

## **Holy Manners: The Spiritual Politeness of Healthy Congregations.**

Excerpt from *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences* by Gilbert R. Rendle (1999: Alban Institute Publication)

“Wait! Stop the meeting!” We were about 30 minutes into a meeting of key congregational leaders that had begun without the minister, who was unexplainably absent. But here he was, storming in the door and waving a piece of paper over his head. “Wait! Stop the meeting,” he said, “and read this!” He handed me a letter from his lawyer which named one of the trustees of the church who was present at the meeting and instructed that he was no longer to set foot on the minister’s parsonage property (owned by the church) and was no longer to make any unsolicited phone calls to the parsonage at any time of the day. The letter identified the next legal steps that would be taken if the named trustee did not comply with the letter.

How is it that the minister turned to the strategy of talking with a problematic parishioner through his lawyer’s letter rather than face to face? Yet, this is not an isolated instance of difficult behavior in a congregation. For example, in another congregation the pastor made repeated attempts to deal with an aggrieved member who was working actively to have the pastor removed from leadership. Each time the pastor met that member face to face, however, he was greeted by a smile, pleasantries, and little or no hint of a problem. In another congregation, a governing board asked their consultant to present its report to a full meeting of the congregation. This was done to prevent the personal accusations and name calling that board members had experienced in the last several congregational meetings. And in yet another, four members of a 14-member governing board held clandestine meetings to which they did not invite the other board members, and during which they planned a strategy for ridding themselves of their clergy leader. Somehow they managed not to feel disloyal to the rest of the board members or to the congregation, which they represented. What sense can one make of a congregational member who sends in hundreds of dollars worth of unwanted magazine subscriptions filled out with the name and address of his or her clergy as an expression of anger with the leader? Besides being illegal, how is this different from the congregational member who won’t talk to another member because she’s “on the wrong side” of an issue, or the rabbi who won’t fulfill a public commitment he made to a capital fund campaign because he didn’t receive the salary increment that he felt was his due?

Perhaps most disconcerting is the fact that most readers will not be surprised to know that all of these are real examples from real congregations. Examples of uncivil behavior that fall outside the teaching of the faith are fairly common in the experience of too many congregational leaders – clergy and laity alike. These stories are disconcerting, to be sure, and ill behavior such as this, when encountered in the congregation, often makes members or leaders wonder why they have committed to

a faith community and if they should continue that commitment. Frequently, the experiences of uncivil behavior are more subtle or common than the examples above. It is more likely that members will be disturbed by unkind public comments overheard in the congregation, by the spreading of rumors and gossip; by the use of anonymous information to question the decisions and actions of leaders; by the public finger-pointing when something goes wrong; or by the attribution of negative, rather than positive, motives to someone's actions.

Should our congregations be different from these startling or common examples of uncivil behavior? Should we expect the behavior of members of faith communities to be more responsible, more caring and more faithful? The answer is definitely yes! In fact, helping our congregations to move toward more responsible and faithful behavior is a responsibility of the leaders in a congregation. Many of the people in our congregations, indeed, in many congregations, have "defaulted" to the behaviors of our culture and need to be called back to behaviors that belong to faith communities. Before we get to that point, however, it is important to understand the larger context in which this less-than-faithful behavior is happening in our congregations. What we experience as uncivil or irresponsible behavior in our congregations often has a history and an origin outside of the congregation. The examples shared at the beginning of the sections don't belong just to congregations. Similar things happen in neighborhoods, community meetings, businesses, banks, hospitals and friendships. It is part of a bigger picture.

## **The Shift from Group to Individual – A look at our culture**

People used to travel in groups. Unless one was wealthy, public travel was done in a coach, a bus, or a train full of strangers. According to Yale professor Stephen Carter, public transportation worked as well as it did, moving people from city to city as they bumped and jostled each other, because people understood their obligation to treat one another with regard as they traveled. "They purchased guides to proper behavior, like *Politeness on Railroads* by Isaac Peebles, and tried to follow its sensible rules: 'Whispering, loud talking, immoderate laughing, and singing should not be indulged by any passenger' was one."<sup>1</sup> Seeing oneself as part of a group lends itself to group behavior. One modifies his or her behavior to accommodate the needs of the group. It is quite civilized.

