



Civility: American Politics and Christian Responses

SESSION 2

Civility has deep moral roots in Christianity.

Introduction

In the previous session, I argued that a commitment to the virtue of civility is an essential cure to the destructive state of American public debate. Surrounded by a political environment that peddles in the distortion of argument, character assassination, and guerilla verbal warfare, many Americans wish for something better from public discourse: substantive debate, accurate information, and a spirit of cooperation, even in the midst of stark ideological differences. Given that many, if not most, Americans are disgusted with what passes for political debate in the United States these days, there is reason to hope that we might effect a change in the public atmosphere, but only through a principled commitment to civility. Civility demands the exercise of patience, humility, integrity, and mutual respect toward our fellow citizens, even those with whom we strongly disagree. This commitment to civility, though often absent in our current politics, is actually a virtue with deep roots in the American moral tradition.

American Christians have additional motivation for committing to civility, for the virtues of civility are not only American ideals but Christian moral values as well. Patience, humility, integrity, and mutual respect are biblical principles rooted in Christian convictions about God, the human condition, and the implications of divine grace. To be civil, then, turns out to be a matter of good citizenship and Christian faithfulness.

Humility

That great American theologian Dirty Harry once said, "A man has got to know his limitations." Christians know those limitations well, and those limitations compel us to be humble. Humility is a Christian virtue because it falls out of our theological anthropology, our faith-based understanding of what it means to be human. To be human is to recognize that we are not

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God and therefore to acknowledge that there are limits to the truth we may possess. Like Job looking into the whirlwind, we are constantly reminded that our knowledge of what is right and good is incomplete. We are not God, but are instead hindered by a limited perspective as finite creatures. Honest about our finitude, we admit that the convictions we hold may not be God's last word on the issues that confront us. What it means to be human is to be created as a masterpiece of God's wisdom and benevolence but created, nonetheless, with all the limitations that come from being creatures and not God.

What it means to be human also includes the realities of our failings. God created human beings as the reflection of the divine image, only to have us mar that reflection through pride and disobedience, relegating ourselves to a perpetual condition in which we turn from the good

to inordinate self-interest. As Christians, we call that understanding of the human condition “original sin.” Sin aggravates the restrictions that naturally come from our finitude and limits the confidence we can have in our knowledge of what is good and right. Sin makes us myopic, distorting our pursuit of truth with the astigmatism of self-interest and limited perspective. Even for the Christian who enjoys the advantage of grace and the guidance of Scripture, the effects of sin remain, so that it is easy to overestimate the confidence with which we understand God’s intentions for us and the world.

Even among Christians who profess a shared love of Jesus Christ and an affirmation of his Lordship, Christians who share a commitment to Scripture as the authoritative source for belief and living, there can be honest disagreement about how to apply those commitments in this world. The apostles Peter and Paul disagreed about the importance of circumcision in the Jewish community as a prerequisite for entry into Christian fellowship, and ever since the church has been wrought with disagreements of various sorts. Christians disagree over the meaning of the Eucharist, the moral acceptability of loans, the appropriateness of embryonic stem cell research, the standard for a just economic society, and the circumstances in which a war may be justified—among many, many other things! These disagreements remind us that no human community, not even the Church, has an air-tight agreement on the truth.

If we Christians are so intimately familiar with such disagreement, we should not be surprised by disputes over moral and political priorities in our religiously and philosophically diverse nation. None of this disagreement surprises Christians, because we subscribe to a theological anthropology that reminds us that there are limits to what we can know about what is right and true, because we are all sinful, finite human beings. Those convictions about human finitude and sin dictate that humility be a part of our character. And a theological commitment to humility requires that we make a habit of regularly admitting the limits to our own understanding. Humility urges each of us to admit that we could be wrong in matters small and significant. You could be wrong, or I could be wrong, but in the meantime we live together and struggle together as “pilgrim citizens,” muddling through our understanding of what Christian commitment obligates us to be and do as members of the communities in which we live.¹

