

Free Speech, Satire and the Power of Humor

Featuring Seth Dillon

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TRANSCRIPT

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Welcome to Cornerstone University's Wisdom and Influence podcast. Today's esteemed guest is the CEO of The Babylon Bee, the world's most trusted and factually accurate news source. Taking on the tone of a traditional news publication, The Bee satirizes real-world events and public figures. Their goal is to make people laugh while valuing freedom, truth, and sanity.

In March 2022, The Babylon Bee was suspended on Twitter, now X, after a satirical post was determined to violate the platform's hateful conduct policy. During that controversy, Elon Musk contacted Babylon Bee leadership to confirm that the suspension had occurred and reportedly joked that he might need to buy Twitter.

Well, later that year, that's exactly what happened. Musk acquired the platform, describing his vision for it as a digital town square that would promote free expression. Our guest is on the front lines of advocating free speech in the public square. He frequently speaks on college campuses and at conferences across the country about the effectiveness of humor, the moral imperative of mockery, and the dangers of censorship.

And here, he will be with us on October 1 for our upcoming Wisdom Conversations, Why Not Communism? A Wisdom Conversation on Faith, Freedom, and the Future of America. Please join me in welcoming to our podcast Mr. Seth Dillon. Well, Seth, it's so great to have you on our podcast here at Cornerstone University.

Thank you so much for joining us. And I wanted to start with two easy ones. Just focusing on the great work you do at The Babylon Bee, I want to talk about Rachel Levine and Megyn Kelly's pager incident, which I thought was fantastic — two things that happened. And tell us a little bit about how these two things have affected The Babylon Bee and your work ever since that time, especially the first one with Rachel Levine and then the incident with Megyn Kelly and the pager.

Seth Dillon: Oh, yeah. Well, the Rachel Levine joke, I have to give some context for that so people know what we're talking about specifically. But, you know, one of the difficult things about our job — I guess people think our job is easy because there's so much to make fun of in the world, right? And that's generally true.

There is a lot of fodder there, a lot of material. But sometimes we come across headlines that seem like they're parody already. They're just so absurd, you know — it's hard to believe that this is real. We see those all the time. In fact, we have another site called Not the Bee that just kind of reports on those outrageous stories that should be satire but somehow aren't.

And every now and then we see a headline, and, in this case, you know, this is a few years ago now, it was back in 2022, there was a headline about how Rachel Levine, who's a transgender health admiral in the Biden administration at the time — Rachel Levine had been named Woman of the Year by USA Today, and this came out in a headline, you know, where they're showing Rachel Levine being awarded the Woman of the Year.

And of course, this is a male individual, not a female, getting the Woman of the Year award, which should be offensive to women who weren't considered for that because you got this man who identifies as a woman who's taking away an award that should have been given to a woman.

And so, but it felt like parody already, and so it was one of those ones that was kind of difficult to satirize, and we were very sensitive to the fact that there's this censorship regime that's in place and these ideological rules that are baked into the terms of service that you have to kind of follow or else you risk getting deplatformed.

And so, we were thinking about, you know, ways to approach this that could avoid that issue where we would get censored. But the best joke that we could come up with, you know, we felt like we needed to kind of hammer the truth home on this one and address the fact that this is a man being awarded something that should have gone to a woman.

And so for the first time ever, we named our pick for Man of the Year, and we chose Rachel Levine. And so we did this headline, "The Babylon Bee selects Rachel Levine as their pick for Man of the Year." And it was crazy because we did have an internal conversation before we posted it, you know, where we were like, "This could result in penalties. We could get suspended for this."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Well, it launched the movement. It launched her movement, I think.

Seth Dillon: Yeah, yeah. Well, what ended up happening was crazy because we had to decide, you know, do we publish this joke? We decided, yeah, you know, this could come at a severe cost. We could end up getting suspended on the social media platforms for posting this joke. But we feel like we have an obligation to post jokes like that. You know, this — really, the primary mission of The Babylon Bee, beyond just making people laugh and entertaining them, is to speak truth into the culture, and one of the ways that we do that is by ridiculing ideas and actions that deserve it.

You know, when foolishness isn't treated with mockery, it's taken seriously, and we've seen that in our culture, and that's been, I think, had really harmful and damaging effects. And so we're not doing our job if we're not mocking things that deserve it. And so we felt very strongly that we needed to tell a joke about this.

So we published that joke, you know, The Babylon Bee's pick for Man of the Year is Rachel Levine, and we did get blocked on our account. We got locked out. You know, Twitter sent us a notice saying that if we didn't delete the joke — they didn't take it down for us. They said, "If you don't delete the joke, then you're gonna remain locked out of your account."

And so we put out a statement saying, "We're not deleting it. You know, we stand by this. We should be — this is a free country. You hold yourself out as a platform for free expression without barriers." That's a direct quote from their terms of service at the time. And we should be able to tell jokes like this.

And, by the way, it's true. Rachel Levine is in fact a man, regardless of how he identifies. And so we posted that, got in trouble for it. Elon Musk, who is a fan of ours and we had already interviewed him, happened to see that we had been suspended because of this joke. And he sent us a message, you know, trying to reach us and ask about what happened, and we couldn't reply to him 'cause our account was locked.