Today we travel in automobiles. And, as most urban planners will attest through their concerns about attracting riders to public transportation and their offering special "high occupancy vehicle" lanes reserved for car pools on city access highways, we most often travel alone. Or, surrounded as we are by the metal and glass bodies of our automobiles that are commonly air-conditioned or heated for seasonal seclusion, and accompanied by the music of our choosing, we at least have the illusion that we are traveling alone. When travel required that we see ourselves as a part of the group, we gave consideration to the group's needs. Now we believe that we travel alone, and we feel free to accommodate only ourselves and perhaps

the one other person riding with us. Consider the difference between Peebles' injunction not to talk, laugh, or sing on the railway in such a way as to bother other passengers, and the fairly common example of disregard for others shown by the lone driver whose care radio is so loud that it can be heard half a block away. The cars closest at the stoplight can actually feel the bass beat of the music hammering away with its vibrations. Traveling in groups seems to produce behavior respectful or group members, and the illusion of traveling alone seems to signal that is appropriate to behave as if only one's own needs and comfort require attention. Traveling alone also leads to competition among individuals in regard to personal needs or preferences. Someone I know very well, who often listens to classical music while driving, admits that when stopped at an intersection next to a car in which the driver is blasting rock music loud enough for the world to hear, she has the fantasy (more than once acted upon) of rolling down her own windows and turning her symphonic volume to its maximum in competition. Writes Carter, "If railroad passengers a century ago knew the journey would be impossible unless they considered the comfort of others more important than their own, our spreading illusion has taken the other direction."<sup>2</sup>

It seems that changing corporate or national perception of ourselves in relation to a group has an impact on our behavior. As we increasingly see ourselves as individuals, we seemingly practice civil behavior less and less. Carter defines civility as "the sum of the many sacrifices we are called to make for the sake of living together" and points out that the word civility shares with the words "civilized, civilization and city" an Indo-European root meaning "member of the household."<sup>3</sup> Our cultural shift toward individualism with its emphasis on personal autonomy reflects the belief that we live in a household with very few other members about whom we need to be concerned or whom we need to treat with caring behavior.

In fact, civility does seem to be getting squeezed in our time. We are increasingly recognized as the most litigious society on the globe, turning to lawsuits in order to right perceived wrongs even before we consider actual conversation between the aggrieved parties to see if something can be done to resolve the issue. Incivility has been practiced so much in the political arena and respect has been so stretched and worn between Republican and Democratic legislators that a Bipartisan Congressional Retreat was held in March 1997 for members of the House of Representatives with the stated purpose to rebuild civility in their working relationships. School boards and homeowner association in planned communities are increasingly forced to make decisions in response to confrontation and pressure groups rather than through proactive strategies to address planning and development.

This broad, cultural pattern is also influencing the way congregational leaders and members address and engage one another during times of change, when anxiety has risen. In fact, our congregations have often defaulted to the values and standards of community behavior in which the preferences of the individual is assumed to have priority over the needs or the preference of the community. How else can one

understand the behavior of the church leader who called a special meeting of the governing board for a day when the minister was scheduled to be out of town at a conference? She told the minister that the agenda for the meeting was a discussion of the plans for an upcoming Christmas celebration. But when the board members arrived, the sole agenda item was this woman's dissatisfaction with the minister and her wish for new clergy leadership.

How else can one understand the arrival of a handful of concerned members at a congregational meeting convened to decide changes in worship times who surprised everyone present with a signed petition in opposition of the proposal? The petition was accompanied by a long list of signatures that included many people who were inactive in the congregation, who had moved out of town or who were the children and relatives of the complainers. Most of the signers would not have known or cared about the changes had they not systematically been contacted by the small opposition group. The petition bearers had worked hard and secretly for several weeks to gather the names of sympathetic and loyal friends so that their preference would prevail. Although traveling alone is really an illusion, as Carter suggests, we nonetheless believe that we have the right and privilege to be the driver and to say what music we will play – and how loudly – on the trip.

