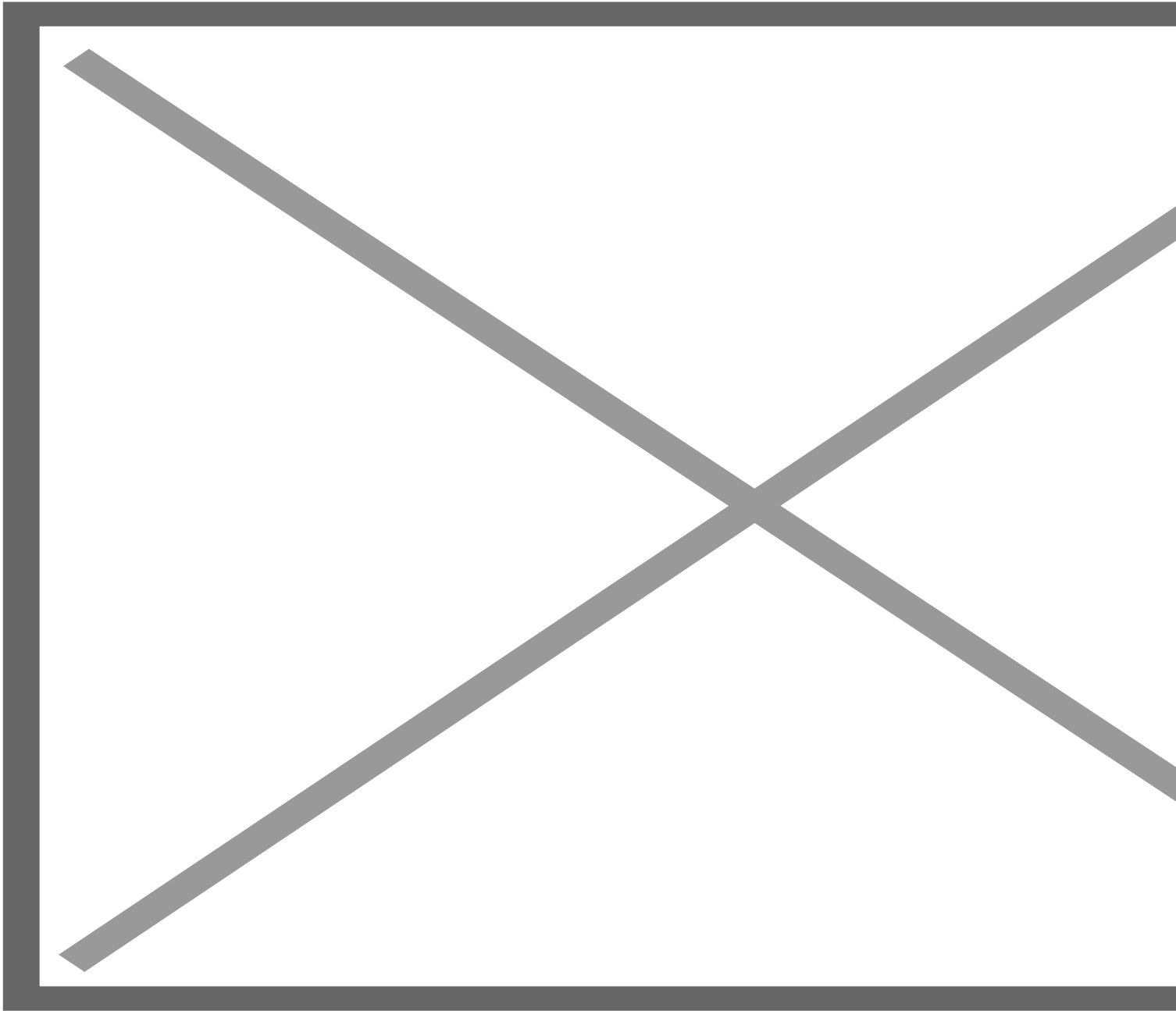


Refusing the rituals of cancel culture

Christians are called to pursue accountability through restoration—not exclusion.

by [Brandon Ambrosino](#)

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Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

Last week, actor Shia LaBeouf allegedly got into a verbal and physical altercation in New Orleans outside of a bar. One man, Jeffrey Damnit, told *People* the actor “jumped at him and struck him,” and also “punched a bartender in the face.” (LaBeouf told police he did not touch anybody during the exchange; however, [video footage](#) appears to show him attempting to hit someone.) Damnit also alleged that LaBeouf used the slur “faggot” several times.

This event came on the heels of another episode featuring a well-known figure caught using a slur. After Nicole Curtis, star of HGTV’s *Rehab Addict*, was heard on camera shouting the n-word, the television station not only canceled her show but scrubbed it from all platforms.

The respective responses from the two figures couldn’t have been more different. Curtis said that she was “filled with remorse and regret” and also [suggested](#) that a blackmailing scheme lay behind the ordeal. LaBeouf, meanwhile, was [seen](#) dancing on Bourbon Street hours after his arrest with his release papers in his mouth. The next morning, he posted the words “Free me” on Instagram. Whether and how this particular episode will affect his career remains to be seen. Both Curtis and LaBeouf enjoy a fair amount of privilege, and I imagine both will end up on their feet. Regardless, the desire for cancellation concerns me.