So we got a message from Elon Musk sitting in our inbox, and we can't answer it unless we delete the joke. And so we had already made a public statement. We're like, "We're not deleting this." So he ended up calling us and having a conversation with us, and at the end of that conversation, he was like, "You know, this is crazy. Comedy should be legal. You guys should be able to tell jokes like this, even if they're offensive. You know, offensive comedy should still be legal in America." And he's like, "I respect your integrity for not, you know, first of all, for posting it and not taking it down." And then he goes, "Maybe I just need to buy Twitter."

And of course, we thought that was a joke. He ends up, you know, later on, taking over Twitter. It took about eight months that we were locked up in Twitter jail waiting for that acquisition to actually go through, and when he did eventually take it over, he contacted me the first day he was CEO of Twitter and said, "Do you want me to restore the Babylon Bee? There will be no censorship of humor anymore."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Wow.

Seth Dillon: So, that was a pretty cool story, and I think it illustrates a number of different things. One of the important lessons, I think, from the whole situation is, you know, if you don't stand firmly and boldly for the truth, you're not going to embolden others to do that as well. If you don't defend freedom, you lose it. If you don't fight for it and use it, you lose it. And you have to be willing to pay a cost for those things, for both truth and freedom. If you're not willing to pay a cost, if you're not willing to — if everything runs through a filter in your mind and you think, you know, "Maybe I shouldn't say this because I might get censored," well, then you're just censoring yourself, and it works out the same in the end.

You're doing the tyrant's work for him. And so, and then of course, you know, Elon being willing to shell out 44 billion to buy the platform and restore free expression so that we could challenge bad ideas like this, obviously, there's a huge cost to that. He took a hit to his reputation with people attacking him, you know, accusing him of being a far-right extremist and whatever, and his stock starts plummeting and his companies.

But there was a group of people, a small but bold group of people willing to go out there and say, "We don't care what this costs us. We're going to do what we think is right and stand on our principles." And it's a great story. It was cool to be a part of it because I think it's really opened the eyes of a lot of other people that, when you fight these fights, you can win them, and you will embolden other people to join you, and that's how you win them.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Well, Seth, you've talked about hard censorship and soft censorship. And I'm wondering if you can comment on a soft one because that's the one that I think is affecting so many people in our country, Christian, non-Christian, the soft censorship. And it's become almost parasitic in many ways and so destructive. And so maybe you can define that for our audience here at Wisdom and Influence Podcast for them to understand what that is, and what do we need to do about it? Because I think that's one of the most important and most detrimental ones out there.

Seth Dillon: Yeah, I agree with that. When I say hard censorship, I'm talking about either the government or these big tech platforms exercising the control and the power that they have to take down your content, to suppress and silence your voice. That's outside of your control to a large extent, you know. And these platforms often do that. They will take down content that they don't like, and I would characterize that as hard censorship. It's happening to you. It's not something that you're playing a role in.

Soft censorship, on the other hand, is exactly that case I was talking about where we're deliberating over whether or not we should publish the joke. Even thinking in that way is — that's how they want you

thinking. They want you questioning whether or not you can or should speak freely because it might come with some consequence, and so there's an element of intimidation there, the threat of the censorship that gets us to go along with their program and simply take the easy road.

You know, it's like, well, I can challenge these things, or I can say what I really think, but it's gonna come at a cost. And so you either have to affirm their ideas or remain silent, and many people choose to remain silent 'cause they don't want to affirm it, so they choose to remain silent instead so they don't face some penalty. That's what I characterize as soft censorship where — to put it as kind of harshly as I can, it's cowardly, because what you're doing is—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And you're affirming the opposition. That's really what you're doing.

Seth Dillon: Yeah, yeah, yeah. You're, you're sort of, to some extent, complicit in what they're doing by not challenging it and refusing to stand up for it. And I realize it's very difficult to make those decisions where you say, "I'm not going to censor myself. Let them censor me." You know, make them censor you. That's difficult because, like I said, it comes at a cost, but I think what our story illustrates is that the cost, while real, in these situations — it can mean losing your account. In our case, you know, we had millions of followers already. So this was one of the primary ways that we drove revenue for our business. And so to be willing to pay that cost and say, "This is worth it to us," if people aren't willing to do that, if they would prefer to take the easy road and not pay that cost and censor themselves, then nothing ever changes.

And if you are willing to, then we're a perfect illustration of how it can effect change. And so I hope that encourages other people. It's obviously a little bit different in a situation with the Babylon Bee where we have a large following. We already had, you know, Joe Rogan was a fan. Elon Musk is a fan. You know, a lot of prominent politicians and celebrities are fans, and so we had some public notoriety already that helped us make an impact with that. But what I try to encourage people is that, you know, there is strength in numbers, and when you're an outlier, if you're a small account, you're just one person who's taking a stand, you know, no one's gonna notice that. If you're a big account, they'll notice it more. But if there's millions of us who just refuse to censor ourselves, that's what really will make the ultimate difference, I think.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And have you seen a significant shift from that moment on? You know, we talk about woke 1.0. Now there's this woke 2.0 out there. Have you seen a shift of more people coming on board, of letting go of the fear, greater courage to fight against these things, to protect freedom of speech, to speak out? And how do you — have you seen that grow even more since that original incident, and what do you foresee in the days ahead as we battle, if I can put it that way, woke 2.0 and a lot of the push for censorship out of the, you know, the far left Democrat, you know, or communist socialist sort of wing of the Democratic Party?

