

Opinion: A lesson in civility

By Cal Thomas

When one writes about moral convictions, it's probably a good idea to consistently live up to them. That way people can still disagree with your convictions, but they have a difficult time accusing you of hypocrisy.

Earlier this month at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington, I failed to live up to one of my highest principles. Here's the background. The story about the Obama administration's attempt to force Catholic and other faith-based institutions to offer employees free contraception in their health care coverage was still fresh. I was asked to be on a panel before what looked like a crowd of about 1,000 conservatives, hungry for "red meat."



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A clip was played from Rachel Maddow's MSNBC program. It featured her commenting on the subject. I stupidly said before thinking, "I think she's the best argument in favor of her parents using contraception." I then added, "and all the rest of the crowd at MSNBC, too, for that matter."

It didn't matter that far worse things have been said in print and on TV about me. I am not supposed to behave like that. I co-wrote a book with my liberal Democratic friend, Bob Beckel, called "Common Ground: How to Stop the Partisan War That is Destroying America." We also write a column together for USA

Today. One of the principles in which I believe is not to engage in name-calling; which, to my shame, I did.

The next morning I felt bad about it, so I called Ms. Maddow to apologize. It wasn't one of those meaningless "if I've offended anyone..." apologies; it was heartfelt. I had embarrassed myself and was a bad example to those who read my column and expect better from me.

Maddow could not have been more gracious. She immediately accepted my apology. On her show she said publicly, "I completely believe his apology. I completely accept his apology." To be forgiven by one you have wronged is a blessing, it's even cleansing.

Politics has always been a contact sport. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams went at each other like the worst of enemies, using some of the most outrageous and slanderous language. I don't have bona fides equal to their founding of America, so there is nothing of similar magnitude on which I can fall back.

Maddow also accepted my invitation to lunch and we will soon meet in New York. I am looking forward to it. Since the incident, which, of course, garnered a mini-tornado of media and blogosphere coverage, I have watched a couple of her shows. Without engaging in any qualifiers, she is a strong and competent advocate for her position. Why do so many of us only watch programs that reinforce what we already believe? Where is the growth in that? Whatever else she may or may not be, she is my fellow American.

I have many liberal friends acquired over the years. They are impossible to avoid in the media, but I don't wish to avoid them. They became my friends because I stopped seeing them as labels and began seeing them as persons with innate worth. That is what I failed to do in my first response to Rachel Maddow. One might expect a pro-lifer like me to support the birth of fellow human beings and not suggest they should never

have been born.

I expect to like Rachel Maddow because my instinct is to separate the value of a person from his or her political position. For some strange reason (demon possession, perhaps) I failed to do that at CPAC.

So, apology delivered and accepted and lunch will soon be served. I'm trying to decide whose career might be hurt more should someone take a picture of us enjoying a meal and –it is to be hoped, at least by me – each other.

Cal Thomas is co-author with Bob Beckel of "Common Ground: How to Stop the Partisan War That is Destroying America".