

One New Book for the Preacher

Charles E. Raynal

Davidson College Presbyterian Church, Davidson , North Carolina

CIVILITY: MANNERS, MORALS, AND THE ETIQUETTE OF DEMOCRACY
by Stephen L. Carter. New York: Basic Books, 1998. 338 pages.

In a graphic illustration, Stephen L. Carter shows why he thinks American society must recover good manners and good morals. In 1995 a man, “Selfish Passenger,” crashed the security gates in the Houston airport, without having himself or his baggage screened. On the chance that he was armed, the airport security service closed two terminals, evacuated 7,000 passengers, and rescreened everyone. This process took four hours, and forty flights were delayed. Thousands missed flight connections. One security guard observed that Selfish Passenger probably made his plane without a hitch.

Carter argues from the anecdote for the *incivility* of Selfish Passenger’s behavior. The frustration, expense, and delays caused by Selfish Passenger illustrate that we live in a society of “barbarians running late.” His action was uncivil not just because it was illegal. Sometimes, says Carter, breaking the law can be a civil act. Neither was it uncivil because some people were inconvenienced. Union pickets are inconvenient, but they are not necessarily uncivil. Illegal, yes. Inconsiderate, yes. But more than illegal and inconsiderate, the action of Selfish Passenger was barbaric and immoral. The behavior was uncivil because it was selfish: “the notion that morality might require him to sacrifice his own interest or desire for the benefit of others, even briefly, probably did not occur to him at all” (6).

Stephen Carter’s keen eye for life in American society today makes his careful argument for civility both delightful and disturbing, but always vivid. He draws on a historical analysis of the roots of civility by Norbert Elias, a Swiss sociologist who documents how the rules of civility grew up in Europe when the church began to yield its authority to the nation state. Carter’s argument is, therefore, fully cognizant of secular, pluralistic culture. He follows the idea of Alexis de Tocqueville, who observed in the nineteenth century that democracy in the United States was not only a type of government, but a system of manners and a form of social life. Carter’s proposal addresses the North American context. He brings his training as a teacher of law, his own upbringing as an African American, and his Christian faith to argue that without civility, our common life is in danger of coming apart. He writes vigorously out of his own deep convictions.

The book is organized in three parts: Part I, “The Collapse of the Three-Legged Stool” (The three legs are the home, the school, the place of worship) defends civility against its debunkers, considers the nature of civility and incivility, traces some of the causes and history of our crisis, and concludes by suggesting an answer is found in the religious concept of awe and sacrifice for neighbor. He draws upon a treasury of Christian sermons from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, his own committed Christian faith, and theological analysis, while also suggesting common ground with Judaism and Islam.

In Part II, “Incivility’s Instruments,” Carter presents various ways in which our

incivility appears in and is reinforced by our language and our culture; further, he reveals how a recovery of a sacrificial ethic would help us in recivilizing ourselves.

Part III, "Civilizing the Twenty-First Century," takes up resources of civility in the family, in religion (specifically Christianity), and in education (the three-legged stool). Carter ends this section of the book with a summary of the rules of civility, developed throughout the book. These rules, inspired by Tocqueville, he calls "The Etiquette of Democracy."

Because Carter relies on his Christian faith for his analysis and argument, this book is valuable for preachers. He finds a great resource in sermons of American preachers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century who were struggling in the decisive battle to end chattel slavery. Carter reveals his appreciation by saying the sermons were delivered when theology was public and accessible to lay people, unlike now when all too much theology is "the property of a handful of sophisticates in divinity schools." Carter recognizes the accessibility and practical side of the preacher's task.

One of his models of civility is the civil rights movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King, who in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference said his purpose was "to save the soul of the nation." It was the genius of that movement to protest segregation, even break laws that were unjust, but to do so in a civil, other-regarding spirit. King is a prime example of Carter's conviction that only faith can rescue civility in America because "there is no truer or more profound vision of equality than equality before God" (31).

Carter's position has remarkable balance, a sense of fairness, and a concrete grasp of the realities of daily life for ordinary people in our time. He gives a poignant example of civility from his own family life in the 1960s. When his father, an attorney, took a new government job, the Carters moved from a black neighborhood in Washington, D. C. to Cleveland Heights, an all-white section of the city. The children were acutely aware that they were the only black people in the upper crust white neighborhood, where there were congressmen, judges, and various other people in government service. Carter had grown up hearing tales of how southerners were racist. One of his elementary school chums had told him that the top of the Washington Monument was shaped like the hood of a Ku Klux Klansman. Doubtless he picked up the tension from his own parents. As he and his siblings sat on the steps, a woman drove her car into her garage across the street, waved to the children, and disappeared inside. In a few minutes she came over to welcome them to the neighborhood, offering them a big plate of cream cheese and jelly sandwiches. Nothing had ever tasted so good. She was Mrs. Kestenbaum, a nice white Jewish lady. The memory is a fixture of his mind, a certain revelation that if we claim the attitude of respect, even love, for our fellow citizens, we can have a civil society in the United States today.