service, I have, at various times, fallen short of the ideal. But today, I am recommitting myself to civility—and I hope you will join me in doing the same. Civility requires that we approach debate and discourse with sound logic and new ideas, not with cardboard shields and tiki torches.” Hatch’s focus was largely on the form of the protests—as though the central problem with the demonstrators in Charlottesville was their unwillingness to assert white supremacy using careful argumentation.⁷ But of all the things to condemn in the wake of Charlottesville, a so-called lack of civility seems low on the list. Further, even if one wished to discuss civility, are there not times when civility must be reinterpreted, suspended, or rejected? Would gathering forces of white supremacy not count as such a time? Is there no place to reckon with the slow, civil road that paved the way to that day? To call for civility at such a moment betrays a desire to maintain the status quo and ignores the fact that injustices can be perpetrated through perfectly “civil” means. Perhaps more importantly, one must not forget that calls for civility can be cynical attempts to divert energy away from movements for positive social change. Certainly, when calls for civility come from people who themselves traffic in uncivil language, if not outright evocation of hatred, the possibility of cynicism should be kept in mind.⁸

Of course, civility can be a good in pluralist societies, but it is a *limited* good. While civility can be used by those in power to encourage passivity, it can also be called for by people on the margins working for liberation, as a call for respect and safety or as a strategic means of securing protection for marginalized positions. Calls for civility in this sense can signal a desire to respect differences that exist among us, as well as a criticism of movements that would seek to impose some vision of the good onto others by force. In any case, *incivility* is not to be praised for its own sake; like civility, it too can be helpful or harmful, just or unjust.⁹ Thus, the challenge is discerning when a call for civility aids the work of liberation, and when it distracts from this goal. In this book I seek to provide some tools by which Christians can discern good from bad calls for civility in our current cultural moment, and to show how Christian convictions both fund and can be used to critique civility. Christians must be shrewd in our use of civility and recognize that calls for civility are

ambivalent, requiring discernment. After all, to be good is not the same thing as to be nice—let alone civil.

Toward a Working Definition of Civility

Despite the many essays extolling its merits, civility is often left undefined, assumed to have an obvious, “common sense” definition that requires no explanation. Before proceeding with any analysis and critique, then, it is crucial to provide a baseline understanding of civility. After all, how one defines civility in large part determines how one thinks it should be enacted and where one sees its limits.¹⁰ As will become readily apparent, there is not really one thing called “civility,” but rather civilities—competing conceptions of a general notion, some of which are more conducive to faithful, prophetic Christian action than others.

Political scientist Keith Bybee provides a fairly typical understanding of civility: “As the standard for all citizens, civility is the baseline of decent behavior and its requirements outline the most basic kinds of consideration that we owe one another in public life.”¹¹ In this usage, civility is a bar one must clear in order to discuss contentious issues in public, but once cleared, one can discuss such matters freely. Civility signals respect for one’s fellow citizens, even those with whom you disagree, and thus helps people get along in a pluralistic society. From this perspective, civility is a dialogical starting point; it does not replace more robust articulations of the moral life. Against those who would bemoan a contemporary lack of civility in comparison to days past, Bybee argues that there was no golden age of respectful civil dialogue. In every era there are people who decry a lack of civility, and in every era public debate is marked by varying degrees of acrimony. Further, Bybee rightly notes that debates about civility are not neutral or somehow disconnected from ideological concerns. “Instead civility is itself a subject of political struggle and debate, a mode of behavior that is developed and perpetually refashioned in the democracy of everyday life.”¹² In other words, what counts as civility is essentially contested and discursively constructed; one person’s civility is another person’s incivility, and vice versa.¹³ Note that civility in this sense deals with public interactions and has engagement with moral “others” primarily in view, rather than more intimate relationships. One does not usually refer to conversations with one’s spouse as “civil” (and if one does, one may rightly suspect something interesting is going on with that relationship).¹⁴ Understood in this way, civility is narrow in what it prescribes—which should make one suspicious of people who treat it as a political panacea or decry its absence as a primary cause of social strife. Civility cannot be the sum total of one’s ideology,

and so one should ask whose agenda might be served (or masked) by any particular call for its “return.”¹⁵

This description of civility is helpful in getting a critique of the concept off the ground, and yet it also needs to be complicated right away, because civility has not functioned in so narrow or “neutral” a way throughout history. Indeed, as a concept civility has regularly been deployed to reinforce a vision of the ideal citizen that carries assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, and class. Civility was used to specify proper conduct in medieval royal courts, for people privileged enough to move in such circles. By the sixteenth century civility came to be understood in Europe as “behavior proper to the intercourse of civilized people.”¹⁶ But *civilized people* is, to say the absolute least, a loaded concept. Those considered to be civilized were regularly assumed to be European and “white,” and anyone who deviated from this pattern was by definition “uncivilized.” Further, even if one accepts this minimalist definition of civility, it does not say anything about when and how it should be pursued, and there is no universal strategy for pursuing civility however it is defined.

