

We once again find ourselves living through yet another raucous, contentious, highly polarized election season. My sense is that the vast majority of us are exceptionally weary of this kind of political rhetoric. Weary of the so-called “culture war” that tries to pit supposedly “Christian values” against everyone and everything else. Truly, what do those of us who find ourselves at neither extreme do when political machinations are desperately trying to define our morals *for us* rather than creating space for us to debate what morals will guide our nation forward? My colleague in ministry James Calvin Davis (no I do not know him personally), Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Hudson Falls, NY (P.C.U.S.A.) offers insight, wisdom, and practical ways forward in his book In Defense of Civility. I’ll walk you all through it for the remainder of this season.

The first priority for Davis is wresting control of the “moral” agenda away from politically conservative, fundamentalist “Christians”. He says point blank that “this book challenges that widely held assumption that moral values are the exclusive domain of conservatives ... [and] explores what it means to hold moral values, in order to uncover the shared concerns that lie beneath some of our most intractable differences”.<sup>1</sup> To do this, Davis needs to expand our definition of what a moral value is. He contends that “there is more to moral values ... than just *conservative evangelical* moral values”.<sup>2</sup> This contention stems from the reality that all major religions understand that “you do not have to be religious to be a moral person”.<sup>3</sup> Christianity recognizes a natural human capacity for morality endowed by God manifesting itself as reason, conscience, or natural law. Judaism recognizes a natural capacity for moral achievement. Islam explains non-Muslim morality thereby recognizing it as a universal capability. If not limited in scope to conservative evangelical moral values, what then are moral values?

“Moral values, then, are convictions about what we ought to do and be, as persons and communities. They emerge out of our understanding of the ‘meaning of life,’ out of our worldviews.”<sup>4</sup> Thus moral values can be discussed as virtues, such as compassion or peace or love, thereby greatly broadening the conversation beyond the scope of political issues. Virtues *inform* our politics, not the other way around. As convictions about what we ought to do, and be, moral values do not need to be *exclusively* identified in the negative; as restrictive or what we are *not* allowed to do. While it is important to state what we should avoid, it is equally important for a healthy moral perspective to include what is commendable to *do*. The Bible has the Ten Commandments; our “thou shalt not’s”. The Bible also has the Beatitudes; our “thou shalt do’s”. Further Davis makes the point that, as convictions about what we ought to do and be, moral values extend beyond our private lives into the public square as we discern how to be with *one another*. Davis then summarizes: “As the convictions that guide us to ‘do what we ought to do and be who ought to be,’ moral values can be conservative or progressive, rules or character traits, absolute or a bit more pliable, negative but also positive, private but also public scope”.<sup>5</sup>

Why is this so important, this expansion and broadening of what moral values are? Davis contends that this will enable us to get beyond the culture wars that so grievously divide us. Why is it so important to overcome our divisions and work towards unity? Jesus tells us that “a house divided against itself cannot stand”. Davis believes that “recognizing that a defense of ‘moral values’ is at

---

<sup>1</sup> Davis, James Calvin. In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues That Divide Us. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY; 2010. p x.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p 15.

work in our opponents' position undermines the temptation to demonize them as amoral or immoral, and instead encourages us to approach the 'moral values' debate as a shared responsibility to embrace meaningful dialogue."<sup>6</sup> In other words, understanding that everyone is driven by a moral code, a worldview, takes the word "enemy" out of our vocabulary. "Opponent" certainly still stands and is valid, but an opponent is not necessarily an enemy. "Competition" is valid, but a competitor is not an enemy. Expanding our understanding of what moral values are takes us out of the realm of existential threat and back into the realm of everyday life and improving that everyday life for everyone. Perhaps most importantly for our polarized times Davis believes that "expanding our understanding of moral values take the power to define the conversation away from the extremes and energizes the moderate majority to see their contributions to public debate as important."<sup>7</sup> And gosh wouldn't we all like to feel that our contributions are important?

---

<sup>6</sup> Davis, James Calvin. In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues That Divide Us. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY; 2010. p 17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p 17.