
Christian Civility Defending Our Faith without Being Defensive

SCOTT HOEZEE

So many people seem angry these days, like they are forever on edge and looking for an excuse to lash out. You see it while driving your car in what has come to be called “road rage;” you see it at political rallies, where it is no longer enough to have policy disagreements with those with differing views, now we are told we have to hate opponents; excoriate them; make fun of them. You see it on cable TV with people on split screens sniping at one another and talking over each other. You see it even in the Church; and even among those who claim to be following Christ. How are we to behave in society, but especially in a culture that seems so confrontational? Today on *Groundwork*, we will begin to explore this; so, stay tuned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we are beginning a very short, three-part series, sort of on Christian behavior...posture of speech. We are calling it *Christians in Society*. How do we behave in the wider world in whatever society we happen to live in? The New Testament actually has quite a bit to say on this subject.

DARRELL DELANEY

You know, we are called as Christians to be lights and witnesses in every sector of society. I don't think we are called to dig our head in the sand and act like nothing is happening. I think God has given wisdom on how to do that; and in this episode, we want to talk a little bit about that. In the second program that comes after this, we are going to talk about how do we do that in response to the governing authorities and people who have power over us politically? How do we navigate what it means to walk alongside them, and actually hold them accountable in a way that honors God?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then the third and final program will take on what really undergirds the whole series, and that is how to develop Christlikeness in our everyday lives, including being Christlike when we are out and about in the wider society?

But let's dig right into scripture here, Darrell, from the first letter of the Apostle Peter, when in his third chapter he writes this, beginning at verse 8; Peter writes: Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. ⁹Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think it is beautiful that Peter is calling us to keep the main thing the main thing. He says to be like-minded; he says to be sympathetic; to love one another; be compassionate and humble. This is the environment in which Christians are supposed to live; and I know in a society, even when he was talking to the Church, he was saying there are people kind of doing tit-for-tat...paying you back...getting even...and he is saying that is not what we are called to; but the concept of like-mindedness really sticks out to me, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it is an interesting Greek word: *homophrones*. This is the only place in the whole Bible where you find that word. If you want to impress your friends, the technical term is it is a *hapax legomenon*, which means that it is a word that occurs just once. Sometimes that means that it can be difficult to know exactly what the word means because you cannot compare how it gets used anywhere else because it isn't used anywhere else. It does literally mean to have the same mind. It seems to carry with it the idea of agreeing with each other; seeking to do whatever you can to live in harmony with other people. Peter seems to be saying, you know, get along with everybody as best you can.

DARRELL DELANEY

And you cannot do that if you are repaying evil for evil.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

Even if someone does something to you, there is a difference between reacting in the passion of the moment and responding in the way that the Spirit has given us to do; and that can be tricky, especially when the world continues to come at you with different things.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it is interesting that you use that phrase. My wife does a lot of education for caregivers for people living with dementia, and that is one thing they always say, you know, when somebody with dementia does something upsetting, don't react...respond.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Don't react...respond. But you are right; few things seem to be more instinctual for us than to give as good as we got, right? It starts when we are kids on the playground, you know. One kid hits another kid, what happens? The other kid swats back. One kid says to another: Your shirt is so ugly... and that kid will reply: Yeah, well, you got a really ugly nose; you know, and on and on it goes. Unfortunately, we don't always outgrow that, Darrell, as we grow up...we just don't outgrow that tendency.

