

A freebie for Tony Perkins

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After Sen. Rand Paul made an offensive (and unfunny) joke involving the word "gay," Tony Perkins (of the Family Research Council) [criticized him](#):

I don't think it's something we should joke about. We are talking about individuals who feel very strongly one way or the other, and I think we should be civil, respectful, allowing all sides to have the debate.

Whaaa? That doesn't sound very [hate groupy](#)!

Most reports are treating this as evidence of just how far off the deep end Paul is. CNN [gets this response](#) from Aaron McQuade of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, who sees it instead as evidence of Perkins's intensity: "I think he was saying that he takes this issue so seriously that it's not okay to make light of it, even if you also oppose it the way he does."

I guess, if you take it at face value that Perkins simply felt compelled in his heart of hearts to speak out against jokes. But this reads more like a calculated play. FRC is a large and influential organization that has been credibly listed as a hate group. So its public identity includes a considerable tension between the lunatic fringe and the legitimate mainstream--and Perkins and Co. have a lot invested in bolstering the case for the latter. Paul's joke gave Perkins an opening to position himself as serious and reasonable and more-moderate-than-some-people (check out [this headline](#))--all without saying anything of substance about gays and lesbians or the policy issues that affect them. It was a freebie.

Or maybe Perkins meant exactly what he said, and he really does have a problem with a senator making offensive jokes about serious matters. After all, Perkins himself tends to be very disciplined and focused--and pretty civil and affable. It's hard to fault him for that. Yet this is also what makes the often hateful things Perkins says come off as somehow reasonable. The media and the public reliably conflate substantive moderation with declining to behave like a complete boor (see also: [Rick Warren](#)). In reality they're pretty much separate subjects.

Which isn't to say that only one of them matters. I think behaving like a boor is a grand thing to not do. But for a couple years now it's seemed like every other item in my blog reader is about how everything would be so much better if we were just more civil to one another. I don't buy it. Civility is good, but it's hard for me to get excited about its as a front-burner cause--because for every example of civility leading to understanding and consensus I see another of it serving as a cloak of Serious Respectful Debate for disrespectful ideas that don't deserve to be taken seriously.

Sen. Paul's remark was classless and offensive, but Perkins doesn't deserve a pat on the back for saying so. Stop calmly, civilly demonizing gay people and then we'll talk.