



**THE MESSAGE BOARD**  
*A Newsletter from*  
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Personal Reflections

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### **A Civility Covenant**

Just how far public discourse has deteriorated in our country is highlighted by the recent healthcare debate. The ugly and deplorable racist comments hurled at black Representatives by some in the Tea Party movement; the ugly threats and acts of violence against various US Representatives; and the vituperative comments that found their way onto the floor of the Senate and the House are evidence of a deterioration of basic respect for others that threatens the ideal of informed public debate around critical issues.

The task of re-establishing within our common life, the concept of “principled disagreement” is an honorable one that will require the leadership of the church and not just political and secular leaders. In this vein I, along with many other religious leaders, have signed a “Civility Covenant.” We pledge in this covenant not to attack or question the motives of those who might take a stand on a public issue that differs from the one we own or represent.

Why have we become such an angry and polarized society? One contributing factor, though not the only one, is that broadcast journalism has abandoned its historic role in a democracy as a source of informed non-partisan information, and has become instead a modern gladiatorial spectacle. Crowds gather in the virtual coliseums of our times to watch or hear verbal gladiators deliver death blows to one another. With adrenalin flowing more fully than wisdom, they then turn to their adoring partisans for the thumbs up/thumbs down sign.

Certainly the economic downturn is another factor as it has many of us on edge as our personal finances suffer. Historically, during such economic crises, anger has increased against the government and against the vulnerable in our society leading to the “Know Nothing Party” and other nativistic groups. The Southern Poverty Law Center notes that “nativist extremist” groups that harass immigrants have grown by 80%, and antigovernment “patriot” groups have tripled since 2009.

Another factor is “spin.” *Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor* has been thrown out the window as everybody “spins” the truth to suit their particular viewpoint. Truth and honesty, the bedrock of trust and integrity, no longer appear to be necessary public virtues. Vitriol is spewed out without regard to the damage done to the fabric of our common life. It is indeed a very troubling sign when public servants such as Senator Bayh start to flee the rancor by leaving office.

In this era of “spin,” a particularly grievous instance was seen in recent comments labeling Jim Wallis of Sojourners, a Marxist. Those comments were preceded by an earlier declaration by this commentator that if your denomination has social justice in any of its documents you should run from it. His comments are far off the mark of the conversations I have been privileged to have with Pentecostal and Conservative Evangelical leaders in the past few years. The very thing many of them wish for in their tradition is a renewed emphasis on social justice because social justice is biblical. I say “renewed” advisedly because evangelicals were deeply involved in the reform movements related to slavery and the position of women in society at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

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## A Civility Covenant

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Christian Churches Together (a group that includes leadership from Mainline, Pentecostal, Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical churches) chose poverty and evangelism as the two themes they would focus upon precisely because this broad network of religious leaders felt that justice and evangelism were the right and left hands of the mission of the church. Young evangelicals are increasingly rediscovering with excitement a whole gospel that emphasizes the social justice dimensions of our faith. The National Association of Evangelicals is discussing ecology as a justice concern now some 40 years after mainline churches. Rather than running away from justice as integral to Jesus' proclamation of the good news, many evangelicals are (re)turning towards it with renewed enthusiasm, commitment and energy.

The labeling of Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners, as a Marxist is the type of tactic that substitutes smear and fear for information and understanding. Few evangelicals would be unfamiliar with Wallis and his profound commitment to Christ in every aspect of life. For many of us as young evangelicals in the 1970s, Jim was the voice that kept us in the evangelical camp as he championed peace and justice as integral to following Christ. His voice, along with the voices of folk like Ron Sider, called us (and still call us) to costly discipleship (Bonhoeffer).

An enduring piece of American Baptist spiritual DNA is the belief that Holy Scripture, especially in the books of the prophets and the teachings of Jesus, mandates that we who have been reconciled to God in Christ work for peace and social justice within the world order. To run away from social justice is to turn one's back on the cross, Jesus' inaugural sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, and God's concern and compassion for the poor and oppressed.

But I digress. As we enter other public debates, especially the forthcoming debate about immigration, I hope that we as the church of Jesus Christ and as the American Baptist Churches USA in particular, might be a guiding force in modeling public civility in such critical matters. Paul consistently urges the early church (no strangers to disputes) in passages such as Ephesians 4:1-2: *I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.*

Finally, let me apologize that the technology used to disseminate this email does not allow for individual responses. It is in part because it goes out to so many (now over 10,000 folks). And I pray that you find these pages not rife with partisan views, but with thoughts that kindle your own, whether seemingly in concert with mine, or in other directions. I hope these pages might offer helpful contributions as we move forward.



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