Seth Dillon: Yeah. There's been a shift. There's been a lot of resistance to the shift. You had — so right out the gate with Elon Musk taking over Twitter and saying, you know, "I'm gonna allow people to speak freely, you know, there's going to be politically incorrect and offensive speech on this platform. Deal with it," you know, that was kind of his position. And that's, you know, of course, the downside of giving people freedom is that they will abuse it and say horrible and awful things. But you never want to put the power in someone's hand where they're dictating what you're allowed to say and what you're allowed to think, because a lot of good and truth gets caught up in those kinds of gatekept filters.

But there was tremendous resistance to Elon initially where, if you recall, you had a lot of major advertisers saying, "Well, if you're gonna restore a free speech platform, we're gonna take all of our money and spend it somewhere else." IBM, Disney, you know, some of these big brands were telling him

that they wouldn't advertise with him anymore, and so they were trying to raise the cost of freedom so high that no one would be willing to pay it.

And that didn't work with Elon 'cause he told them, you know, "I don't care. Take your money somewhere. You can't hold money over my head. I have all the money I need. So you can't do that to me." So he was really the perfect person to be in that position, not just because of his resources, but also of his attitude and outlook towards these things. You know, there's obviously some things I disagree with Elon on and we have a different worldview. But when it comes to protecting freedom and the right to speak freely, you know, we're very strongly aligned on that, and he was willing to take a stand on that.

But the shift that's happened has been fairly dramatic because despite those efforts of people to make him pay more by withholding their funds, there's been an opening up, not just on Twitter but on other platforms as well. You know, Facebook shortly thereafter started changing the way that they did things. And Twitter continued, even now it changed to X, but initially it was still Twitter, and they continued to grow and get more downloads and have more engagement. And so it wasn't dying like everyone said it would, and so that was a good sign.

And then, you know, all the criticism started being leveled at some of these other platforms like YouTube and Facebook for continuing the censorship regime when Twitter has broken that. And so they kind of followed suit and relaxed their policies a little bit. Facebook was one of those platforms that was relentlessly fact-checking content, including jokes like the Babylon Bee's headlines. The most famous of them was this old CNN joke from back in 2018 when they threatened us with suspension because we published a headline that said, "CNN purchases industrial-sized washing machine to spin the news before publishing it." And they're working with these third-party fact-checkers because they wanna crack down on the spread of misinformation, and that gets caught up in that.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You know, that's misinformation, really? It's just a silly — the fact check was funnier than the joke.

Seth Dillon: Yeah, yeah. So, they started relaxing that stuff after Elon took over Twitter. Facebook changed their policies. There's no more third-party fact-checkers. They now have something more like community notes, you know, that they're working on. And so there is more freedom now than there used to be. There are fewer penalties than there used to be. We monetize and drive traffic through Facebook now in ways that we weren't able to just a few years ago. So there's definitely been a change for the better. How long that persists, I don't know.

I do know that the censors, especially in particular when we're talking about, like, the secular progressives that are very aggressive in trying to prevent their ideas from being challenged — they don't want open discourse and debate. It's the last thing that they want. Their ideas can't stand up under scrutiny. They're very insecure about them, and they want to try to gain power so they can exercise that power to get everybody in lockstep with this ideological conformity. And so I don't see them giving up on that task ultimately. I think they'll continue to try to find ways to do that. The onus is on us to continue to thwart it at every opportunity we can, and that's why we're involved in all these court cases too, because some of the censorship is government censorship. So every time we get the chance when there's a new law that's passed that would criminalize speech in some way, you know, we sue and try to defend our First Amendment right to speak freely.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You know, Seth, you've spoken about the censorship regime. Could you comment on, you know, what some could call the frailty regime, the sensitivity regime? It seems like so many Americans are afraid of being criticized, or they fear criticism of any kind. So you — one way to deal with it, just eliminate the possibility of criticism, and then do censorship. But it seems like the

American skin has become very, very, very, very thin over time. How has that happened? What do you think has been happening to make us so frail and so fragile in our thinking?

Seth Dillon: Well, you know, it's a very deliberate effort to try to convince young people that things like humor are harmful, because they hurt people's feelings. A lot of it is dressed up in sort of the class warfare stuff, you know, the sociocultural Marxism stuff that is undergirding the woke ideology, is aimed at insulating and protecting people who are powerless and oppressed. You know, either the average person who's not in the elite class or somebody who fits into some kind of cross-sectional, you know, oppressed minority class. You know, they're a woman or they're trans or they're a minority or whatever it is, or an intersection of those multiple things. You know, the prevailing sort of cultural mentality about people who lack power and privilege is that they have to be protected. They need a safe space, and that ideas that challenge their thinking or are offensive are actually harmful, and they're treated as if they're violence.