Nor does this definition speak to moments when the pursuit of civility should be superseded by weightier matters (justice, love, truthfulness), especially since civility as defined here is morally ambivalent rather than inherently good. After all, it is possible to enact all manner of evil while following rules of proper behavior; truly heinous positions can be taken under the guise of civility. This is particularly possible if the standard one is upholding is itself unjust, since civility deals merely with policing tone and thus often redounds to the benefit of the status quo and those already in authority.¹⁷ As Nikuyah Walker—the first Black female mayor of Charlottesville—put it in explaining her rejection of calls for civility in city council meetings, “Even though meetings have been very civil in the past, the results of those meetings have been complete disasters for people’s lives . . . especially if you were Black and low income.”¹⁸ Generally speaking, those suspicious of civility tend to note who is more likely to be described as civil or uncivil, focus on times when an inordinate focus on civility distracted from the work of justice, and generally wonder if being overly concerned with civility is akin to being concerned with a symptom rather than a disease—with a fever rather than the underlying cause of illness.¹⁹

Going forward, then, it will be important to provide some historical orientation to the concept of civility, noting in particular the way its usage has been connected to valuations of normative humanity that fit neatly with colonialist and neocolonialist activity. It will also be important to note that, despite this seemingly “common sense” and minimalist definition, civility actually admits of different uses that map onto distinct political and theological inclinations.

Christian Attractions to (and Caveats with) Civility

The appeal of civility is widespread, finding adherents in many different political and ideological circles. But the appeal to civility is especially strong in Christian circles, to the point that it may seem surprising at first blush to provide a critical assessment of civility from a Christian perspective. For many Christians, the appeal to civility seems obvious, even intuitive, only resisted by people who hate pluralism or who need a refresher in what it means to love their neighbor. Indeed, if our society is marked by intense fights that sometimes spill into violent interaction, it is understandable that some Christians would see their calling as turning down the heat on such fights, serving as agents of reasonability and civility in a world at odds with itself.²⁰ To be sure, Christians ought to care about love of neighbor, and ought not disdain pluralism, but see the differences in the human community and the vast creation as something to be loved and respected rather than embarrassed of, let alone squashed. Put differently, Christians have a stake in participating in what Paul calls “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18), not allowing divisions to remain how they are but rather participating in the work of healing ourselves and the world around us.

And yet, the Christian attraction to civility is not innocent; it requires scrutiny and further nuance. For one thing, in rightly giving voice to a desire for reconciliation, some Christians may confuse any fighting, polarization, or acrimony as somehow antithetical to the desires of God. Whatever place reconciliation and “civility” have in the Christian life, they cannot come at the expense of other calls that also issue from the gospel: the demand for justice, the drive toward liberation from all that alienates people from flourishing, and the creation of spaces where actual, authentic inclusion occurs, especially for people who have been historically marginalized and excluded from such “civil” conversations. It is true that remaining open to others, including deeply valuing the practice of listening to those with whom one disagrees, is important; such openness is preferable to a closed, paternalistic, unreceptive stance toward difference as such. And it is certainly true that the way people interact with one another is morally and theologically weighted. And yet it can be tempting to move from this stance of receptivity to a suggestion, or outright affirmation, that there is no time for discord, that one must remain “civil” always and in all circumstances, that expressions of anger or lament or rage have no place in the Christian life.²¹ Christians are called to a life of reconciliation, to be sure; but so too are we called to a life of faithfulness and justice. Openness must be coupled with discernment, and there are some ideologies and indeed some people toward whom one should be closed.²² After all, someone’s “civility” *could*

reflect their desire to be respectful and open toward those with whom they differ; but insofar as it results from powerful (if subtle) disciplinary measures, where people unhappy with the status quo are afraid to voice their dissatisfaction clearly and effectively for fear of reprisal, civility could also be a sign of profound despair, and incivility (no matter how angry) a sign of hope. People give voice to their grievances only if there is some hope, however dim, that something may yet change.

