

A CHARITABLE DISCOURSE:  
TALKING ABOUT THE THINGS THAT DIVIDE US

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*Jihad in the Church*

Why don't we talk more about controversial issues in the church? Why are we quieter than talk radio hosts and news entertainment folk? They tell us who did it, why, and what they meant by it. The actually say more than they know. And we say so much less than we believe.

Maybe we are afraid of appearing uninformed on an issue. After all, lack of intelligence seems to be one of America's greatest sins. It is quite humbling to say, "I don't know. What do you think?" Maybe we are afraid of the doubts that reside in our own questions. Maybe we are afraid that the answer may overturn our fixed worldview or obligate us. Maybe we have not used our thought muscles on complex issues for a long time.

But maybe we just want to get along. We are afraid of challenging anyone, or asking them to explain what they deeply believe. We don't want to become their enemy. We are afraid.

History is rich with ways of dealing with the enemy. From holy war in the Old Testament, to the dungeon of the Spanish Inquisition, to the Salem witch trials, we have always had ways of dealing with folk not like us. Today, we have religious fundamentalism of the violent and not-so-violent type. Central to this way of thinking is the creation of an enemy.

In a world where money, politics, and religion are center stage, there are always enemies being made. In each contest, there is a path to victory. With money, the one with the most wins. The poor loser goes home with less in his pocket. In politics, the party with the most votes wins. The defeated go home and cry in their milk. In religion, however, defeat is never quite enough. The enemy must be destroyed because they represent an allegiance to an 'other' way. If they are right, it calls for a re-adjustment of one's worldview. Therefore, total annihilation is necessary. Holy war/divine judgment is the means and method of destroying the enemy. And lest we forget, our own faith is founded on texts that speak of wiping out entire pagan tribes, destroying the works of the devil, and binding evil in a pit for a thousand years. It is not enough to disagree or offer a different opinion. The opposition must be crushed. This art has been perfected by the political machines of religious fundamentalism. It could be that the church is in greater danger from the Trojan horse of religious fundamentalism within its gates than from the worldly enemy without.

Kingdom ethics are hard for the church. We are vested in protecting the ways we have grown accustomed to rather than being open to change from the in-breaking kingdom of God. Complex ethical issues are easier to address when we pin-the-tail-on-the-enemy from a pulpit, learn the dismissive language of smear, and keep our distance from the one being hung by our tongue until dead. And in so doing, we violate the essence of our faith – God is love. The world turns its back on our worship, younger generations walk out the door in search of a holy conversation, and hardened 'saints' miss the chance to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is time to re-learn the spiritual practice of holy conversation. But to re-learn it, we must first empty our current arsenal. With caution and grace, I wish to write about the ways we destroy each other in dealing with controversial issues. I know how a few of these demonic weapons work. I have battled with and against them. Others I know because I have seen them full-blooded in the church directory. The local church and the denomination of preference have their arsenal of Jihadic weapons. The use of these weapons brings holy conversation to an end. The weapons are named and addressed in the following chapters.

### *The Cruel Art of Labeling*

It was not enough to say that John F. Kennedy was Catholic. It had to be added that he would obey Rome rather than do the will of the American people. It was not enough to say that Martin Luther King wished to overturn the racial injustice of the south. It had to be added that he was a Communist. It was not enough to admit that Dan Quayle could not spell potato. It had to be added that he was not bright enough to be a heartbeat away from the presidency. Political parties perfected the art of labeling.

Once political parties perfected this art, the religious right learned from the best in the business and started creating its own vocabulary of spite – liberal, soft on crime, leftist, socialist, tree-hugger, bleeding heart, tax-and-spend...you know the list. I'm not suggesting that there are no concerns regarding those who bear these labels. I'm suggesting that the labels are conversation-stoppers. Like the old children's game Pin-the-Tail-on-the-Donkey, once the donkey is properly pinned, the game is won. If the enemy can be properly labeled or mis-labeled, the verdict for destruction is in place. Ready-aim-fire. What follows is not an intelligent, fact-informed, theologically guided discussion on important issues, but a lynching.

Of course, this kind of labeling is not new. They called Jesus a friend of sinners, a glutton, and a drunkard. They called him a blasphemer. They suggested he was somehow a threat to Rome and anyone who looked the other way would be "no friend of Caesar's". Few of these 'labelers' ever had a sit-down face-to-face with Jesus. They just knew he was dangerous. They were right. If his understanding of the world were to prevail, it would turn the world as they knew it upside down.