DARRELL DELANEY

And unfortunately, when we get older, we hear these words like: Don't get mad, get even; and unfortunately, the world teaches us that we need to keep score and remind people of the things that they have done against us; and then take our shots. That is unfortunate, because that is not exactly how Christ has called us to live. We are actually called to live in a way that is disarming to people, so that they won't want to do that; but they won't see that example unless we model it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; don't repay evil for evil. Take the evil, absorb it, Peter says; don't give it back; let that evil thing die at your feet; and don't trade insults with people. You know, all it does is initiate a pattern that goes on and on; and you know, I think we have all seen it, Darrell. Nine times out of ten, when people keep matching insult for insult, the volume keeps ratcheting up, until finally, sometimes...it almost feels inevitably...people move from verbal parlay to actual physical violence. So, Peter says don't go there. And again, this goes contrary to a sinful instinct that we all discovered ourselves, already on the playgrounds of life. I mean, who doesn't have memories of the old na-na-na-na-na variety, right? But this is also contrary to our current culture, especially in the United States, you know, that only wimps and losers just take it when you are insulted. No; Peter says, don't go there. Take it and absorb it; let the bad thing die with you.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, Jesus models this type of meekness. I mean, even when the Pharisees would think they are the experts of the law, and they are trying to “correct Jesus”, who actually is the Word made flesh; knowing the law to a T, they think they are schooling Jesus; they think they are educating Jesus; he doesn’t react in that moment. He allows them to get out their thought, no matter how off and erroneous it is, and he in his meekness has found a way to respond to them. He could just retaliate; he could just lash out. He doesn’t do that, and that is not easy to do, to show meekness in the middle of the situation when people are pushing your buttons.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is exactly right; but as they say on the TV commercials: But wait; there is more. Peter says that it is not enough just to keep your mouth shut after being insulted, or just to walk away, quietly shaking your head. No; Peter says respond by giving a blessing. Not only don’t insult them back, bless them instead. To this, you were called, Peter quickly adds, and that seems to be rooting this in the character of Jesus himself; and that makes all this really quite interesting, Darrell.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is one thing to not retaliate with evil-for-evil, but now you have to overcome evil with good, which is basically what Romans 12:21 says: Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. So now, you are actually having to bless the person who you want to retaliate and curse because they cursed you; and Christ is the only one who can give us the power to do that, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; I mean, it takes a lot of effort...as we just said...a lot of intentional effort to not hit back or trade insult for insult. It takes something herculean, effort-wise, to go the other way and to bless the person who, in your mind’s eye, you would much rather be punching in the nose, you know; and as you just said, Darrell, we could probably all agree that none of us would ever pull this blessing after insult behavior off without the motivating and equipping power of the Holy Spirit; and let’s all admit, too, Darrell...I mean, I certainly can...I won’t speak for you, but you know, we all have our fair share of failures in this area to confess. There are times when we did cave in to the insult-for-insult temptation...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, by the Spirit, we kind of pick ourselves up and, you know, vow to try to do better next time; because, again, as Peter put it: To this you were called.

DARRELL DELANEY

This is our calling, and it is the essence of what it means to be an ambassador for Christ; and it is not easy to do, but in just a moment, we are going to hear another interesting thing that is sometimes difficult that Peter calls us to do; so, just stay tuned.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if there is another feature to our present society, Darrell, that I think we all know about, maybe to one degree or another, this has been a fixture of all societies in history, but it is that people really like to challenge the beliefs of others. Maybe what they want to challenge is someone's set of political positions to which another person holds. Maybe it is a challenge even to defend a biblical theological doctrine or a belief to which some others don't hold, you know; maybe it concerns the role of women in Church leadership, or the age of the earth or questions surrounding a just-war theory, or whether a Christian can ever support a military action, and so forth. So, sometimes we have disagreements and challenge each other in that kind of thing, but in the wider society, Darrell, what can get challenged is the Christian faith completely—the whole package.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think that the essence of challenging doesn't always have to be bad, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sure.

DARRELL DELANEY

I mean, sometimes challenging helps us to actually crystalize what we believe, articulate it clearly, and live it out. So, sometimes challenging can be good; but in the essence, sometimes the world will challenge us and it will make us question our very Christian faith that we hold very dear; and end up, you know, teasing Christians, making fun of Christians, making Christians look bad in a bad light; and that can be challenging for those who are just simply trying to live out their faith, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, in recent decades, there have been some bestselling authors who have made kind of a cottage industry out of poking fun at Christians, if not people of *any* religious faith. Some of us may be familiar with names like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett. They have written bestselling books with titles like: *The God Delusion*; *God is Not Great*; and these are people who have gone on television and the radio to declare that being religious is the result of a brain defect. They think that people who believe in God...any god...are juvenile, immature, silly, and frankly are just an embarrassment to modern society; and so, you know, directly or indirectly, Darrell, we seem to be confronted with the basic question: Explain yourselves, you Christians, you! How in the world can you believe in such fairytales?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; even the modern philosophers: Immanuel Kant, Nietzsche; those guys that are thinking God is dead, it has been a wider thought in some of these spheres, you know, that religion is a crutch for people who are weak; and you know, leaning on that because you cannot think for yourself and you actually need something to help you; and that is actually really challenging for those who are wanting to believe and walk in the faith that they hold dear; and so, sometimes Christians will resort to trading insult for insult or going tit-for-tat. You see it online a lot; and that is not the way. There is a better way, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is; and Peter gets at that: Rather than get your back up...rather than get defensive...here is 1 Peter 3, now we are at verse 15: But in your hearts, revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

DARRELL DELANEY

This is actually a really challenging verse, and I think about it quite often, where it says: Always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is within you; but then, there is a way to do it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, it is not just retaliate...it is not just I am angry and I am going to spew out whatever...no; it is supposed to be gentleness and respect, because that keeps your conscience clear. I have answered this as best and as humbly as I could; and if they don't understand it, that is on them. If they are going to continue attacking me, that is on them; but my conscience is clear. And that is the way you are supposed to respond.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is what theologian Richard Mouw has called Christian civility, because Peter here is calling us to do what most of our parents urged on us when we were children, you know: Be polite; mind your Ps and Qs; show respect, even to the people who are frankly showing you zero respect. Look; it is going to happen, and even back in the pagan Roman and Greek society of Peter's day, the questions about beliefs...they don't come at you gently or respectfully, right? But Peter says here be polite or civil; be gentle; defend your faith without being defensive; defend your faith without being offensive, even to those who have made up their minds to be offensive toward you.

