

"Civics Class for Christians"

Matthew 7:12-23

July 5, 2020

North UMC

This week, I read the Indiana Department of Education's academic standards for teaching United States government. Here are some of my personal favorites:

- USG 2.6 "Explain how a shared American civic identity is based on commitment to foundational ideas in Founding Era documents and how it has changed through subsequent periods of United States history to present day."
- USG 2.8 "Explain the history and provide historical and contemporary examples of fundamental principles and values of American political and civic life, including liberty, security, the common good, justice, equality, law and order, rights of individuals, diversity, popular sovereignty, and representative democracy."
- USG 4.5 "Analyze powers the United States Constitution gives to the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government in the area of foreign affairs."
- USG 5.8 "Describe opportunities available to individuals to contribute to the well-being of their communities and participate responsibly in the political process at local, state and national levels of government."

These standards were crafted in 2014 and were updated this year. One of the updates was to standard 1.4: "Compare and contrast types of government including representative democracy, monarchy, oligarchy, totalitarianism, and anarchy." They added "anarchy" to the list of topics to be taught. As of July 1, social studies teachers must include anarchy in their lessons.

A word of caution to all social studies teachers: Do not teach anarchy as a practicum in your classrooms!

GOLDEN RULE VIRTUES

The standard for a Christian civics course is the Golden Rule: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you." In everything—including how we act in our civic life and how we conduct our political affairs—do to others as you would have them do to you.

In these partisan and anxious days, we Christians are in desperate need of a refresher course in civics. And the cornerstone of that lesson is the Golden Rule.

Why is the Golden Rule the cornerstone of Christian teaching on politics and civic life? It is not because it is the unique feature of Christian teaching. In fact, it is the opposite. The Golden Rule is the least distinctive, the most universal ethical principle. We see the Golden Rule in all other religions—from Islam to Hinduism—and in non-religious ethical systems.

It is precisely because we share this teaching with non-Christians that it should be the cornerstone of Christian engagement in civic life. The Golden Rule is the common ground we share with others for the promotion of the common good. Practicing the Golden Rule is the basis for creating what is good for all people.

What is unique and distinctive about Christian ethics is not the teachings of Jesus, but the spirituality of Christ that empowers and guides our implementation of those teachings, which are universal. Yale theologian Miroslav Volf wrote, “I want to make Christian communities more comfortable with being just one of many players from whatever place they find themselves—on the margins, at the center, or anywhere in between—they can promote human flourishing and the common good.” We promote the common good when we enact the Golden Rule through the Spirit of Christ alongside others.

We need a Golden Rule Politics. A Golden Rule Politics is necessary for democracy. A democratic society is dependent upon all citizens acting virtuously. Virtues include respect for others, truth-telling, trustworthiness, and other basic virtuous characteristics summarized in that simple principle of the Golden Rule. We support democracy not because it helps us as Christians, but because as Christians we believe in doing unto others in our civic life as we would want them to do to us if we were in the minority in our culture. Virtue is the oil with which the engine of democracy runs.

In contrast, other political systems do not run on virtue but are dependent on vices. Autocratic governments depend on their citizens to tolerate and practice vices of ignoring the rights of others, disrespecting others, lying about their fellow citizens, tolerating corruption and unequal application of the law. Dictatorships never work simply because there is a strong man in office. The dictator needs other subordinate leaders to carry out his vision, government employees to tolerate corruption, and ordinary citizens going along with it. A clear and disturbing example of this is in the 2006 German film *The Lives of Others*. It depicts how the Stasi, the secret police of communist East Germany, in the 1980s spied on a playwright. Vice is the oil of the engine of autocracy.

Golden Rule Politics is a set of virtues that promote the common good.

The Golden Rule is easier said than done because it goes against the grain of our current society. Jesus said about the Golden Rule that it is like entering a narrow gate, “for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction and there are many who take it.” The wide gate in American politics today is one of meanness. The road of destruction is treating your opponents with disrespect and name calling. Over time, the politics of meanness tears down the common good of democracy.

Why are we so tempted to practice such meanness? There is power in being mean. There is also a sense of rightness. Our opponents are wrong and we are so bothered by how they are hurting the common good that we feel justified in “fighting fire with fire.” And so, in the case of demonstrations and protest, we can and should engage in acts of civil dissent, but we must do so with the virtues of the Gold Rule Politics.

GOLDEN RULE VISION

The Golden Rule is not just about personal virtues, it is also a public vision. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you is the basis for human rights. As Christians who engage in civil life based on the Golden Rule, we are united in upholding the rights of all people. The vision of Golden Rule politics defends the rights of children, of women, of immigrants, of workers, of native peoples, people of color, persons with disabilities, of sexual orientation and gender identity, of other religions. We may never be united on specific strategies and policies, we may never be united in doctrine or theology or liturgy, but can we not find common ground among Christians on upholding the basic human rights of all persons who are created in the image of God?

In a democratic society, one cannot affirm human rights without including two other essential rights that undergird civil liberty and civic participation. First, there must be full access to voting. We must make voting available to all adults and provide practical and efficient forms of voting that mitigate all attempts at voter suppression.

Second, universal public education is the other cornerstone of a democratic society. Education is necessary for accessing democratic process. Sufficient funding and competent administration of public education is essential for our democracy. Without an education, a citizen cannot effectively participate in the democratic process. In 2015, IU and the Indiana Bar Foundation issued a “Civic Health Index” which measured various factors for promoting or inhibiting the well-being of civic life in the state. It showed that educational achievement is one of the biggest factors in promoting civic participation. For example, 28.5% of Hoosiers with less than a high school education vote, whereas 53.7% of those with a high school diploma vote. Without an education, our democratic society is vulnerable to attack by autocratic forces that is fueled by ignorance and intolerance.

The commitment to human rights is complemented with a commitment to compassion for the most vulnerable citizens in our society. Golden Rule Politics works toward creating not only a fair society but a compassionate society. A compassionate society includes public policy but also goes beyond the role of government to mobilizing all elements in society to care for those who are most vulnerable—children, immigrants, the poor, the elderly, the disabled.

The vision of a compassionate society demands that we evaluate public policies and private initiatives based on what they accomplish rather than what they claim. There are many government programs that claim to help the vulnerable but they hampered by bureaucracies. There are many private initiatives that claim to help the vulnerable but they do not solve the systemic issues. These efforts “work in theory” but mask our ineffectiveness.

Instead, a Golden Rule Politics does not care about ideological purity or aspirational policy. It measures the vision by what it accomplishes. Jesus said, “you will know them by their fruits.” In recent years, programs to help the poor are being measured by “evidence-based outcomes”—“you will know them by their fruits” regardless of their political identity or party.

These rights and responsibility are not liberal or conservative beliefs, they are not Republican or Democrat policies. They are the common vision of a Golden Rule Politics.

However, Christianity is not compatible with any and all political expressions. The vision of a Golden Rule Politics rejects the Alt Right and its perversion of the faith by the Christian Identity Movement. The Christian Identity Movement is the religious expression of the Ku Klux Klan and Neo Nazis. It claims that all non-whites will either be exterminated or enslaved in order to serve the white race in the new Heavenly Kingdom on Earth under the reign of Jesus Christ.

It is a heresy. It is the idolatry of the racial identity of whiteness. It violates the basic Christian affirmation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of all people.

And yet, perversely proponents of it will say they believe in the Golden Rule. We must remember that the Golden Rule is not a watered down and vacuous religious sentiment. The Golden Rule is not an empty concept into which we can pour our ideologies of hate or greed. The Golden Rule is ‘the law and the prophets.’ It is a summation, a short-hand way of affirming the challenging, convicting commands of

our Jewish heritage in the law which says, “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” And the Hebrew prophets which said, “They abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain...But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

The vision of Golden Rule Politics is not a vague, utopian pipe dream. It is a vision lived out in detail in the inner workings and concrete hopes of a democratic society.

GOLDEN RULE COMMON GROUND

The Christian Identity Movement is not the same as the Religious Right. It must be noted that there are persons and organizations of the Religious Right that denounce this racist heresy, especially traditionalists in the United Methodist Church.

Clearly, the Religious Right has been a major influence in American politics over the past forty years. It has been so influential that pollsters have a demographic category, “white evangelical voters,” and even the word “Christian” is equated with their particular stance on key issues such as abortion and marriage.

Those who are opposed to this political agenda has promoted the idea that what America needs is a Religious Left political movement. They say that to counterbalance the Religious Right that progressive Christians need to get organized, use the same strategies and make their voices heard.

America does not need a Religious Left. Even if the Religious Right is on the cusp of being eclipsed in history, the last thing America needs is for the pendulum to swing in the opposite direction with a new demographic category for pollsters and pundits. It is not that I disagree with many of the specific policy positions of progressives, for my politics that spring from my faith is in the tradition of Debs and FDR.

However, we need a new way altogether for all Christians to participate and bear witness to our faith in our democracy. “Christian” must become a pan-political identity marked by a shared practice of virtues and a vision for the common good that accommodates our deep differences on specific policies. In short, Christians need to be known for those who practice Golden Rule Politics.

And so, if you are a Republican be a Christian Republican. If you are a Democrat be a Christian Democrat. An Independent—an Christian Independent; a Libertarian—a Christian Libertarian; a Democratic Socialist—Christian Democratic Socialist. For we called to be the salt of the earth in all parts of civic life. But “Christian” comes first in every label. They will know a new form of Christian politics that is marked by virtuous character and a vision of human rights and compassion. It will be a new form of Christian politics that is as old as the Golden Rule.