## **Congregations Are Meant to be Different**

In communities of faith there is an alternative. As we've told the story so far, we have only looked at the cultural polarities of group versus individual, conformity versus autonomy. As our national story suggests, we have moved in the past few decades from a cultural time in which people were rewarded for living out of a group identity and in which conformity and stability were honored. It was a time of sameness. We have moved to a cultural time in which people are rewarded for living out of an individual identity in which personal preferences and personal autonomy are honored. It is a time of great difference. The world of "group" and the world of "individual" are competing domains with different identities, values, and assumptions that lead to very different daily behaviors. These two domains have historically formed a polarity in which one and then the other becomes dominant. Yet in the midst of this cyclical swing between conformity and personal freedom there is a third domain of living that people of faith can claim and to which they belong. And it is to this third domain that we now need to turn our attention as leaders of congregations.

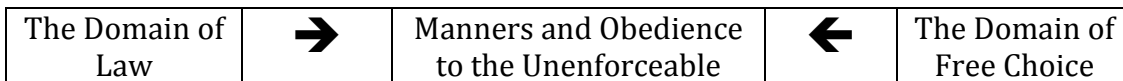
At a 1995 commencement address at Boston University, university president and philosopher John Silber quoted Lord John Fletcher Moulton, who described not two, but three domains of human interaction:

Seventy-five year ago ... Lord Moulton, a noted English judge, spoke on the subject of "Law and Manners." He divided human action into three domains. The first is the domain of law, "where," he said, "our actions are prescribed

by laws binding upon us which must be obeyed.” At the other extreme is the domain of free choice, “which,” he said, “includes all those actions as to which we claim and enjoy complete freedom.” And in between, Lord Moulton identified a domain in which our action is not determined by law but in which we are not free to behave in any way we choose ...

Lord Moulton considered the area of action lying between law and pure personal preference to be “the domain of obedience to the unenforceable.” In this domain, he said, “obedience is the obedience of a man to that which he cannot be forced to obey. He is the enforcer of the law upon himself.” This domain between law and free choice he called that of Manners. While it may include moral duty, social responsibility, and proper behavior, it extends beyond them to cover “all cases of doing right where there is no one to make you do it but yourself.”<sup>4</sup>

These three domains of life compete with one another for our attention and allegiance. In their competition one domain seeks to minimize the other. A simple graphic of this experience might look something like the following:



It is no wonder that the middle domain – of manners and obedience to the unenforceable – is often minimized or recessive while the dominant domains of law and free choice battle with each other publicly in a democracy. In the argument over large social issues the two dominant forces of law and free choice stretch themselves in order to capture more attention and authority in the battle for control. For instance, in an issue such as abortion some would seek to write new laws in order to legislate correct behavior (the domain of law), while others resist such laws, insisting that a woman’s body is under her own control (the domain of free choice). In an issue such as education some argue for the mandatory wearing of public school uniforms (the domain of law) as a way of providing focus for children’s attention on the disciplines of learning, while others argue that the choice of baggy pants, purple hair, or body piercing, or the choice of wearing a jacket and tie (the domain of free choice) supports the development of peer identity and self – worth. Rarely in this ongoing argument between these two dominant domains is the softer voice of manners, or moral behavior, heard. Yet, it is this middle area of moral behavior or manners in which Lord Moulton would insist on some behaviors being practiced simply because people are able to discern right from wrong in conduct. It is this softer voice of obedience to the unenforceable which argues that some behaviors are to be practiced and some disciplines followed simply because they are the right thing to do (the moral, the ethical, the civil), even though they are unenforceable. The domain of obedience to the unenforceable is that area of our lives where we act not because we are forced to (the domain of law) and not because we have the freedom not to (the domain of free choice), but because we

understand that it is right to do, and so we discipline ourselves to do so. This third domain of manners or moral behavior is a primary one in which congregations live and from which they offer membership to other people who share both their faith and values. As communities that base their lives on shared beliefs and values, congregations can, and should, expect members to practice behaviors of this middle territory as a condition of membership in the faith community.

It is the domain of obedience to the unenforceable, the middle territory between law and free choice, between conformity to the group (the norms or laws of society) and autonomy of the individual, to which congregations can lay claim. In fact, this middle territory is the province of denominations or movements that historically have developed special disciplines of behavior intended to be practiced as daily acts of faith, both among members and within the larger community. This area of life is not minimized when Lord Moulton refers to it as “manners.” For Moulton, manners refer not only to being polite in social settings. Manners also have a moral content and include practices or behaviors based on the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. As Carter states, “Perhaps how we treat other people does matter; and, if so, then following rules that require us to treat other people with genuine respect surely is morally superior to not following them.”<sup>5</sup>

Moral behavior is not necessarily defined by the domain of law, where people follow the rules because the rules are enforced. Many people don’t take the risk of parking in a handicapped parking space, not because it will inconvenience handicapped persons if the space is filled, but because there is a law against it and a fine for being caught. Living in the domain of law is necessary to civilized life because it provides order in those areas of living that need to be shared and where we need to accommodate all; however, simply following the laws that are imposed on all people is not necessarily moral. In fact, some laws are of questionable moral character, as can be attested to by examples that once permitted different treatment of persons because of race or gender.

