

The Foundation of Civility  
By: Editor-in-Chief Grace Hemmeke

Heidelberg Catechism

Q [1]. What is your only comfort  
in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own,  
but belong—

body and soul,  
in life and in death—

to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,  
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.  
He also watches over me in such a way  
that not a hair can fall from my head  
without the will of my Father in heaven;  
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him,  
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,  
assures me of eternal life  
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready  
from now on to live for him.

It may be odd to begin a discussion on civility with these words. Civility is often viewed as a peripheral, genteel aspect of life, while worldview and values are central to the identity of a country or culture. However, civility is the fruit of a Biblical worldview; one which roots itself in God's ownership of the universe.

At the foundation of many secular ideas is the belief that before we belong to anyone else, we belong to ourselves. Manifestations of this include the “I don't need no man” mantra of the feminists, the popular changing of wedding vows to omit the word “obey” (Tigar, 2020), and an

increase in the culture of self-love or self-care, which, while promoting the value of good stewardship, removes God as the owner and creator of the things which must be stewarded.

In order to bring about a civil society, we must recognize God's kingship over the world. Yet following the West's increasing rejection of God (Lipka, 2015), secular humanists now demand basic human rights and dignity for all without any idea of where these rights come from. Many papers have been written by men, outlining these basic human rights. All of them have failed to recognize Yahweh as the Author of those Rights. Perhaps the most famous and most cited document on ethical guidelines is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which in its very first article attempts to lay the groundwork for every right to which humans are entitled. The authors state that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." (United Nations, 1948, art. 1). This article leaves a very important question unanswered: Who endowed humans with reason and conscience? The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, written during the French Revolution, states that "For these reasons, the National Assembly doth recognize and declare, in the presence of the Supreme Being, and with the hope of his blessing and favour, the following sacred rights of men and of citizens" (National Assembly of France, 1789, para. 2). Even the French, while chopping off their "divinely appointed" king's head, understood that some higher power existed. Although it is difficult to find a more secular nation than the Republic of France and its Temple of Reason, the United Nations does not even recognize that there might be Something more powerful or more important than humankind.

The American Declaration of Independence offers an insight which seems closest to the Christian worldview, stating famously that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men

are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights” (Jefferson, 1776, para. 2). This is somewhat better than the French version, as the Founding Father’s point to the arbiter of human rights, recognizing that the Creator has power to endow what rights He will to His creations. Although the Founding Fathers did not name their Creator, they understood that they had one. Christians further affirm the Bible’s teaching: “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” (Genesis 1:27). From that image of God flows all the deserved respect and dignity which the seculars cannot articulate.

The Heidelberg Catechism elaborates on our creation, stating that we belong to God, and furthermore, that this is our only comfort in life. Because we belong to God, our selfish tendencies are shown to be sinful, instead of helpful, as secular culture would have us believe. Oprah Winfrey (n.d.) teaches “The biggest choices begin and end with you.” Jesus teaches: “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.” (John 15:12-13). Oprah’s advice is in direct conflict with the Christian worldview. How are we to have respect for the God-given rights of others if we are concerned primarily with our own lives?

Civility is an act of selflessness, though not as dramatic as death. In civil conversation, people are expected to listen, to respond without aggression, and to be peaceable. These actions deny our own selfish instincts and instead show patience with others. All of us have felt the instinct to tell an egotistical bore that the company has heard a story a thousand times before, or the instinct to tell someone exactly what we think of their outdated political views. Yet to be civil to those we disagree with is to be both humble and respectful. Selfish conversationalists are easy to spot, and harmful to any conversation they enter. Without humility, they elevate themselves

above everyone and therefore assume that their point of view is the only valid one. Their minds do not entertain any ideas that they dislike or that could cause them to rethink their positions. Extreme versions of selfish conversationalists include internet trolls and debaters who restate their points without engaging counterarguments. There is no conversation with these people, only a one-sided broadcast of opinion.

Therefore, civil discourse is only possible in a society which is selfless, and which has a virtuous foundation which leads us to respect others. That foundation cannot be “Humanity” alone, for history is rife with the despicable acts of humans. That foundation cannot rely even on a “Supreme Being” or even a “Creator” for how are we to understand these vague entities? Rather, the strong foundation of respect must stem from a Biblical love for Christ, co-creator with His Father, selfless messiah who humbled himself to the point of tortuous death for our undeserving sake. If this is our God, then we have our rules of civility premade, taken to extremes, and exemplified for us. The selflessness required for civil discourse leads us to something as equally important as human rights – it leads us to the discovery of truth. Just as Christ’s selflessness gave us the truth of the gospel, so too our smaller selfless acts of civil conversation can show us other truths. Selfless conversation leads to questioning of beliefs, which leads to a better understanding of what is true.

We call this the Great Conversation, which has built much of the philosophy of Western culture. But the West lost its civility when it lost sight of God and took up the refrain of the humanists, that Man is the measure of all things. Civility can be regained by understanding our own smallness in comparison to God. We are told to put ourselves first when we ought to respect others as more worthy than ourselves and extend the love of Christ to those who do not know

Him. Civility, in the end, means embracing God as the One to whom we belong, and embracing His image as we find it in our fellow image bearers.

## Resources

Heidelberg Catechism. (2011). In *crcna.org*. Retrieved January 28, 2022, from <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism>

Jefferson, T. (1776). The Declaration of Independence.

Lipka, M. (2015, May 13). A closer look at America's rapidly growing religious 'nones'. In *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved February 16, 2022, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/>

National Assembly of France. (1789). Declaration of the rights of man and the citizen.

Tigar, L. (2020, December 15). Traditional Wedding Vows 101: The History, What They Mean, & Examples. In *weddingwire.com*. Retrieved January 28, 2022, from <https://www.weddingwire.com/wedding-ideas/traditional-wedding-vows>

The Holy Bible, New King James Version. Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson.

United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights.