

Column

As we begin a new year, it might be a good time to ask: What is the greatest threat to civilization? In the 1940s it was Hitler and the Nazi war machine? Following the Second War, it was the threat of Communism and nuclear war. Fallout shelters and civil defence preparedness were all the rage.

Today, instead of there being just one, threats seem to be everywhere. The ones that come to mind include: the breakdown of the home and family, the possibility of cyber-attacks by rogue nations and, now, again in the forefront of everyone's attention, mass shootings in public places around the country.

To these three, let me add a fourth. It may well be the most serious of all. I am thinking of the disappearance of reasoned public discourse. Be it gun control, abortion or boarder protection, real meaningful dialogue no longer seems possible. On the television news channels, no less than in the halls of government, people don't talk to each other: they talk *over* them.

More maddening still, when hot-button issues are being discussed, the spokesman will turn from making the case for one side or the other to attempting to discredit his opponent. Out from the closet will come such pejorative epitaphs as bigot, racist, socialist or fascist.

Once this happens, the conversation is over. Everyone may as well get up and go home. For dialogue to continue, someone needs to stand up and say: Stop, the terms of engagement must be reset before this conversation can go forward. Sadly, I don't recall this happening very often.

This below-the-belt technique of labelling and calling people names is nothing new. We find it going on in Bible times. The Judean religious leaders, instead of attacking Jesus' teachings head on, often resorted to calling Him a Samaritan, one possessed with a devil or one who was unlearned.

What about Christians today? How should we respond to this crisis which threatens civilised society? Three suggestions come to mind:

First, Christians should stay clear of this practice of assigning demeaning and unfair

epitaphs to opponents. Instead, they should practice speaking the truth. Argue forcefully and persuasively, by all means, but stay clear of unfair and mean-spirited name calling.

Secondly, Christians should call out others, especially those in public service, who transgress this canon of right behaviour.

Thirdly, Christians should model civility in discourse, which includes listening to the other's points of view. In so doing, points of convergence may well be found which can be used to move beyond an impasse.

Can you think of others?

Threats from without and within abound. Where do we begin in tackling these threats? Why not with working towards restoring meaningful and civil dialogue?

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given us this good land for our heritage; We humbly beseech thee that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of thy favour and glad to do thy will. Bless our land with honourable industry, sound

learning, and pure manners. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogancy, and from every evil way. Defend our liberties, and fashion into one united people the multitudes brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues. Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to whom in thy Name we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that, through obedience to thy law, we may show forth thy praise among the nations of the earth. In the time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail; all which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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