So there's this idea that, you know, something that offends you is not just a verbal attack, but like an attack period. It's some sort of violence that needs to be defended against. And I — there's so many things that are wrong with that, but one of them is that what it ends up doing, like you were saying, is it ends up cultivating this sort of hypersensitivity to the point where you had a — this goes back years. It's probably more than a decade ago when Jerry Seinfeld, you know, announced that he would no longer be going to college campuses to do any of his stand-up because the students had been so indoctrinated with this sort of safe space thinking, that they weren't tolerant of humor that might make them feel uncomfortable or be offensive to them.

And so we lost that ability, which is a very healthy one, I think, to take another look at ourselves, laugh at ourselves, take ourselves less seriously, recognize that, you know, there's truth to some stereotypes, there's differences between men and women. You know, there's things that we can laugh at about ourselves and turn it around and look at ourselves real honestly and confront that in a way that's really — I think humor's a very healthy way of confronting that. You know, you can recognize the truth of it and also laugh along with it, rather than being so offended and hurt by it. And there's just some great illustrations of how this attempt to try to foster this safe space mentality is harmful.

One of them I saw, there was a study that was done — I think it was in New York City. It could have been another big city, but for some reason I'm thinking New York. They had changed a lot of the playgrounds to make them safer for kids, because, you know, kids get hurt on playgrounds all the time. And so they retrofitted these playgrounds to be ultra-safe, and there was all this like soft turf so that if you fell off the monkey bars or whatever, you know, you land on a really cushiony surface and you can't get hurt. And this study found that it was actually detrimental to put kids in an environment where they couldn't get hurt because it didn't teach them that some of the things that they were doing were actually dangerous.

So it's like, you know, if you fall and you get hurt, you realize, you know, "Well, maybe I shouldn't have been so careless or reckless while I was up there." Maybe I shouldn't have jumped, right? Then when it happens when they're on pavement or on concrete, all of a sudden it hurts really bad. They didn't learn that lesson. So the study actually concluded that when you go too far in the direction of trying to protect kids from potentially hurting themselves, you hurt them in a different way because you set them up for getting hurt later on by not experiencing any of that, which is a part of growing up. It's a part of being a kid, is you fall and scrape your knee. You know, you get hurt sometimes, and that's part of what builds up a little bit of resilience and tolerance in you for the sort of adversity that you face both physically and emotionally, psychologically. When you take all of that away, you end up with rooms full of college students who can't tolerate comedy from Jerry Seinfeld, who I think is a pretty clean comedian.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: He's as clean as they come nowadays.

Seth Dillon: Yeah. Yeah. So that is ultimately where all of that leads. And I think it's tremendously unhealthy. I thought our society was a lot healthier a couple or a few decades ago when, you know, everyone was kind of willing to laugh at themselves and each other, much more so than they are today. I mean, political correctness has been a thing for a long time, but comedy was certainly a lot more tolerated back then. And I think the further we push in going back in that direction, you know — we call all these things are dressed up under the language of progress. This is progress. We're making progress.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Seth Dillon: Well, you know, I don't know. Like C.S. Lewis said, "If you're on the wrong road, then progress means turning around and going back to find the right one. And so the man who turns back soonest is in fact the most progressive." So I think we're being progressive when we regress, in the current culture and turn back and try to find the right road again, one that's healthier, 'cause we're not doing the kids any favors.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Absolutely. You know, the other real victim in all of this is truth too, because it's so important for a society to have a strong moral order, a moral compass, a moral foundation. Here at Cornerstone, we're a Christian university. We speak about this, teach this to our students from a Christian worldview. But when you censor or you strip society from the ability of being critical in assessing yourself well and rigorously in others, then all of a sudden truth becomes something that you basically censor too. The reality, the possibility for it, and that's absolutely destructive, not just as a society, but to people. So, you know, your work — talk with us about that because it's so important, not just via humor and satire and critique, but truth is absolutely essential for our civilizational moment now.

Seth Dillon: Yeah. Well, you know, there's various worldviews that are at war with each other, and the one that you and I share is that there is, in fact, objective reality and objective truth. There is, baked into the fabric of reality itself by our Creator, from whom truth and goodness comes. There is objectively right and wrong, and you lose sight when, when you start censoring, what ends up happening is the people who are in those positions that have the levers of power to turn off certain voices and turn on others, they have their idea. They have their subjective preference for what's real or true or should be affirmed. Oftentimes it's very relativistic and floating around and not anchored in anything. And so there's a sort of arbitrariness to it, and they're willing to decide upfront what's sayable and what's not on the basis of sort of this arbitrary shifting thing.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: They're, like, rooted in the air, not a real foundation.

Seth Dillon: Right. And so yeah, truth is often the first casualty of those things. I think this was really powerfully illustrated by what happened with COVID. You know, I testified before Congress on the censorship stuff that was happening around that time and how it was impacting us at the Babylon Bee. And during the Q&A period, you know, the COVID censorship stuff came up, and I made the point that, you know, what happened with COVID was you had the government and the big tech platforms working together to determine what you were allowed to say about COVID, you know? Can you criticize the social distancing stuff? Can you have critical commentary on the efficacy of masks in preventing the spread and transmission of COVID? You know, like, are you allowed to say those things? And they decided that you weren't allowed to, because it would be harmful if you said them, and people might believe things that aren't true, because they had established in their mind what was true.

And then later on, what ended up happening was they walked back a lot of the things that they'd said. Other studies and information had come out, and more knowledge was gained that showed that some of

the things that they had insisted were true were, in fact, not necessarily true. And so they had been censoring preemptively on the basis of the truth.

And this is why debate is so important, you know? It's how you get to the truth, and when you circumvent that process, when you cut off the ability of people to debate with each other, you stop at this point that you call truth, but you may not be there yet. You may not have learned enough to know what's true about these things. And so particularly in areas like, you know, science and where there's developing fields and the evolution and the development of knowledge over time, I think it's just an absolute knockdown argument against censorship, what happened with COVID, because you had — it was very clear when they started making the excuse, "Well, we censored based on what we knew at the time."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right.

Seth Dillon: And I'm like, okay, well, if you're saying that our knowledge changes over time and we learn more things over time, then there should never be a point at which you censor as if you know what's true. You know? Like, let people debate it, because it might turn out tomorrow that you censored something as false that was, in fact, true. And so their own admission that knowledge changes over time defeats their argument and their justification for their censorship.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You know, Seth, I was — this morning I went back and re-read our First Amendment, right? It's so important, so central, and I want to ask you to talk about oftentimes the objection you get from people, uh, many sides of the aisle, many different religious backgrounds, is that the freedom of speech allows for the freedom of people saying things that should never be said, right? Evil, right? The immorality argument. And yet there's a powerful counter to that as well, and perhaps you can help our listeners walk through that because I do find many Christians who object to it. They like it, but then evil exists. Well, we live in a fallen world. We live in a broken world. We know that, but the freedom of speech is so fundamental to us today, fundamental for our ability to have this conversation, our ability to share our faith, our ability to critique, so many different things. Walk us through the reality, the evil, the problem of evil with this, but also why it's so important to be able to counteract it.

Seth Dillon: Yeah. Well, I mean, there's a lot of ways to approach this. Just to start on, you know, going back to what we were talking about with the Rachel Levine joke that we told — there were a lot of people who thought that our joke was evil. They thought that our joke amounted to hate speech. And so that was the same justification that they were using to censor us. They're saying, "Your ideology, your worldview is hateful and harmful and wrong, and so that's why we're going to censor you is because it's harmful and it hurts people." That's their view. That's what they think we're doing. I of course disagree with that, but that's their objection to us being able to say those things is that they're harmful and they're wrong.

And the problem when you start giving people the — when you allow for anyone, whether it's the government or the big tech platforms, you know, to just exercise this moral judgment about what's evil and therefore not allowable to be said or expressed, you're not necessarily gonna have somebody with your worldview that's enforcing that, and they might have a different idea of what's evil and what's good. In fact, there's a lot of people who've completely inverted the moral spectrum and put evil at the top, calling it good, and good at the bottom, calling it evil. And so if they're in power, we have problems. But I still don't trust — I don't trust Christians with that power either. I don't think anybody should have the power to just determine what's sayable.

I think one of the things that we should value in others is that we're all created in God's image. We all have a level of dignity, that in the rights that are secured by our Bill of Rights and our Constitution and our, you know, mentioned in the Declaration of Independence. You know, these are God-given, and we have to respect that in others without imposing on them our own views and values. God himself gave us freedom to disobey him and rebel against him. That's the first example that we can look to of how — you know, this is sort of how the First Amendment works. You know, God respects our right to do that because he respects us enough as creatures that he gave freedom to. He's willing to allow us to say no to him and to disobey him and defy him. And that is what freedom is. And so of course, yeah, people will abuse that freedom and misuse it and defy God and do terrible things and say terrible things. But he gives us the ability to do that. Now, ultimately, of course, there will be justice that's done, but in this life, we have that freedom. And so the First Amendment similarly offers that to the American people. You know, we have that freedom to use it responsibly and positively to be, you know, edifying, encouraging, humorous, whatever, and promote good ideas. We also have the freedom to say truly offensive and abhorrent things. And the answer isn't to say, "Okay, well, we're going to set up this system where what's good and true is allowable, and what's bad and false is not." Nobody short of God, I think, is in a position to enforce that fairly and without resorting to some sort of tyranny, and we don't have the right to dictate to other humans who have, you know, liberty. We don't have that right to control them in that way, and we shouldn't want the power exercised in that way. That's my belief, and that's what the First Amendment is really predicated on, is that belief.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: No, I mean, that because I see so many Christians and people, good people who are just, they wrestle with the reality of evil and freedom, and then censorship seems to be appealing to them because of that, right?