Another worry about Christian attractions to civility is the sense that civility might distract from substantively addressing issues of systemic injustice. Many invocations of civility are made by and among people who, whatever else their differences, have a similar stake in maintaining the way things are, perhaps with some incremental changes made here or there. In this sense, some Christian invocations of civility are defense mechanisms. As homiletician Veronice Miles puts it, while there is certainly nothing wrong with civility or politeness in the abstract, such commitments can also allow people to avoid pain, remorse, or responsibility, and thus “can become a barrier to delving deeply into questions about the nature of injustices, our complicity in keeping systems of oppression in place, and the impact of systemic oppression upon our lives.”²³ If the goal of the Christian life is faithfulness to the crucified and resurrected Jesus and the liberatory mission he inaugurated, then whatever place “civility” has in the life of faith, it is subordinate to that end.

And so civility is, at best, a limited good, to be analyzed thoughtfully and taking care to avoid downplaying the sense that people are not “in this together,” but that history is marked by struggle—that anything like “progress” has come through fighting and disputation rather than civil discussion. For Christians, following *Christ*—who was not always “civil,” who empowers people today to walk in his liberating path—that is the goal. Or at least, it should be.

1

THE GENESIS OF CIVILITY

Whenever someone proclaims, “Yet this is how it has to be!” one can be assured that he is in the grip of a particular picture of how the world is.¹

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

Civility is a bewitching concept.² Despite the intractable nature of the fights that recur in public discourse, the concept of civility continues to attract adherents in the forlorn hope that while people may never agree on everything, they may at least agree on how to (and how not to) discuss their disagreements. For such a move to work, “civility” would need to admit of a basic definition affirmed by nearly everyone—something like a minimal, virtuous standard of conversation and conduct followed by members of any tolerant society.³ The problem is that even if everyone signed on to this very definition of civility, people would still disagree about what counts as “virtuous” in different circumstances.⁴ The fact that one person can levy a charge of incivility while another can reject the complaint outright suggests that much more is needed than a simple call for civility’s return. Indeed, disagreements about the contours of civility likely signal deeper differences between communities and moral traditions, contrasting visions of what civility entails.⁵ And yet the desire for civility remains alluring precisely because many sense the need for *some* quality or commitment that might prevent disagreement from necessarily involving verbal assault or even violence.

Civility is further bewitching because it finds itself among a class of moral concepts that tend to be treated as though their meaning is relatively constant over time. While most recognize that what people mean today by “marriage”

or “war” is different from what those terms signaled in previous eras, this point is sometimes neglected when it comes to weighty concepts such as “justice,” “love,” “rights,” or even “good.” But of course, even powerful moral concepts like justice or love shift in meaning over time, such that one cannot simply refer to their previous invocations as though their usage is the same as one’s own.⁶ One era’s “love” may seem like mere sentimentality in another time and place; what looks like “justice” for one community may look like straightforward revenge to another.⁷ And so it is with civility. What counts as civil in a particular time and place is not intuitively obvious and would not necessarily be considered “civil” elsewhere. Quite the opposite, understandings of civility are refashioned in each generation, and the rules of civility—including those practiced in contemporary liberal democracies—are not “common sense,” nor are other understandings of civility obviously incorrect.⁸ Indeed, attending to the history of a concept like civility provides a needed check against the temptation to assume a constancy of meaning with civility: it reveals the degree to which the fears and anxieties that motivate people and shape behavior are not only variant, but human-made—that is, constructed.⁹

All this to say, it is vital to frame any normative assessment of civility within an analysis of its historical development, providing a genealogy of civility in its modern usage.¹⁰ Not only is such a frame crucial for any worthwhile assessment of what good and bad invocations of civility entails; it also undermines naïve appeals to the concept that proceed as though contemporary debates about civility are the same, or basically the same, as similar debates in other eras. Once one has a sense of the multivalent and complex ways “civility” is invoked—both through history and today—surface-level appeals to civility or laments about civility’s demise lose some of their allure. One is able to ask, “Whose civility? Which *civitas*?” After all, civility has never been a morally neutral concept, but has always carried assumptions about proper behavior and normative humanity that are imbued with issues of power. Once these assumptions are made explicit, they are easier to accept or resist. Unpacking civility in this way enables one to formulate a basic but important question: “Whose interests are being served by invoking civility *now*, in this moment?” An inquiry of this sort also helps Christians navigate the divergent ways civility has been understood through time, the way Christian convictions have been employed to construct and defend particular understandings of civility, and thus helps Christians discern when we may be called to violate norms of civility in service to a greater good. It will become clear that some versions of civility are amenable to, or at least not hostile toward, the possibility of contentious argumentation in public, while others present themselves as approaching

an overriding good in pluralistic societies—which is fine until the status quo itself requires disruption, at which point calls for civility become pernicious, vicious, and unfaithful. In other words, the interesting question regarding civility is not “Is civil speech acceptable?” but “What constitutes civility?” or better, “What does civility entail?”¹¹