Nor is the domain of free choice necessarily an area of moral life. Individuals are free to assert their own rights and choices even when their choices diminish the choices of others, such as when exercising the right to smoke in non-restricted places, even though doing so has negative health effects on nonsmokers.

It is in the domain of obedience to the unenforceable, the realm of manners, that faith communities can claim a special space to practice behaviors that conform to and evidence their beliefs and values about what is moral. It is the area of life in which we are required to behave in certain prescribed ways, but not because it is required by law and that a failure to comply will be punished. It is also the area of life in which we are not free to disregard certain prescribed ways simply because we can exercise our personal preferences. The domain of obedience to the unenforceable is the area of our lives of faith in which we submit to certain ways of living because we hold membership in a faith community that rests on beliefs and values that prescribe such behavior. Simply speaking, this is the area of life in which

we do certain things because we understand, according to our faith, that they are right to do. Moral and mannered behavior is the responsibility of the civilized person. Moral and mannered behavior is the responsibility of the moral person. And in the case of the congregation, moral and mannered behavior among its members is certainly the responsibility of the person of faith. As Carter states, “... The freedom that humans possess is not the freedom to do what we like, but the freedom to do what is right.”<sup>6</sup>

It is here that congregations possess so many lessons of our faith tradition which are meant to guide the behaviors of our members. The teachings of our faith traditions are a part of the unenforceable domain because they are not public laws that can be enforced. And yet, because of our membership in the faith community, we are not free to disregard them. Unlike laws or rigid rules that, once broken, will result in punishment, the manners of faith are to be found in covenants or promises to practice behaviors grounded in the teachings of the congregation.

For example, Peter asked Jesus how often he should forgive another person who has sinned against him and the answer was, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times” (Matt. 18:22). In our congregations and in our community life we are not required by law or by denominational rules to forgive without end. (Seventy-seven times, however, seems to be a number sufficiently large for us to lose count of the number of times we forgive, suggesting that our forgiveness should be without end.) But neither are we free *not* to forgive others. Learning how to forgive and to risk practicing forgiveness are behaviors that should be grounded in the faith community and belong to the domain of obedience to the unenforceable. We are to do it simply because it is right to do.

For example, the injunction of the Golden Rule in the Old Testament to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18) and the New Testament counterpart that “in everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12) are not legal statutes. As members of congregations we are not required by law to obey these commands and to love others, but as members of congregations we are also not free to disregard them and behave unlovingly towards others. We love others as we would love ourselves, simply because it is right to do and because it is a discipline of our faith. Loving others is not always an easy discipline to understand or practice. And certainly people of faith do not practice it because it is understood or practiced in the greater community outside the congregation.

Congregations as faith communities need to be able to depend on the practice of obedience to the unenforceable as a context for the shared practice of faith that binds our members together. We do not have faith nor do we practice the disciples of our faith alone. We live our faith in the context of community and necessarily see ourselves as a part of a group that shares this faith despite the cultural inclination towards individualism. The values and behaviors of the faith community often stand in contrast to and, at times, stand against the values and behaviors of the culture. Claiming to be different from our culture, we should not accept insensitive,

uncaring, or irresponsible behavior in our congregations, even during anxious times of change when differences are most pronounced.

## **Leaders Need to Introduce Civility (Holy Manners) to their Congregations**

To that extent, congregations need the direction and guidance of their leaders to help them reclaim the midground of the domain of obedience to the unenforceable. Much of the conversation today between the domain of law and the domain of free choice is debate, not dialogue. There is much talking and directing, but little listening or learning. People are debating competitively and fiercely with one another in order to find ways to win. The controversy between Republicans and Democrats is often uncivil because the two sides do not seek to listen and learn from one another but rather to defeat one another in a struggle for votes representing the power and control to set preferred policies. The wrestling over the ordination of gays and the performance of same-sex union ceremonies has often been uncivil because the polarized sides to the argument have sought to defeat the opposition rather than respond with love to others who experience their faith differently.