DARRELL DELANEY

There is a story that I think about when I think about this, what you just said, Scott. It is a story about a guy and a snake; and the snake is really just going to end up biting this person; and then, the person is not going to retaliate to the snake and throw him down or hurt him; he is going to put the snake down; and the snake was like: Well, why did you take me home? You knew I was a snake. You knew I was going to bite you. And the point is, the person said: Just because it is in your nature to be a snake and bite people, it is in my nature to show kindness and mercy, and I am not going to let the way you determine the way you are change the way I am; and that is how I think we are supposed to respond when people bite us and people retaliate with us, so to speak; we are supposed to respond in the way Christ would, and not retaliate in the way they would.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is tough, but maybe it helps us to remember, Darrell, who wrote these challenging words in 1 Peter 3, that we just heard. It is Simon Peter. It is the disciple who had been known to be a bit of a hothead...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who often did not weigh his words before speaking them. He thought he was doing the Lord's will when he cut the ear off a high priest's servant in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was being arrested. Peter is also the person who, when pressed three times later that same evening to say whether he was a follower of Jesus, Peter not only denied ever knowing Jesus, but by the time he got to his third denial, he turned the air blue with swear words, which mercifully, scripture doesn't spell out for us. So, maybe it helps a little bit to remember Peter's early struggles to do the very things he is urging on fellow believers now. Maybe we can take a little comfort, Darrell...I do, I know...that Peter had to learn how to do this, the same as all of us.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is beautiful and encouraging, because I have been impatient; I have been a hothead; I have made mistakes. I put my foot in my mouth; I have said some things; and so, the fact that Peter was like that, and then the love of Christ has changed him into this person who can say: Listen, I understand how you feel. I am not negating it; I am not explaining it away; and yet, I am giving you a better way to respond to that. For someone who has earned his stripes, so to speak, I think it gives me great comfort to know that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; but there is a practical consideration here, too. Peter goes on to say: Look, when you get sneered at; when you are treated that way; but when you sneer as good as you got sneered at; when you are not polite and gentle when you engage with your critics, all you are doing is giving them ammunition. Look, Peter says, we do have enemies in society. We just do; but your goal should not be to aid and abet their cynicism, but rather, behave in such an above-board, civil, polite way that you give them nowhere to go. You give them nowhere to go.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is really important for us to be the light that Christ has called us to be, so that people don't have an excuse to disengage God because of what we do or what we fail to do; and I think it is really important for us to know that; but also, Peter is making it very clear that he wants us to set a place in our heart for Jesus all the time. What does that mean?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I like that...I like that. He wrote that way, you know; In your hearts, revere Christ as Lord. I think what he means, Darrell, is remember that you belong to somebody...you belong to a living Lord. He is in charge of you; he is your Lord, your master, your boss, your manager; whatever image you want to use; but it also means you are never on your own. The Holy Spirit...the presence of Jesus...is always there to help you when you are tempted to give as good as you got, and that is very comforting; but as we conclude the program, we will move on from Peter to the other great apostle, Paul, and some important things he wrote to the young pastor Titus. So, you will want to stay tuned for that.

Segment 3

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And let's dig right back into scripture, Darrell, with these words from the Apostle Paul to the young pastor Titus, who was ministering on the island of Crete, an island where the people had a reputation for being rather difficult folks.

DARRELL DELANEY

It says: ^{3:1}Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, ²to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone. ³At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. ⁴But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Notice here especially, Darrell, the call not to slander anyone. Now, here is an issue that also seems highly relevant for the times we are living in, because it just seems like some of the news media, some people in politics, have turned slander into a weapon...almost an art form that they wield without compunction or hesitation. People hop on Facebook, they spread rumors about somebody or they take something someone said way out of context, and then twist it to make the other person look bad. We have even heard about artificial intelligence and the ability to create what has become known as "deep fakes..."