Part of the trouble with discussing cancel culture consists in defining it. A recent [Pew survey](#) shows that public definitions range from “actions taken to hold others accountable” to “mean-spirited actions taken to harm others.” But we don’t have to agree on a concise definition to admit that many of us delight in the cultural pastime of making people go away in the aftermath of their mistakes. The unbridled glee with which we pursue others’ downfall is what I refer to as “cancel culture.”

To be sure, cancel culture isn’t practiced simply by one political side. People across the political spectrum have long tried to cancel authors and celebrities and unknown social media users. But Christians ought not participate in cancellation practices, and the reason is very simple: God does not cancel us, so we should not cancel others. On the cross of Jesus, God cancels the canceling powers that seek to destroy human community. And on Easter Sunday, God proves once and for all what a waste it is to cancel anyone, because he has the power and the will to bring back the canceled.

While Curtis and LaBeouf responded differently to being caught, the public response has been very similar. There’s a script for these things. When someone, especially a public figure, does something cancelable, we rally together and work to make things very bad for them, and we typically don’t stop until they’ve gone away. We are eager to demand that people do better; we’re even more eager to not give them the opportunity to do so.

Think, for example, of [the recent BAFTA episode](#). When John Davidson, who suffers from Tourette’s Syndrome and coprolalia, shouted the n-word while Black actors Michael B. Jordan and Delroy Lindo were on stage presenting an award, the public condemnation was swift. Actor Jamie Foxx claimed that Davidson “meant it.” Other figures claimed that the reason for Davidson’s outburst (a neurological disorder) didn’t ultimately matter. What mattered, some argued, was that people were harmed. Eventually, some activists, including some Black people with Tourette’s and coprolalia, tried to educate Davidson’s critics about the involuntary nature of tics and outbursts. But rather than abandon the call for cancellation, those invested in this debate just redirected their anger from Davidson to BAFTA and the BBC. The desire to cancel *someone* seemed insatiable, aimless rage in search of a target.

To be sure, slurs have the power to break people. By the time I learned that the word “faggot” meant boys like me, I’d already experienced its force thousands of times. Times are different now. If someone is going to use that word, we reason, then they should face consequences. It’s not like we’re sending them to prison. It’s not like we’re physically hurting them. So they lose their job. So they have to find other ways to pay their bills. So they

suffer reputational damage. They're the ones who so effortlessly deployed a term meant to degrade an entire group of people. If being canceled is the worst that happens to them, then so be it.

Perhaps some of these reasons are valid, especially for companies. It certainly makes good business sense to distance your brand from a public figure who acted so egregiously in contrast to your brand's values. But the gospel has never made good business sense.

Christians are not protecting a brand—we're building a kingdom. And this kingdom, whether we like it or not, makes room for those people that the forces of American empire seek to cancel. I am not suggesting we give everyone *carte blanche* to degrade or harm one another. We can and should hold people accountable for their wounding words and actions. But accountability is not served by cancellation.

For Christians, accountability should aim at wholeness, not exclusion. Jesus tells us not to give up on lost coins and lost sheep—even if, as in the case of the sheep, it might be their own fault that they went missing. God doesn't want us to redefine our group boundaries when our members push us away with their words or actions. What God wants us to do is to embrace these folks so fully that, being reminded of the liberating force of God's love, they may eventually come to embrace us back with the very hands they at first used to wound us. The first step to holding someone accountable for their wrong actions is to *count* them, to remind them, "You are one of us and that will not change. Now let's get to doing the difficult work of repairing our relationship." Cancellation reproduces the carceral logic of the state to convince people to change—but Christians believe people can experience conversion without first being made to experience exclusion.

I have, I'm sorry to admit, sometimes joined internet mobs in calling for someone's cancellation. Looking back, I wonder what I gained. Some kind of satisfaction, probably. Not everything that offends us can be adjudicated in a court of law; cancellation gives us the opportunity to take matters into our own hands. Let that be a lesson to others! And what was the lesson? That there are [people](#) who don't deserve jobs? People who deserve to be hated so long as their names can be googled? That, even as we mobilize against the structures of incarceration that tear apart our communities, we reserve the right to decide whose lives ought to be ruined? We are all, as Bryan Stevenson reminds us, more than what we've done in our worst moments. Does this hold true only for incarcerated people on death row?

I think cancel culture is a bad idea for anyone to participate in, regardless of their faith commitments, but there is no way that Christians can bear witness to God's Kingdom while participating in the rituals of cancellation. Our loyalty is to a different kind of world, a world ruled by a God whose unwavering loyalty is to us—all of us. God bears responsibility for his entire creation, warts and slurs and all, and then commands his ambassadors to imitate him. Cancel culture is our refusal to take responsibility for the bad actors in our midst. But if "forgiveness" means anything, it is that God refuses to refuse anyone in this way.

As Rowan Williams points out in *Why Study The Past?*, Christian history is an "exposition of martyrdom," where "martyr" means witness. In every age, Williams says, Christians are tasked with wondering what it means to live "as an assembly answerable to the emperor's Lord rather than just the emperor." This witness sometimes meant execution, which bore witness to the martyr's belief that "the legitimacy of the empire cannot be the last word." In our age, though, at least in the US, we must find other ways to bear witness to the kingdom of God. Perhaps refusing to join in cancellation rituals is one way to remind onlookers that our primary loyalty is to the God who is rapidly bringing us his future—a future that welcomes all of us, beginning with the worst of us, a time when accountability consists not in erasing those who screw up, but in counting them.