



CIVILITY

QUICK TO LISTEN

AND THEY SAT WITH HIM ON THE GROUND SEVEN DAYS
AND SEVEN NIGHTS, AND NO ONE SPOKE A WORD TO HIM,
FOR THEY SAW THAT HIS SUFFERING WAS VERY GREAT.

—Job 2:13 ESV

In 2016 I helped a close friend campaign for a political office. “My opponent has been in office for twenty-five years, and has run unopposed for the past six elections.” Rob’s words startled me. He’s a supremely likable fellow who, in turn, likes everyone else. So it was tough for me to imagine him having an opponent. But in politics, as in sports, you must face your opponents. Rob knocked on ten thousand doors in Lancaster City and spent countless hours listening to residents. I joined him on a few of those humid summer afternoons. I observed him speaking with grace and humor in debates, avoiding potshots at his opponent and, more importantly, distancing himself from his own presidential candidate who was was not exactly kind or predictable. Rob waged a war of civility and garnered a third of the votes he needed to win.

According to Dan Spanjer and Amy Black, two lecturers we hosted in Lancaster before that election cycle, the political middle in both major parties has been shrinking. “No Compromise” has supplanted “Compromise” as the most effective rallying cry in getting votes. When’s the last time any of us witnessed political opponents listening carefully to each other in order to clarify issues and find common ground? Christians of all kinds get tossed back and forth within their own parties between the poles. 2016 got pretty tribal.

Sebastian Junger suggests we are hardwired for tribalism.¹ Tribes are what give us purpose, identity, and community. His main illustrations are drawn

from recent military campaigns. Soldiers returning from the tight-knit brotherly action of the Afghan front find themselves home: in shallow communities, bereft of the purpose they once had. The enemy without no longer exists. They miss their band of brothers. Then, the enemy within raises its head and launches an ambush. Depression, self-medication of all kinds, and loneliness turn up their assault. Until and unless a returned soldier finds a replacement tribe, his reintegration into civilian life will be laced with land mines. Liberal societies like ours have given tribalism a bad rap, but Junger is saying we have an evolutionary determination to seek tribe. We're losing our core identity to our own self-destructive lust for personal space and independence. I find his argument compelling, if self-contradictory. If we're wired for tribe, and we are evolving biologically and societally, why are so many of us lonesome? Isn't it more likely that our wires are so crossed that we easily drift away from community unless we're compelled by a common enemy? And couldn't tribalism itself lead to xenophobia, warfare, and genocide? History holds the answer. Still, his application to our desperation to belong is something ancient faiths have addressed for millennia.

Tribe (spiritually speaking) is nothing new to Jesus and His followers. Christianity is founded upon unity, both globally and locally. Christians have also fallen prey to lesser tribes such as nationalism, racism, classism, and sexism. Still, the tribe toolbox is in their truck. If only believers would use their tools to build bridges instead of walls. When we build a bridge, something beautiful happens: the lost and wounded can find a place to belong. There is a battle in the Christian faith, but the lines aren't the same as the political ones. Jesus drew His own lines with a sword and still does, but we must ask ourselves: whose side are we on? Aren't we called to peace? Who really are our enemies?

I'm reminded of one of those mysterious portions of Scripture in the story of Jericho. It's similar to the scene J.R.R. Tolkien paints in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Tom Bombadil lands in that story as if from heaven, and departs just as abruptly with no explanation. In Scripture, Joshua was out looking over the battle lines for the next day's conquest against the walled city. Suddenly, "a man was standing before him with drawn sword in his hand." Being the commander of Israel, Joshua rightly asked whose side the man was on. He replies, "No; but I am the commander of the army of Yahweh. Now I have come."² Joshua must've been thinking, "Wait. I'm the commander, right?" The Bombadil character, who we can surmise was an angelic being, answered

Joshua's question on his own terms. "Forget whose side I'm on. I'm a messenger of the Lord." Joshua hit the ground in worship, and the angel informed Joshua he was standing on holy ground. Joshua slipped off his sandals.

One of our main tag lines for The Row House is "Nothing is Not Sacred." I don't mean by this that we live in a wholly holy world. Rather, I'm affirming that we live in a sin-saturated world where God chooses to show up, and no corner of this sphere is off-limits to Him. When He appears, He leaves footprints of holiness. In a spiritual sense, our world is Chernobyl being taken back by nature. Christ is redeeming all things at this very moment, and His intentions are holiness for every square inch of creation. This reclamation project is centered on humanity. The raw material He's working with are "jars of clay," much like Joshua. His real opponents are the sentient beings, both human and angelic, who oppose Him. But that's His business. Whose side are we on as we set out to engage culture? Where is the holy God in all this? And who are our enemies? If we can answer these questions, we will be proper servants of God in battles raging around us.

If our Lord has enemies, we are bound to as well. But so what? How does He treat them? With embarrassing mercy. Our business then, following in the steps of the Son of Man, is to love our enemies, to pray for our persecutors, and to extend mercy to all in His name. That mercy includes civility toward those who aren't yet on board with His cleanup project. We don't have a right to ignore people. As James the brother of Jesus put it, "Be quick to listen and slow to speak." The nursery expression holds true: God gave us two ears but one mouth. Anyone made in God's image is worthy of respect and a listening ear. How else can we bring a message suitable to their longings and questions?