These are chaotic times in which differences flourish. In spiritual terms it may be more appropriate to say that we are living in a time in which God is doing something new. Again. These chaotic times are somewhat a wilderness experience in which we may feel assured that there is a promised land toward which we can head, but we are not sure of the path by which to get there. For example, it is not always clear what decision to make about abortion or euthanasia because we live in the new territory of a medical science that offers us more control and more options (and therefore more decisions) than ever before. The fact that we have developed a new discipline called biomedical ethics tells us that this is uncharted wilderness in which answers cannot always be clear because questions cannot always be posed in clear ways. Similarly, it is not always clear what decisions to make in our congregations about the way we worship. In many congregations, applauding for our children when they sing in worship will often feel to one generation as an offence to the formality of a tradition that quietly honors the presence of God, while not applauding will feel to another generation like missing an opportunity to affirm that God will accept and love us as we are, apart from traditional formalities and pressure to conform.

The time of the wilderness will always be hard on leaders because it will appear that there are multiple paths that can be followed. And the group or congregation will want clear decisions for the leaders about which path is the best. However, when the time of the wilderness is also a time in which individual autonomy is honored, as it is in our day, each and every potential path that the congregation can take will be championed by individuals who will want to follow it as a matter of personal preference. Some people want to applaud in worship; other do not. Some people want to sing praise songs in worship; others will insist on well-known, traditional



hymns. When the priest, rabbi, or minister preaches, some people will want to be educated and will hear with their minds; other will insist upon being inspired and will listen with their hearts. In the current wilderness, whatever the possible paths, the steps leaders choose to take will be evaluated by each individual according to whether or not they conform to the preferences of that individual.

The proper response of leaders in communities of faith is to hold people steady in their own faith and ask, “How shall we live together in the wilderness? What promises, covenants, behaviors will we offer to one another and to God while we live, search, and experiment together in this wilderness?” It is futile for leaders to search for problem-fixing answers during a complex and chaotic time. Rather, they must seek ways to live together in the wilderness. The practice of loving, civil behavior in our congregations is a central mark of faithfulness for a community in the midst of any change that comes with exile, wilderness or just simple differences of opinion.

## **How do leaders do it?**

This is where the “rubber meets the road,” as the old tire commercial used to say. It is the difficult task of application or performance. It is one thing to understand that we are in the midst of a cultural shift of values, assumptions, and behaviors. It is one thing to recognize that faith communities have the resources and the requirements to behave with informed care and with uninterrupted love despite the fact that this would require practices significantly different from the culture. It is quite another thing, however, to behave differently as a people of faith who live with one foot in the congregation and another foot in a culture that regularly competes for their attention.

In the present wilderness, clergy and lay leaders alike need to stand side by side and support one another in the practice of “holy manners” – the obedience to the unenforceable within the faith community based on shared faith and values – in real and practical ways. They need to remind one another to practice behaviors that clearly announce that rumors and innuendo are not the ways to communicate concerns or disappointments, but that the people of congregations speak openly and face to face about their hopes and disappointments. They need to remind one another to practice behaviors which clearly announce that building a consensus does not mean making everyone happy, nor is it an opportunity for one side to win. People of congregations listen to one another in order to come to agreements that reflect the purpose of their life together. Because we live in a time in which incivility can break out at any moment as individuals sense and push for personal preferences, leaders need to step out and lead. Spiritual covenants (behavioral agreements) need to be identified and practiced in the congregations so that the domain of holy manners – obedience to the unenforceable – is reclaimed by people of faith. It is a primary task of spiritual leadership, by clergy and laity alike, in congregations.

This essay is a summary of the introduction and initial chapters of *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences* by Gil Rendle. Permission is granted for purchasers of this book to reproduce this resource, provided copies are for local use only and that each copy carries the following notice: Reprinted by permission from the Alban Institute from *Behavioral Covenants for Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences*, © 1999 The Alban Institute, Inc.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 15.

<sup>4</sup> John Silber, "Obedience to the Unenforceable," *Bostonian* (Summer 1995): 50.

<sup>5</sup> Carter, *Civility*, 35.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.