



# Civility: American Politics and Christian Responses

## SESSION 1

*The ideal of civility is deeply rooted in American politics.*

### Goal for the Session

Participants will learn the four key virtues of civility in American culture, discuss their experience of them, and plan a civility project to present in class.

### Preparing for the Session

- This three-session study uses examples from the U.S. context, especially in this first session. If in another country, this session can be used to stimulate discussion. Prepare to present a few examples from your country's past leaders who practiced and promoted civility.
- What good is learning about civility if we do not practice it? Think about your group and your context and what kind of project will be most appropriate. Here are a couple examples to consider:
  - Join with a group of people who have a very different perspective on issues than most people in your group. Perhaps your group is fairly liberal. Find a more conservative group and commit to doing this study together. If you do this, you might adapt session 1 to get to know one another. Find common interests and share personal histories. Perhaps pairs can be formed who commit to get to know one another better and use this study to model civility to others.
  - Choose a controversial issue to analyze during the course. Everyone can work on the same theme or allow participants to each choose their own. Work alone, in pairs, small groups,

### Session at a Glance

#### OPENING

- Why be civil?
- Introduction to the study
- Prayer

#### EXPLORING

- The four virtues of civility
- What civility *doesn't* require
- Inciting incivility
- Civility in American history

#### RESPONDING

- Project orientation
- The most difficult virtue

#### CLOSING

- Review expectations/questions
- Prayer

or however your group works best. Have participants find Web sites, television shows, and advocacy groups that promote each side of the issue. Analyze the fairness and civility of their tactics. Where is there common ground? What economic groups fund each side and what do they have to gain by this? Perhaps the first week's home assignment will be organizing

yourselves, choosing a topic, and searching for resources. The second week's assignment may be to list the best arguments for each side and any evidence one side acknowledges it hears from the other side. The third week's assignment may be to make a plan to approach someone on the opposite side of you and attempt civil conversation.

You do not have to do a project, however. You will find plenty of activities in each leader's guide to discuss and react to the Participant Handouts. Likewise, if you do choose a project, you may need to adjust the time of activities to include progress reports on projects and final presentation.

- Distribute all three Participant Handouts the first week. The third session provides practical suggestions that may come up throughout the study. Participants might enjoy the study more if they read the third session after the first session, although this is not mandatory.
- Encourage participants to keep a journal. You might wish to provide small notebooks at the beginning of the study. Some suggested sections for the journal include:
  - Importance of civility
  - Characteristics of civility
  - Biblical lessons on civility
  - Practical steps to remember
- Prepare four sheets of newsprint with the following headings:
  - Expectations/Questions
  - The Four Virtues of Civility
  - Why Be Civil?
  - Being Civil Means . . .
- This first session will be a challenge to complete in less than an hour. Read this leader's guide carefully. You may wish to alter activities in order to shorten the session. Other lessons will be easier to complete in 45 minutes. It will help to be very prepared to lead the session. Arrive early and set up the room before participants arrive so that you are ready to go.
- Arrange the room in a way that encourages maximum participation. Putting chairs in a circle or sitting around a table is a good way to encourage talking. Sitting in rows is not.
- Pray for the participants who may come to these sessions. May this be a welcoming space and

helpful to them in their lives of discipleship.

- The second session suggests the showing of two short YouTube videos. If your space does not have Internet access and projection possibilities, consider an alternative way to show the videos. They may be downloaded to a laptop or phone. Young people often can help figure out solutions. If you need help, identify someone in the first session to help you prepare for the second session.
- Also, in the third session it is suggested that you play an eight-minute segment of the radio show *This American Life*. The segment may be streamed from a smart phone, tablet, or laptop with Internet access or it may be downloaded to an MP3 player, such as an iPod, and played to the class. Again, consult with people who understand these technologies. If you cannot or choose not to do either of these activities you can adapt the lesson to fit your needs.

## Materials Needed

- Newsprint and markers
- Copies of Participant Handout for all three sessions

## Teaching Tip

All of the most divisive issues today have passionate supporters on each side. Most advocates claim to be civil while pointing out the incivility of the other side. Passionate supporters who see their side as just may find it difficult to admit incivility on their own side. It may be helpful in some instances to suggest people focus on another divisive issue they are not so invested in personally in order to practice civility in a new way.

## Opening (10 minutes)

### 1. Why Be Civil?

Welcome participants as they arrive and point out the piece of newsprint on the wall titled "Why Be Civil?" Invite them to use a marker and write their response to that question on the newsprint.

When all have gathered, welcome them to a three session study on civility. Have them think for a moment about a controversial public issue where they have witnessed people on opposite sides of an issue have a civil debate. If you have a large group, form pairs

and answer the following questions. If it is a small group, invite a few volunteers to briefly answer the questions:

- What was the issue?
- What about the debate made it civil?
- What was the outcome?

Point out the piece of newsprint titled “Being Civil Means...” and invite brief suggestions based on the examples shared. Say that this piece of newsprint will remain during the entire study and at any time participants may suggest something be added to it based on their findings.

## 2. Introduction to the Study

Distribute the Participant Handout for session 1 and explain that today’s session is based on the understanding that no one has read it. You will be reading sections of it during the session. However, at the end of this session you will distribute the other two sessions’ handouts and expect people to come to the following meetings having read them. Commit as a group to doing this. If you have provided notebooks for participants to journal, distribute them at this time and explain what they are to do with them.

## 3. Prayer

Pray this prayer or one of your choosing:

Merciful God, open our hearts as we gather today.  
May our lips speak of your love for all people. May  
our actions demonstrate our faith in you. Amen.