Seth Dillon: Yeah, and I get that. I totally get that, yeah, because there's — oh, so great example would be, like, Twitter became this free speech platform, right? I see all kinds of hatred expressed on Twitter that would have been censored before, and it's despicable. It's horrible. A lot of it comes my way. You know, there's terrible antisemitism that's just rampant there right now that's awful and nasty, and, you know, people are praising Hitler and saying he was right about the Jews and all that. And all of that would have been censored in the past. I think there's obviously — there's pros and cons to everything. And the downside of freedom is that people will abuse it. I think the answer, though, and I would be echoing Charlie Kirk in saying this 'cause I'd heard him say it many times, is that, you know, the answer to bad speech is good speech.

Those people are exposing themselves by speaking in that way. You'll learn something about them. You'll learn where they really stand. But you also get the opportunity to refute their bad ideas. You get the opportunity to respond to their speech with better speech, and to argue with them and debate them, and defend the good and the true so that it wins not by powerful imposition but by persuasion and argument and love and kindness. And you can accomplish that with engagement. You don't have to engage all the people that are saying those terrible things. You can block and ignore them. You don't have to censor them. That's the other option that people forget about is, you know, when someone's in your comments denigrating you or disparaging you or saying hateful things, you can tune out from that without trampling on their right to be terrible.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You can block them and ignore them without trampling on their rights.

Seth Dillon: Yeah. Those are tools that are available to you on these platforms, and people act like we need to, you know, take away their ability to speak. No, you know, they're exposing themselves for who they are, and you don't have to listen to them, or you could respond to them and refute their nonsense.

You have a lot of options to you that respect the freedom of others that don't involve some sort of tyrannical imposition of force and coercion.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yes, I agree, Seth. And I'm wondering if you can also comment on something else because we, earlier we spoke about what I'll call sort of the thin skin of America, right? And our frailty and sensitivities. I'm also wondering about what I'll call our intellectual weakness or immaturity on either side of the aisle, our inability to defend what we believe, to articulate it, to counter-argue others, right? That sort of apologetic, you know, defense — it's so important. It seems like more and more, whether you're on the left or the right, we're unable to do that. We've not been educated well enough to be able to do those things, and so the easiest thing is to tell people to shut up.

Seth Dillon: Yeah. Yeah. That's actually a really good point. It can be — that's where the insecurity comes into play. I was criticizing the secular progressives for being so insecure because their arguments don't stand up to scrutiny. Well, the same can be true on the other side. It can be very difficult to defend a Christian worldview or a conservative political outlook if you haven't taken the time to equip yourself to engage on those issues. If you don't know, if you only know what you believe but not why you believe it, then of course you're going to feel insecure about defending it, and you're going to bristle more at people challenging it. It's going to make you second-guess yourself, or it's going to make you angry and frustrated because you don't know how to respond. And that can lead to that inclination to want to see those counter voices, you know, dealt with in some sort of harsher manner, some sort of penalty. Someone who's really confident in what they believe is going to have much more comfort in the public square dealing with opposition. So the importance of that can't be overstressed.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Sure.

Seth Dillon: For me — I don't know why this was the case — my leg is all tangled in my cords here for some reason. I don't know why this was the case, but I took an early interest in Christian apologetics when I was younger. I just couldn't read enough. I was a Christian already. It wasn't like I was a skeptic who was searching for the truth. I just wanted to really be well-equipped to defend my faith and be able to offer reasons and justification for why I believed what I believed. So it wasn't just, you know, "This is true, and you must believe it." "Okay, well, why?" And be willing to answer hard challenges. And so, you know, I spent a lot of time — this wasn't something that I got through my formal education, but, you know, just reading Christian apologists, everyone from Lewis and Chesterton to, you know, Plantinga and J.P. Moreland, and William Lane Craig, who was debating atheists in churches and campuses across the country. And, you know, the Christian apologetics, there's so much rich stuff there.

And I happen to be really good friends with Frank Turek now, who's an amazing apologist who does a lot of campus speaking across the country, and he was working with Charlie Kirk on this. You know, Charlie went to these campuses well-prepared to handle objections. He's such a good example of how, you know, fruit can come from not trying to stamp out the other side, but saying, "Hey, I've got a microphone, sure, but I'm not just gonna talk at you. You step up to this microphone and let's have a conversation." And he took lots of time to equip himself, and he worked with Frank on the apologetics angle of it too, so that he could defend not just a conservative political outlook, because he was primarily running a political organization with Turning Point, but also his Christian faith. You know, he wanted to be known as a bold defender of his faith, and he wanted to be able to answer objections from agnostics or atheists and skeptics in the audience. And so he trained and equipped himself to do that. He didn't have that impulse to just stamp out dissent. He had the drive to go out there and try to persuade people to his way of thinking, and was very effective at doing that.

And so there's lots of great models out there for young people to look to, and it's such a tragedy. It's such an awful thing that someone who is as effective and ambitious in those areas was taken from us.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, it demonstrates the point of the ultimate, the ultimate kind of censorship, right? You murder. I mean, that's what's so terrifying and terrible about the trajectory. That's ultimately what it was. We can't, we don't have the ability to turn off his microphone. We can't shut him up. There's only one real way to silence him.