Patience

This acknowledgement of our limitations encourages humility, but it also encourages our second virtue, patience. A Christian commitment to the virtue of patience is rooted both in our humble admission that our opponent may be more in the right than we are and in an affirmation of the sovereignty of God. If a Christian anthropology convinces us that we cannot be overly assured that we understand God’s wishes more properly than someone else, Christian theology also assures us that God is the final arbiter of truth and that God will make the right and the good known at the end of human history. Until that time, we pursue the truth, but with a certain amount of patience with the slow pace of human understanding, the mysteries of God, and the dissenting views of others. “But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters. . . . Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them” (1 Thess. 5:12-14).

As Karl Barth and other Christian thinkers have put it, we Christians are uncomfortably aware that we live in the “now, but not yet.” We live in the interim between the accomplishment of God’s reign and its realization. And in this interim, we have no choice but to be patient with a certain amount of moral and theological uncertainty and disagreement in society.

One way that Christians display this commitment to respect, along with the corresponding virtues of humility and patience, is with a promise to *listen* to each other, especially to sisters and brothers who disagree with them. Sometimes we Christians are pretty good at listening to one another, sometimes not. But listening is an expression of patience, and it’s an essential practice for a community committed to living faithfully. Much of the world around us claims that shouting matches and personal attacks count as “debate.” Christian humility and patience, by contrast, insist that we listen to our opponents, taking the time to really hear what they believe, why they believe it, and what they find mistaken or hurtful in our own convictions. We listen this way in the hopes that we might learn from them, because we are humble enough to recognize that we have no corner on the market of Christian truth. And we listen this way as an exercise in patience, confident that the God of history will reveal everything to us in God’s time, which

gives us the room to fumble through together with our partial understandings. Most of all, we listen this way as a expression of kinship and respect for our conversation partner, that no matter how much we disagree with them we honor them as a child of God.

Integrity

Despite serious disagreements, when we patiently engage others in conversation, it gives us the opportunity to display another virtue of Christian civility, integrity. When we refer to someone as having integrity, what do we normally mean? We usually recognize a person of integrity as someone who is true to themselves and their convictions, when it is convenient but also when it is not. Integrity is the kind of consistency of character the apostle commends in 2 Timothy, when he urges Christian evangelists faced with changing cul-

consistent with Christian ideals. Too often on display in politics are politicians who claim to be Christian but who engage in tactics and rhetoric that is ruthless, manipulative, or underhanded. They behave as if there is a hard line between their positions on issues—abortion, economic justice, or marriage, for instance—and their behavior in the political arena itself. Touting their religious motivations on certain issues, they strut their Christian credentials, but when it comes to campaigning, a resignation to “politics as usual” sets in, and they conveniently forget those Christian ideals of honesty and fair dealing. The virtue of integrity demands that Christians comport themselves with honesty and fairness in political debate, regardless of whether “politics as usual” rewards the opposite. Integrity requires leaders who will be guided by faith convictions in both their positions and their political practices. And integrity also

requires something from us citizens, that we make civility a prerequisite for a candidate who would have our vote. From a Christian point of view, integrity is essential to a commitment to civility.

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tural tides and “itching ears” to “proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). We expect the person of integrity to be allergic to hypocrisy and unafraid of prevailing winds. The Christian with integrity is true to faith and morals, in season and out of season.

In other words, to have integrity requires a commitment to honesty. A political leader with integrity is honest about the beliefs that motivate her decisions, even when such honesty isn’t politically expedient. Public officers have integrity when they own up to their mistakes and insist on full disclosure of errors and misdeeds. A candidate with integrity is honest about his opponent’s positions, even when it would be advantageous to manipulate his opponent’s statements to create the impression he stands for something else. To have integrity is to live honestly and with consistent character, even if that truthfulness puts you out of step with the culture around you.