## Exploring (30 minutes)

### 4. The Four Virtues of Civility

Allow five minutes for participants to read the section titled “The Four Virtues of Civility.” Either as a group or in four small groups (with one virtue assigned to each group) agree on a one-sentence definition for each virtue and write it on the newsprint titled “The Four Virtues of Civility.”

Point out that at the end of that section in the handout the author suggests other possible virtues such as self-control, tolerance, and humor. If the group wishes, list these under the four main virtues on the newsprint.

## 5. What Civility Doesn’t Require

Allow a few minutes for participants to read this section in the Participant Handout. Very briefly discuss:

- Do you agree with the author about what civility is not?
- What is an example of good and bad conflict?

## 6. Inciting Incivility

Briefly summarize this section for participants. The author suggests two contributing factors that have heightened incivility in our society. First, the media, in particular cable news and the Internet, has discovered they can best sell advertising and compete if they cater to one extreme side of the market. Second, the anonymity of the Internet allows people to be more hateful without being seen. Ask:

- Do you agree with these two factors?
- Are there other things happening in our society that have caused incivility to rise?

## 7. Civility in American History

Allow a few minutes for participants to read this section in the handout. Facilitate a brief discussion of reactions to the examples given. Add any lessons to the newsprint titled “Why Be Civil?” or “Being Civil Means...” gleaned from these examples. If people wish to briefly name other important figures in American history that have contributed to civility, allow them to do so.

**Teaching Tip.** At this point it may be wise to avoid using modern examples too much. Due to the extreme polarization of our culture, all public figures are portrayed both as the most civil and the most incivil at the same time.

## Responding (10 minutes)

### 8. Project Orientation

Explain what people are to do between sessions and as a final project. Following are the things that need to be explained here.

1. **Describe the topic.** Will people pick from a list of possible topics (such as health care reform, same sex marriage, America’s energy future, global climate change, public schools, Wall Street bailout,

banking regulation) or will you all work on the same project? If the latter, you will need to identify that subject now.

2. **Describe the project.** Depending on the needs of your group, various projects can result. You may have everyone prepare to present them in session 3 or you can create an additional session to present them so that you can use session 3 to discuss the Participant Handout. Here are some examples of projects:

- After reviewing Web sites and resources from two different sides of an issue, present the best arguments for both sides and give examples for each side that show incivility toward the other side and also examples that show respect for the opposite side.
- Design a process to approach someone who holds a very different view on a controversial project. During the three weeks determine the topic, research what both arguments are, articulate Christian principles you will maintain, state your reasons for holding the position you hold, identify potential dialogue partners from the other side, and determine how you will go about beginning the discussion.
- Match people in your group who hold different positions on a topic of public debate this week. They will each work to get to know one another during the course of the study as people, research the other side's position, and be able to represent it fairly and to the other person's approval. The final week they will each present the other person's position to the group.

3. **Work alone or in groups?** Decide whether participants will work alone or in small groups.

4. **Determine the goal of the project.** Decide the main goal of the project for your group. Here are some examples: To learn to separate the issue from rhetoric; to identify civil and uncivil responses; to learn practical ways to hold civil discourse.

5. **Explain what to do before the next session.** Tell participants that before the next session they should identify Web sites and spokespersons for both sides. Begin listing the principle arguments for each side and any responses they have to the other side's arguments. Find signs of civility and incivility on each side. Begin a list of people you know who hold a position opposite your own on the subject.

## 9. The Most Difficult Virtue

Invite participants to take a moment of quiet reflection. Have them look at the newsprint with the four virtues of civility and think about which is the hardest to practice in their daily lives with people who hold opposite views on a topic close to their heart. When they have identified that virtue, challenge them to think of one thing they can do this week to be more civil to these people. If there is time, invite a few volunteers to briefly tell what they will do.

## Closing (5 minutes)

### 10. Review Expectations/Questions

Point out the newsprint labeled Expectations/Questions and tell participants to write any questions they still have or issues they hope to cover in the remaining sessions.

Distribute the participant handouts for the remaining two sessions or promise to email them as attachments early in the week.

### 11. Prayer

Pray this Prayer of St. Francis or one of your choosing:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
where there is sadness, joy;  
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

## Teaching Alternatives

- Spend some time listing additional virtues, defining them, and finding examples for each of them as it relates to civility.
- Before class, decorate the newsprint used at the beginning of the session (Why Be Civil?) with images of people showing civility and incivility toward one another. Find these in newspapers or magazines and cut them out and paste them as a border around the sides of the piece of newsprint.
- If all three sessions of this study are used in a

one-day retreat setting, you will need to gather information to be used for all three sessions prior to the retreat. Create a leadership team and meet before the retreat. Read all three handouts and leader's guides and create a plan that will work for your group.

## Key Scriptures

Matthew 5:1-16

Matthew 5:38-48

1 Peter 3:8-12

## For More Information

James Calvin Davis, *In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues That Divide Us*

(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

P. M. Forni, *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002).

Susan Herbst, *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics* (Baltimore: Temple University Press, 2010).

Cassandra Dahnke and Tomas Spath, with Donna Bowling, *Reclaiming Civility in the Public Square: 10 Rules That Work* (Livermore, CA: WingSpan Press, 2007).

Search your denominational Web site for resources. Many social justice and peacemaking offices provide good resources on civil debate.

Another helpful Thoughtful Christian study on this topic is a two-session study "When Church People Disagree," by Victoria Curtiss.