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Where people's voices can be imitated by a computer, and then you can make them say anything you want and then claim that is really what he said when it didn't actually happen. That is kind of the atmosphere we are in. We could wish, Darrell, that Christians would find it easy to rise above all that, but it is too easy to become part of all that.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; it is really hard to do. Slander is an issue when you speak against someone and you defame their character verbally. Like libel is when it is written down. Of course, people have seen that in the news and things like that; and these are things over and over in the New Testament we are called to go away from; and they are part of the old life and the old way we used to do things. We are called into a newness in Christ that puts that stuff to death; and I pray that we learn what that means; and even though sometimes you see that all over the place; and unfortunately, in the pulpit as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; there have been issues in recent years of some pastors who use their pulpits to spread disinformation about a subject or about a person; and that all kind of led me to think about sort of the classic confession of the Reformed tradition, the *Heidelberg Catechism*. In the section that contains commentary on the Ten Commandments, and particularly in connection to the ninth commandment that forbids bearing false witness, here is what question-and-answer 112 says: What is the aim of the ninth commandment? This: That I never give false testimony against anyone; twist no one's words nor gossip nor slander, nor join in condemning anyone rashly or without a hearing. Rather, in court and everywhere else, I should avoid lying and deceit of every kind. These are the very devices the devil uses, and they will call down on me God's intense wrath. I should love the truth, speak it candidly, and openly acknowledge it; and I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor's good name.

DARRELL DELANEY

There is not a lot of wiggle room there, Scott. I like the fact that it gives us a way, actually, to live, because slander is when you say something about someone that is not true about them; and when we lie about people or about their character or about what they have done...what they have said...and we twist those words, we actually are aligning ourselves with the father of lies. But now, if we walk in truth and we live in truth, we are aligning ourselves with the Father of Truth; and that is, I think, the essence of what is going on in this question-and-answer of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. We need to make sure that we are walking the right way and making the right decisions.

SCOTT HOEZEE

These are good words to reflect on every time before we go on Facebook or Twitter, or now it is known as X, you know. Don't twist people's words. This happens all the time. We have all seen it, right? Don't tell a half-truth; don't leave out the main thing a person said to make them look bad; and then, the real kicker from that question-and-answer from the Catechism, Darrell: Don't only refrain from telling lies or engaging in slander; take positive, active steps to guard and *advance* your neighbor's good name. Go out of your way to make them look better, not worse.

So, Christians in society, which is what we are thinking about in this series, we need to be loving, gentle, truthful. We need to be respectful, polite, civil; rise above the tactics of too many others today, who seem to take delight in bringing other people down.

DARRELL DELANEY

And then Paul talks about one last thing in Titus 3, and we want to talk about before we close the program, and Paul goes into this detail about this ingredient and uncivil behavior that starts in verse 9; and it says: But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. ¹⁰Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. ¹¹You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, keep your eye on the main thing, Paul says. There are endless controversies out there; silly arguments; petty quarrels; it is easy to get swamped by trivial matters and then allow those arguments to keep ratcheting up in intensity until the next thing you know, people come to blows. So, stay away from that. Don't argue about foolish things that really maybe in the end don't matter; but then, there is the other thing he says there, Darrell. There is such a thing as divisive people, right? People who just love to stir various pots. They love sowing dissention. They take a perverse pleasure out of sparking quarrels in other people. So, right; as we have seen in this program, Darrell, in some situations when we are questioned and we are put on the defensive, then we go back to Peter's advice to be civil and polite in how we reply; but then, there are also times when the best thing to do is just to walk away quietly. Don't engage a divisive person, because you probably cannot win. You are just going to give them more things to divide you with.

So, sometimes it is Proverbs 26, a seemingly contradictory pair of wisdom sayings here from Proverbs 26:4, 5:

⁴Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be just like him. ⁵Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.

So, which is it? Answer a fool or don't answer it? Answer: Depends. It takes wisdom to apply wisdom; but in summary, Darrell, at an uncivil moment in so many societies, Christians have the high and difficult calling to be better than so much of what goes on around us. We need to defend ourselves without being defensive, much less causing further offence. We need to be restrained in our speech, civil in our tone, polite in our posture; and avoid the slander and innuendo so rampant on social media and in so many other places in life.

DARRELL DELANEY

We are called to do something that we cannot do on our own. We need the attitude and behavior of Jesus Christ, but we need the Holy Spirit's power to give us the ability to get that done, because there will be times where things are messy, and we won't know what to do; but he has given us his wisdom, he has given us his power, he has given us each other; and we know we don't need to do it on our own because Jesus Christ has given us the power to do so, and we love the fact that he knows what to do and knows what is best. Thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Darrell Delaney, and we hope you will join us again next time as we examine biblical wisdom to help us navigate the complexities of Christian engagement in societal issues.

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DARRELL DELANEY

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