Seth Dillon: Yeah. And I think that is something that we need to look at as not an example of how we need to take more control of the public square, whatever. You know, well, oh, you know, free speech is failing because we show up with a microphone and they show up with guns. How do you win that fight, you know? There's that fear there. But, you know, the reason that they targeted Charlie, that this, you know, ended up assassinating him, was because Charlie was so effective.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yep.

Seth Dillon: It was because of how effective he was, and so I don't think we should shy away from that. Of course, there's danger in terms of violence that might be faced, especially for public figures like myself who do public speaking on stages like Charlie did. But the reason they wanna stamp out voices, and that is the ultimate form of censorship, is because of how effective it is and because of how threatened they are by it. And that should just be encouraging to us that what we're doing is working and it's powerful. And we can't be afraid. We have God on our side ultimately, and, you know, if something tragic like that happens to me, I know where I'm going.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Amen. Seth, I want to talk about truth and humor because I think Babylon Bee does this so well. And I remember, when Dave Chappelle came back. You know, he was off for a few years, and he did his first show, right? I think he actually did it in Detroit, Michigan, and came back, and I watched that special, and he told the first joke, and the first joke was a story, an actual story that he lived through in Hollywood. It was probably 10 minutes. It just kept going, going, going. He loves doing these long stories where he gets the punchline at the end, and it's, you know, it builds. And it was a story, and it was a story of something he saw of method acting. You know, when actors sort of become the role and they live in it for months at a time, right?

And he told this story. It was — it was Jim Carrey, wasn't it? He was talking about Jim Carrey? Was that who it was?

Seth Dillon: Yeah, so it was.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: All right. And he connected it to transgenderism. And I remember hearing that and thinking, "Wow, what an incredible story to speak about a truth," right? It was — he was a master at what he did and how he told it. So talk with us about the importance of humor and truth, because it is such a powerful vehicle through which to communicate eternal truth.

Seth Dillon: Yeah. So, there's a quote I love to pull out. It's something that George Orwell said. He said, "Every joke is a tiny revolution." And I think about that sometimes when I see jokes like that because, you know, what Chappelle was doing at that time was telling a joke that you were not supposed to tell. You know, it's just like a Rachel Levine joke. It's like this is the unsayable thing. You're not supposed to laugh about this. It's considered — in the progressive or woke framework, it's considered punching down. You know, you're abusing your power to hurt somebody who's beneath you in some way, you know, because they're marginalized or oppressed.

And he was willing to do that. And I, by the way, just want to make a comment on that, on that outlook of calling it punching down. It's not punching down when you're challenging an idea that's being imposed on you from the top. So, you know, when you have someone like Rachel Levine, for example, who's a white male high-ranking government official, splashed on the front page of newspapers and magazines

and has all these accolades and awards being given to them, and they actually enjoy so much power and privilege that you're not allowed to joke about them or else you face penalties — that is a kind of power that I've never had and never will have. So I reject this idea that comedy that targets those things is in fact punching down. I also just think it's silly from a perspective of a comedian to have to stop and think about yourself, "You know what? I shouldn't joke about those people. They're beneath me." What do you mean? What a condescending outlook to think of people as, you know, like, "I'm up here on the power structure. They're down here. I shouldn't joke about them." It's very condescending. Like, give people the dignity and respect of putting them on your level where you can joke about them 'cause they're just another human.

So there's that level to it too, but what Chappelle did — and there's another example that I cite of a similar thing that happened with Bill Maher, who I disagree with on many, many issues. This is not an endorsement of Bill Maher and his worldview.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Or of Dave Chappelle. But these are truths.

Seth Dillon: Right? Or of Dave Chappelle. Yeah. But sometimes, you know, sometimes what Bill Maher does really well is he defends freedom to speak and to joke. And he's even defended the Babylon Bee on the record, which is pretty cool. But he did a monologue a few years ago about the rise of, among young people in particular, you know, this trans trend that was happening where you had all these young people suddenly discovering, "Oh, I'm a girl," or, "I'm a boy trapped in a girl's body." This alarming trend where this was happening with numbers that we'd never seen before. Where is this coming from, you know? And he didn't — he was unwilling to acknowledge, as they want us to believe, that this is some natural phenomenon that's happening. He's like, "This is not natural. This isn't normal, and it shouldn't be affirmed."

And so he put together this monologue where he made this joke where he said, you know, "We can't be affirming kids, you know, eight-year-olds and what they identify as because that would result in absurdities. You know, the world would be filled with cowboys and princesses if eight-year-olds were affirmed in their self-identity, you know?" He's like, "When I was eight years old, I wanted to be a pirate. Thank God no one scheduled me for peg leg surgery and eye removal."

