

"CHILDREN, STOP FIGHTING! BE NICE!"

an open letter to an area minister (in the United Church of Christ, having episcopal functions over a geographical group of churches), in response to her invitation to go with her five days hence to "A Consultation on Civil Discourse in the United Church of Christ" (sponsored by The Council on Theological Education in New England, which includes the UCC conferences [corresponding to dioceses] & seminaries in this region)

Dear _____,

1 While I'd like to be with you personally, I must leave very early next morning for Hilton Head, thence my obligations at N.Y. Theological Seminary, so I must not go. But I cannot express the civil plesantry of saying I'm sorry. As I read the flier, I found I was glad not to attend: the consultation has made no provision for anyone to speak a good word for **incivility**, without which language-worlds collapse into incoherence,....

2as has been happening in our denomination. I refer to incivility of point, not of pique. The Consultation (again, judged only from the flier) innocently (surely not intentionally?) confuses the two. I loved my grandmothers, & now in my old age know what they meant when their nerves sometimes just couldn't abide the fustian & bustian of us kids: their nerves paid no never-mind to whether we chn. were having conversations of consequence or only acting out our being pissed off at one another. As Father God acts like Father God & not as Grandfather (all-permitting) God, Mother Church should act like Mother Church & not--as currently UCC official-dom--Grandmother (all-permitting) Church.

3 Excuse, please, while for the benefit of my readers I quote from the flier: "people's passions often have risen in proportion to the significance of the issues," & some in consequence "have often spoken too harshly with one another," resulting in "scars." ([My comments, in "()"] Take no offense, get no wounds, have no scars. In the culture & in our church, we need to raise the threshold of tolerance for incivility, so people won't be so touchy & so leaders won't be tempted to sacrifice truth to the supposed need to avoid offending anybody. Weld & Kerry slashed at each other in nine debates in the contest for a Mass. senatorship, but last night on the tube I saw the two of them downing stouts--pd. for by Weld, "because I lost"--in a Boston pub. Then there's that outrageous speechifying in the British House of Commons, far more incivil than the U.S. Congress would tolerate. Nobody here but just us chickens?) We should all "respect each other's basic right to hold a position that differs from our own." (I doubt there's anybody in the UCC who'd disagree with that.) "We secure that respect when we covenant together to maintain customs, procedures, and rules that provide every participant with a place where they can speak safely and honestly without fear of recriminations, anger, or loss of status." (Every congregation in every denomination should offer this "place," this space where all lean toward love for the sake of each, where each earns the right to speak by listening & encouraging others to speak. Yet many clergy in our now-highly-ideologized UCC are afraid to speak out in language unconformable to the word-censorship code of the Board for Homeland Ministries--afraid of being [as is said in business] "topped out" & marked as troublemakers on whom church employers should not take chances. If a pastor crosses the UCC partyline on, e.g., "inclusive language" or "open and affirming" homosexuality, s/he will be treated as impure & when seeking new employment in the UCC, experience "recrimination" & discover "loss of status." This is so severe that in a meeting yesterday, eminent preacher Herbert Davis, recently retired, said that he couldn't get a church now & because of his opposition to the new BHM/UCC hymnal, has heretic status.) We of "diverse perspectives" should be able to talk about anything & then "go home still friends, still committed to the United Church of Christ." (This expressed motive functions as a conversation-control: nothing's important enough to fracture unity. It all sounds amicable & "Christian" enough till you reflect that under this guideline, reformational rupture could not occur, & any dissident would be sanctioned as in violation of unity, a value rated superior to truth & honor. What's at bottom being promoted here is self-righteous conformism, at ironic odds with our denomination's touting of "diversity.") The one "case study" mentioned

is "the new hymnal," on which I'm the UCC's most prominent instance of incivility (as back-defined in the flier). The ¶ mentioning that concludes: "Let us learn civility by talking together honestly about things that matter." (What's that "honestly"? I know of nobody who's interested in dishonest conversation. And why only "civility"? That case study would be an opportunity to learn both civility & creative incivility [what I call incivility of point, not pique], equally. The Consultation's planners' bias is showing.) In the UCC, we should be able "to discuss matters of faith and ethics without recrimination or without challenging the motives of people of good will." ("Without"? That dooms the conversations to superficiality, for only surface conversation can avoid peering into participants' motives. "People of good will"? That's pollyanna: human beings are a mix of good & ill will & in all situations should be aware of the possibilities of both, with the will to support & impugn motives as may be seen as appropriate.) "...listen to each other with respect for the other person's integrity and honesty." (That the other person has integrity and is honest is only a love-required working assumption, not a conviction. If it were a conviction, how could we confront when we've heard something that we think lacks integrity or is dishonest? We would be condemned to the shallow speaking in love, rather than "speaking [what we hold to be] the truth in love" [Eph.4.15; & see "confrontation" in manuals of Christian ethics].)

