

Conviction and Common Decency

For at least twenty years now social commentators have remarked on the breakdown of common decency in our country. In our increasingly diverse society, some people feel threatened and show little respect for those who differ from themselves. Sometimes people speak destructively and occasionally act out violently. Notable examples include the bombing at the Boston Marathon last year and the bombing of the Federal building in Oklahoma City back in 1995, as well as less dramatic acts of violence.

More often the lack of common decency shows up in such an ordinary situation as a stoplight when someone lays on the horn if another driver is too slow to move when the light turns green. We occasionally hear of an altercation in a theater line when someone speaks rudely and another person responds by escalating the conflict, sometimes with tragic results. Competition over parking spaces can lead to shouting matches and dented fenders.

Sometimes substantial issues lead to conflict. Not all conflict is a bad thing. Sometimes it is necessary in order to resolve unhealthy or unjust situations. What we must not allow to occur is a breakdown of relationships or –much worse– a breakdown of society. You may recall the words of poet W.B. Yeats in “The Second Coming”:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

....

The best lack all conviction, while the
Worst are full of passionate intensity.

Passionate intensity that is cut free from a commitment to common decency is dangerous. It knows no limits. It is blind to the good will in others who are different in race, religion or viewpoint. Passionate intensity can become the habitat of hatred.

Christians can be part of the problem or part of the solution. We don't become part of the solution by giving up all conviction and losing passion. But we do need to be careful that our `righteous indignation` doesn't get the best of us and we fail to see good even in those we believe are not only at odds with us but hold views and perform deeds we think of as detrimental to the world.

We need to do our best to make sure our convictions and passion keeps in touch with civility. Without common decency our convictions are unlikely to reflect much of the Christian faith. Followers of Jesus are to “speak evil of no one, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone” (Titus 3:2).