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This is exactly what happened to a visiting woman in Simon's home. The story is recorded in Luke 7:36-50. It is the story ripe with labels. *Sinner* was her label. And it stuck. She might as well have monogrammed her clothes in bright scarlet letters. **S-I-N-N-E-R**. We are not told that she is a prostitute, but we suspect it from the way she is spoken about. The label *sinner* separated her from most folk in the community, except the lustful men who wandered into her isolation. They were gone almost as quickly as they came. Always taking, never leaving anything behind. If she was the common prostitute of the day, she'd tie up her hair, put a vial of seductive perfume around her neck, and work the streets. People knew what she did.

Simon had a label too. *Host* was his. He is the backbone of the religious community, one who has taken his stance against the pagan culture of Rome. He prefers the way of Torah. We do too. He attends the Promise Keepers rally and defends the integrity of the family. He prays. He fasts.

He tithes. He believes that holiness is the practice of separating from evil of every shape and size. In addition to the label *host*, he also wears the label *holy*.

Our story is ripe for the perfect clash. The woman enters the home uninvited and approaches Jesus as he reclines on a couch, propped up on his elbow facing Simon. His feet dangle off the end of the couch behind him. The woman stands behind Jesus, wetting his feet with her tears. She loosens her hair, drying the tears with it, and kisses his feet. She splashes perfumed ointment into her hands and begins to massage his feet.

The geography of the room is very important. The woman is behind Jesus, massaging his dangling feet. Jesus faces Simon who reclines on the couch in front of him. Jesus is sandwiched between *holy host* and *sinner*.

What label will Jesus wear in this story? Until this moment, Luke has introduced Jesus to us as *prophet*. But the label is about to be rescinded by Simon. He says of Jesus, “*If this man was a prophet, he would know what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner.*” In other words, Jesus should be able to discern that the foot massage he is getting in Simon’s home is not an act of hospitality, but a seductive move by a sinful woman. *Prophets* know these things. Especially the difference between the holy and the profane.

Before Simon can move to re-label Jesus *not-a-prophet*, Jesus speaks. Note that the woman is still behind Jesus and Jesus is still facing Simon.

*Jesus said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you. A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?’ Simon answered, ‘I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You have judged rightly.’*

The story suggests that love is empowered by forgiveness. The more deeply we experience forgiveness, the more deeply we love. Jesus interprets the action of the woman as a response to forgiveness. The tears, the oil, the massage...have nothing but forgiven gratitude in them. And how does Jesus know this? Well...*prophets* know these things.

Jesus knows the difference between heart-felt worship and dull routine. He knows the difference between obedience and showing off. He knows the difference between a sacrificial gift and a religious tip. He knows the difference between a glittering image and a pure heart. And he doesn’t even have to turn around and look. The woman at his feet has experienced the cancellation of a huge debt and it has changed her.

Then comes the hinge of the story. Note again the geography of the room. Jesus swivels. Just as he spoke of the woman to Simon while his back was to her, he now speaks of Simon to the woman with his back toward Simon.

*Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? (Jesus is looking straight at her, inviting Simon to do the same). I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.’ Then he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ And he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’*

Jesus, the *prophet*, now tells what was in Simon’s heart without looking. And he declares to the woman that she is forgiven. Labels fly. *Sinner* becomes *forgiven-one* and *the-one-who-loves-most*. At the same time, *holy-host* becomes *little-forgiven/little-love*. The world in Simon’s home is being turned upside down. This cannot be. So they move to re-label Jesus by asking the question, “Who is this who even forgives sin?” Because if this holy conversation goes further, the woman becomes their sister in the kingdom and they will be forced to deal with her on new terms. It’s easier to keep the old labels intact.

It seems to me that, somewhere in the world, there should be people who are doing what Jesus did in this story – naming forgiveness and empowering a new identity. As long as conversations occur under the old labels, no one ever changes. As long as we talk about people without ever looking at them, we will be like Simon.

This ploy diverts the conversation from the issue at hand to the persons dealing with the issue. It seeks to tag a person with a label that pigeon-holes them in unfavorable light. Rather than being a partner in conversation, one becomes a person judged and dismissed as unworthy of consideration. Avoidance is then practiced. A conversation never occurs.

If a graceful discourse is to occur, labeling must cease. We are not dealing with labels, we are talking to people. Forget their political party, their economic status, that they beat you in the last board election, that they are different – and remember that Jesus removes labels. So can we. Then we might be able to talk.

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