4 It's what you leave out that wrecks you. What's being left out of the Consultation (again, as far as the flier lets me ascertain) is the question of truth. The Consultation may operate, as today's culture elite, on the postmodernist premise that truth is both practically & philosophically unavailable to us, so all opinions are to be respected. Germany's post-WWI culture elite operated under that nihilistic assumption & became an easy target for Hitler's "blood-&-soil" pseudotruth, which the Deutscherchristen (the Hitler-supporting, antisemitic churchmen) bought into, at least going along to get along. In the Barmen Declaration (1936), "confessing" Christians defined the evil of Nazism &, on the basis of Christian truth, denounced the heresy of accepting Hitler's pseudotruth....This instance was adduced yesterday after Chas. Harper (the UCC Boston-&-environs area minister) declared that the category of heresy had ceased to be "functional": nobody here in the UCC but just us nonheretics. At the thought of Hitler's so-called "German Christians," he backed down & allowed that there may be some exceptions. That opened the door to the question of possible categories of exception. For me, e.g., The New Century Hymnal is clearly heretical, layering a new religion over Christianity by bowdlerizing the ancient language-landmarks, great hymns & creeds, even the UCC Statement of Faith (which does not appear in its original, unbowlerized form). (The event was the Mass. Confessing Christ Consultation titled "The Jesus Seminar: Another Voice," in Boylston, Mass.--with special reference to heretic Marcus Borg, presently touted around the UCC as the latest theological darling.)

On the psychoscale, the lighter truth is taken to be, the heavier unity, which thus becomes the operant truth. In C.K.Hadaway & D.A.Rogers' REROUTING THE PROTESTANT MAINSTREAM: Sources of Growth and Opportunities for Change (Abingdon/95), the baleful results of this trade-off are detailed. 77: "The values of religious tolerance and theological openness are paramount within the mainstream [churches]. Greater effort is made to communicate our acceptance of diverse groups than to communicate what we do in fact believe about God." 77: The deciding factor in the mainline future is not theology or religious language but "churches whose primary concern is making people full of God [through worship]"; such churches' "pews will be full of people."....An immodest claim to truth sacrifices unity to dogmatism, but an insistence on unity sacrifices truth to sentimentality. The latter is clearly the danger in the UCC, whose latitudinarian attitude toward truth, scripture, the ecumenical & Reformation creeds leaves an authority vacuum into which the ideologies of cultural icons (e.g., radical feminism & "open & affirming" homosexuality) rush to provide the denomination with a simulacrum of the identity & stability of churches faithful to the Christian heritage & wary of heresies as that heritage has defined them.

5 On a panel yesterday, I had to rebuke Richard Chrisman (Boston's Old South Church) for standing history on its head. He said the creeds were meant to be "conversation starters, not conversation stoppers." Calcedon intended to stop conversation as to whether the Lord Jesus Christ is truly God & truly man. And did, except for heretics ancient & modern.



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DONNA SCHAPER

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Dear Donna:

Thanks for the "civility" flier, which--as you can see by #2820--I took seriously.

As for your statement, "I don't think of you as my enemy," how can that be? Did I fail, in #2812.4, to communicate that I'm on the opposite side of the "struggle" you spoke of, "the great struggle about whether women will be allowed to name our God [within the Christian religion & church]." My "[]" includes, I believe, what you imply.

There's no "struggle" as to whether the Church should "allow" nonchurch women to name their deity: what they do with religious language is no business of the Church. But inside the Church, it's many centuries too late to talk about naming the deity, who's long been canonically & creedally authoritatively named. As I am an enemy^{*} of anyone who disagrees with this, & apparently you do, the fact that you do not "think of" me as an enemy of yours means that here your thinking is out of sync with reality.

^{*} Objectively, not subjectively.

But if, ^{you} were making only an emotive statement, viz. that you feel no animosity toward me personally (as I none toward you), I thank you. Here applies my distinction in #2820 between point (a substantive matter) & pique (egoistic animosity). Atop all this is our Lord's mature command that we love our enemies (Mt.5.44+).

Grace & peace,