A Genealogy of Civility

Every society has some set of norms meant to regulate acceptable speech and behavior, regardless of whether or not such norms are made explicit.¹² As such, it is necessary to limit a genealogy of civility to modern, Western invocations thereof. Even within these contours, civility’s meaning is far from self-evident. Philosophical arguments about the place of civility in public life were born of cultural anxieties surrounding proper behavior and social discord in the wake of feudalism and Christendom, and dealt as much with etiquette at the dinner table as with speech in the halls of power or an imagined public square. The personal, then as now, was political. Put differently, in Europe the politically and theologically weighted question of civility was related, historically, to the issue of table manners.

So argues Norbert Elias in his groundbreaking study of civility and what he calls “the civilizing process.”¹³ During the Renaissance, a particular set of habits and behaviors were cultivated that allowed rising socioeconomic classes to distinguish themselves from others and one another, gravitating in particular around the behavior of the courts and among the feudal lords.¹⁴ In Western Europe, contemporary understandings of what counts as “civil” emerged at the same moment that both knightly society and the unified Catholic church were fraying; “civility” promised to unite diverse nationalities, languages, and cultures around a shared standard of behavior, born within the social formation that would be the backbone of this new world: court society.¹⁵ That is, what counted as the standard of “civil behavior” was behavior appropriate to the royal court, even as “civility” helped ensure loyalty to the courtly world.¹⁶ Manner manuals and codes of “proper behavior” predate the Renaissance, of course, and were used in knightly-courtly circles in the Middle Ages as well.¹⁷ However, these codes of conduct were relegated to these social worlds, and were not seen as of interest or relevance to people outside such circles, let alone the masses.

This began to change as feudalism was challenged by a growing class of merchants, at which point simply having wealth was not enough to distinguish oneself as a member of the ruling class. Not only were an increasing number of people of “low birth” able to assume the trappings of wealth; more

substantively, greater numbers were learning how to read, forming a new civil society made up of people who had access to the aesthetic preferences and manner manuals that were previously out of their reach.¹⁸ Furthermore, as the class structure of society diversified, people from various stations were increasingly interacting with and economically dependent upon one another.¹⁹ In order to distinguish themselves *within* one's own society, then, the nobility honed standards of behavior, speech, and habits at the dinner table that allowed them to demonstrate what it meant to be a "true" nobleman.²⁰ Such behavior also allowed nobility to judge amongst themselves who was more or less "noble," and provided a standard by which they could praise or correct one another's expressions of nobility.²¹ As this occurred, what counted as "proper behavior" slowly evolved from the knightly-feudal concept of courtesy to the early modern notion of civility.²²

Elias famously traces this shift from courtesy to civility by examining *On Civility in Children*, a popular "manner manual" written by Desiderius Erasmus in 1530. The manual was read across Europe, inspiring an entire genre of books dedicated to civility instruction, both in children and adults, despite the fact that the manual was written specifically for training the children of nobility, introducing boys to the habits and behaviors appropriate to life in the court. Thus, its runaway success suggests that it met a larger social need, recording models of behavior fitted to the upper class and increasingly demanded by society at large.²³ Erasmus' text was responsible—wittingly or not—for developing and popularizing a particular sense of civility in Western Europe, which framed its development into the contemporary world.²⁴ And as a general audience taught their children these particular habits of civility in order to mimic the nobility, the actual nobility developed still newer forms of civility in order to distinguish themselves as superior; these new habits were then copied by the masses, thus compelling further developments in civility—and so on and so on.²⁵

Even in its earliest forms, civility as a concept was already imbued with issues of class, power, and aesthetics. Indeed, it is noteworthy how often the concerns of civility dealt with behavioral and "external" factors, issues of appearance rather than internal disposition. For instance, Erasmus' manual explicitly deals with "outward bodily propriety" of a very basic sort, discussing how and when to dip particular foods into particular drinks, when and how to wipe one's mouth on the tablecloth, when and how to fart in public, and so on. How to sit, how to greet, how much snot to have on one's nose, what to do if some snot hits the ground—all are matters of civility, and how one does any of these tasks signals one's level of civility and one's station in society.²⁶ Much of what Erasmus discusses as "civil" would be considered crass by today's