Christian integrity in politics also includes engaging in the political game itself—whether as a citizen, a candidate, or a public officer—with behavior that is

Mutual Respect

The exercise of humility, patience, and integrity toward others as we wallow through our shared finitude and limited knowledge is itself a reflection of the final virtue essential for living together in disagreement, mutual respect. The term “mutual respect” does not sound very theological, resembling more the Enlightenment philosophy of Thomas Jefferson than the convictions of biblical theology. But the idea of respect is deeply rooted in Christian theology, as an important consequence to the doctrines of creation and grace.

Genesis tells us that God made us in the divine image: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). For more than twenty centuries, Christian theologians have been trying to identify what it is about human beings that reflects the image of God, or the *imago dei*. Is it our physical resemblance, our rationality, our morality, or the fact that we are fundamentally social beings? Regardless of your favorite interpretation, the idea that we are made in the *imago dei* represents the fundamental value of every human being in the eyes of God. Our sin distorts the reflection

of the divine in us, but we remain creatures of pinnacle value, beings worthy of respect, as a result of being created with this intention.

What adds to the value with which we were created is the worth attributed to us through God's grace. The respect afforded another human being as a reflection of the *imago dei* should be multiplied in light of God's indication of our continued value despite our sin. Christians believe that Jesus Christ was and is the communication of God's love for us, even with the injury we have done to the divine image we're supposed to reflect. God declares us respectable, lovable even, despite our sin. Furthermore, Jesus mandated to Christians that they mimic that divine love and respect in their own relationships with other persons: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). In the face of extreme differences, Christians resist the temptation to incivility, instead showing respect for those with whom they otherwise have very little in common out of respect for the *imago dei* in that other and in imitation of the grace God extends to each of us.

Because we will find ourselves extending respect to folks with whom we continue to disagree, an important corollary to mutual respect is tolerance of disagreement, what the Bible sometimes calls *forbearance*. Forbearance means to delay a negative reaction to another's action, inaction, or presence, or to tolerate or indulge another. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you" (Luke 6:37-38a). Given that we must admit the limits to our own confidence in what we believe right and true; given that God has assured us that God will make clear that truth in God's own time but that we must be patient with that time; given that we acknowledge something of value in every person, certainly every Christian, regardless of the errors we believe them guilty of; it seems appropriate to extend others the benefit of our doubt, our tolerance, even in matters of principled disagreement.

Conclusion

The virtues of civility—humility, patience, integrity, and mutual respect—are essential ingredients to biblical character. They are an apt description of the *vocation*, the calling, to which every Christian is invited. As the apostle wrote to the Ephesians, "I therefore, a prisoner

in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:1-6). Clearly these virtues are foundational to Christian character.

Of course, we must admit that Christians often have found it very difficult to live up to these standards of civility. At least as often as it has provided leadership in these virtues, the church historically has been guilty of displaying incivility and intolerance toward its perceived enemies, a point that Christianity's detractors are quick to point out. Nonetheless, the biblical values of our tradition commend civility to us, as both a standard for relating to one another in the church and as our witness to the world around us. To take seriously the Christian responsibility to civility requires the church to become, as theologian James Gustafson put it, "a community of moral discourse," in which its members enjoy a safe space for confronting together the moral issues that perplex and divide us.² As a community of discourse, the church equips its members with the moral tools for negotiating our disagreements. Civility, then, becomes a virtuous part of living together in faith. To live up to this theological mandate might be one more way the church can serve as a "city on a hill" for the world around us. Taking advantage of the resources for civility in our tradition, Christians just might become a model of civil dialogue for a political culture desperate for a better way.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. I've borrowed the term "pilgrim citizens" from Ronald Thiemann's book, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996).
2. See James M. Gustafson, "The Church: A Community of Moral Discourse," in *The Church as Moral Decision-Maker* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 83-95. For more on the role religious communities like the church might play as models of moral discourse, see my *In Defense of Civility*, especially 165-69.