At The Row House, our first line in the defense of listening is with our speakers. I only invite thinkers and practitioners whom I feel are good listeners. Perhaps they've studied long and hard on their topic. Perhaps they possess a self-moderated posture of listening to others in conversation. Perhaps they are more eager to learn from others than to hear themselves talk. A return speaker who demonstrates listening well is Phillip Johnston. Wise beyond his age, Phillip reads widely with a passion for lived wisdom. No wonder, then, that his forums are not only memorable but also eclectic. Topics have ranged from Terence Malick's *Tree of Life* to "How Extroverts Can Help Introverts." He's one of the introverts, by the way. I've found some of the sharpest Christian communicators are. Mr. Johnson now works out his love for ideas and people at a Christian residential study center founded by Francis and Edith Schaeffer

called L'Abri—French for “shelter.” There, in Jane Austen’s backyard in rural England, Phillip hosts a stream of meal discussions and leads a host of mentoring relationships, all rooted in the discipline of listening well to others’ questions about anything under the sun.

Besides inviting presenters who listen well as a matter of course, my second concern is for listening to rule our live events. Speaking of Francis A. Schaeffer, the story goes that he was asked, “Given an hour on a train with a stranger, how would you spend it?” He remarked that he’d probably ask questions for fifty minutes. Then, as time and appropriateness dictated, he would proclaim the Good News of Jesus to points of tension or interest in the other person.³ In The Row House Forums, I have tried to demonstrate civility in one simple way: I lay down ground rules before the presenter speaks. First, we ask that she receive our utmost attention for the duration of the talk. Then, as we open up the floor for brief questions, I request the audience members to refrain from commentary. I also ask that each participant listen to the other members with the same degree of attention they wish others would give them. I’m not merely trying to defuse craziness in our forums, though that is, honestly, a goal too. I’m desiring to demonstrate civility. More than that, I want to encourage “speaking the truth in love,” as the Apostle Paul frames our obligation as Christian communicators.

Interestingly, Paul’s injunction to civil conduct was written to *Christians in Ephesus*, and wasn’t directed at how they should speak in public. He wants them to simply get along with each other, from the heart. Getting Christians to act kindly often is half the battle. In the broader world, Christians tend to have a reputation for speaking before listening. Since our forums are meant for the public, I’m less concerned with a guest, newcomer, or committed skeptic speaking up—it’s the Christians that make me nervous. There are not too many Christ-centered events where anyone can ask a question and not feel ashamed or fear being run out on a rail. I thought my forums, with their punchy titles and inviting marketing, would spark more fireworks. Most, though, are quite civil. Disagreeable folks, I suppose, are shamed into keeping my ground rules. Perhaps, it’s also true that those with honest and hard questions just aren’t ready to share what’s on their mind from fear of past smackdown. You know what I’d love to overhear in a coffee shop someday? “Go to the Row House. They have the biggest ears around.”

I studied Rhetoric as an undergraduate. That is an uppity way of saying I majored, along with six others, in Speech/Communications. I have since taught a course on interpersonal Communication for groups, inspired in part by my enjoyable courses at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. My favorite form of torture, therefore, is the Role Play. They are exceedingly awkward in college, and no less unnerving in any other setting. Still, they're effective at making us aware of communication realities. In one such role play, I was paired with a blonde, buxom sorority girl whose name I somehow can't remember. Let's call her Buffy. To say I did not traverse her orbit while at university would be an understatement. We were asked to interview each other about our upbringing, sitting back to back. Obviously, we were paying attention to nonverbal communication, or the lack thereof. The second role play with Buffy involved conducting a "natural" conversation in which we were to restate each other's comments before asking our own questions about them. For instance, "So, you were raised in the Poconos, and your Mom was your third grade teacher. Did I get that right?" If your partner felt adequately listened to in that exchange, they would then permit you to say something about yourself. Awkward and difficult.

A few years later, the Conversational Skills Rating Scale (CSRS) was developed and it became the benchmark for gauging the quality of interpersonal communication.⁴ The areas measured are Attentiveness, Composure, Expressiveness, and Coordination. It's as if nothing is new under the sun. Be quick to listen; slow to speak. Speak the truth in love. In keeping with that measuring stick, how good are we at paying attention, maintaining self-control, expressing ourselves in appropriate ways, and coordinating the various elements of our communicative events with grace?

Are Christians known for their listening skills? I believe in some circles, yes, but it's not our calling card. We may have the toolbox, but the trick is putting the tools to use. Without love for our fellow earthlings, we don't even open the box. One of the reasons I started hosting forums was to venture out on this bridge of commonsense communication, park the truck, and start some repairing.

ENDNOTES

1. Sebastian Junger, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*. (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2016).
2. Joshua 5:13ff (English Standard Version).
3. Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth: The Whole Gospel Wholly by Grace Communicated Truthfully and Lovingly* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press 2012).
4. The CSRS was developed by Brian Spitzberg, a professor of communication at San Diego State University.