And, you know, his audience probably didn't even know how to react to this. I know he got some laughs, but there were probably people nervously thinking like, "I can't laugh at that because he's joking about the marginalized and the oppressed. You know, he's punching down right now. This is not allowed." But I heard that joke and I thought, "Well, it's funny. That's actually pretty funny." But it's also profound because what he's doing is he's challenging an idea that shouldn't have been taken seriously in the first place, and that's what comedy is so good at. Mockery to expose foolishness for what it is so that it isn't taken seriously, because when it's taken seriously, it has catastrophic consequences. You end up with kids who have been put on these hormones that sterilize them, or they have these surgeries that remove healthy body parts. And it's just tragic, and so many of them are now regretting that and trying to detransition and going through that hard process. You know, after these young girls have already had their chests removed and their voices changed, and now they've decided, you know, they wanna be a mom, they wanna be a woman and embrace their womanhood. And they can't in a way that they would have before. Or maybe they can't at all because they're sterilized at this point.

And so those are really tragic outcomes that are the result, the direct result of bad ideas being taken too seriously. So the Chappelle thing is a great example. The Bill Maher joke is a great example of how comedians can play a role in the culture. Not just comedians, but everyone can play a role in shaping how things turn out for young people by saying, "Yeah, I'm not gonna go along with this program. This is actually really absurd." It's the kind of stuff that was comedy 10 years ago and still should be comedy

today. And the way that we need to handle it is to literally not take it seriously. And even laugh at it and mock it because it can't be taken seriously by others. And so there's that sort of social attitude towards these issues that really does make a difference.

And it's not mean and cruel to do that, by the way. I have to distinguish because, you know, whenever I'm speaking, like at a church, for example, or at a Christian college, there's a lot of Christians in the audience who hear that and they immediately think, you know, mockery is — "I don't wanna be mocking anyone. Mockery's mean. I don't wanna be cruel. I wanna be loving. I wanna show Christ-like love for my neighbor." And I have to just make the point that you're not loving someone by affirming them when they're wrong about who and what they are. Right. You don't love a person who's suffering from, you know, some sort of eating disorder by telling them, "Oh, you know what? You really are fat. You need to get skinnier." You know, you're not loving them by affirming them in their own delusion. You love them by telling them the truth. Humor's one of the more gentle ways to do that, and you're not mocking anyone for the purpose of making them feel bad about themselves. You're trying to mock the foolishness so that it's not taken seriously because you care about that person and where they're gonna end up. And so it is a loving thing to tell people the truth. Obviously, there's harsher and more aggressive ways of doing that. There are gentler and softer ways of doing that. There's effective and ineffective ways of doing that. But ultimately, at the end of the day, I think our culture needs more comedy, more lightheartedness, more of a willingness to engage in some introspection and look at ourselves and laugh at ourselves too. It's not — we're not just pointing the finger. The Babylon Bee doesn't just point the finger at the secular progressive left and say, "You guys are a joke." We laugh at ourselves plenty and make jokes about ourselves a lot too. So, you know, pull no punches and aim the sights of ridicule at whatever deserves it.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Seth, in closing, I — hearing you answer that question and address it, it reminds me of the scripture in Proverbs where we're told, "Answer a fool in his folly, lest he think he be wise." But then right after, the next one, "Don't answer a fool in his folly, lest he think he be wise." So I want to ask you about what are the times in The Babylon Bee where you haven't answered a fool, right, in their folly? You know, and you — where you're like, "Man, you really want to," but then you realize maybe it's just better not to say anything on this one. Have there been times like that? Or have there been times where you've answered a fool in the folly and you think, "Man, maybe we shouldn't have done that one"?

Seth Dillon: Well, I mean, there's definitely been jokes that we've regretted from a couple of different perspectives. Like, you know, too soon after somebody's death, or maybe it wasn't charitable enough and there wasn't enough truth to the joke. It was just, you know, a little bit too mean. There's been examples of that. Sometimes they slip through. I don't personally review every joke before it goes up. Sometimes I see a joke that we've posted and I'm like, "Ah, I don't know that I would have posted that. You know, maybe that wasn't done just right. Maybe that's just open to too much misinterpretation." That can happen.

The other one is harder to think of an example of where we chose not to answer a fool in his folly. I don't have one off the top of my head that I can think of. I'll have to go and look for something along those lines.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Maybe you've answered all the fools.

Seth Dillon: I'm sure there's cases. Yeah. Yeah. We try to answer the fools and their folly to the extent that we can, because it's literally sort of what we're set up to do. That's our job. So, you know, and we have, I think, good justification for it, at least in the style and the manner in which we're doing it. But I'm

sure there have been cases. I'm sure we could find cases where we decided, you know, either this isn't worth it, or it's silly and self-defeating enough on its own that it doesn't need to be addressed.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Well, Seth, thank you for being with us. I'm looking forward to meeting you and seeing you here on campus October 1 for our wisdom conversation on why not communism. It's gonna be a fantastic conversation to have you and others in the panel. Thank you for all you do. Thank you for your courage and your example and all you share with us, Seth.

Seth Dillon: Oh, yeah. It was a lot of fun. It was a lot of fun. Thank you. Good conversation. I look forward to it too. Feel free. Thank you.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Thank you. See you soon.

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