



Civility: American Politics and Christian Responses

SESSION 3

| *What kinds of commitments, behavior, and practices does civility actually require?*

Introduction

Your decision to participate in a study like this is probably a good indication that you agree: incivility is a big problem in American politics (not to mention the larger culture). And if you weren't quite there when you began, hopefully by now this study (and the conversations you have been having with your fellow participants) has convinced you that respectful dialogue is an art worth cultivating. But what should that effort look like? What does the exercise of humility, patience, integrity, and mutual respect look like on the ground? What kind of effect do these virtues have on the shape of actual conversation between people with very different ideological commitments? What kinds of commitments, behavior, and practices does civility actually require?

Some writers in the area of conflict resolution like to distinguish between "debate" and "dialogue," arguing that debate is necessarily combative, competitive, and antagonistic, while dialogue implies relationship, cooperation, and mutual understanding. While I prefer still to use the term "debate" as a rough synonym for public dialogue or discourse, the distinction between the two types of attitude is helpful. When cultivated and practiced, the virtues of civility encourage us to see public discourse differently. Public debate should not be combat; it's not a war to be won, and our fellow debaters are not enemies to be conquered. Instead, civility urges

us to see public life as a relationship between members of the same civic family, and public discourse as cooperation in the common endeavor of ensuring our family's future. Our conversation partners in public debate are just that *partners* in the shared project of discerning truth, interpreting values and commitments, and figuring out what it is God or the common good requires of us in this time and place. Civility encourages us to see our fellow citizens, even those with whom we disagree,

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as sharing our commitment to the project of a stable and flourishing society. Seen through the lens of civility, then, public discourse is not a contest so much as it is a relationship, and like any other relationship, it requires work and intention to remain healthy.

So what concrete steps can we take to maintain humility, patience, integrity, and mutual respect in these relationships, especially in the face of sometimes intense ideological disagreement? Let me suggest a couple of specific ways we can infuse some civility into our public engagement with others:

1. Humanize the "other." One of the biggest reasons we fail to show respect for other people is because we simply don't know them. "Those people" who believe differently than we do on religion, abortion, gay marriage,

or the economy are strangers and foreigners to us. We don't know them; we don't understand their culture or lifestyles or convictions. We don't know them; our ignorance breeds fear, and that fear encourages anger, intolerance, and distrust.

Too often politicians take advantage of our ignorance to stoke our suspicion and fear. Manipulating an opponent's words to mean something besides their original intention is a tried-and-true tactic of political campaigning. Campaign ads deliberately take an opponent's words out of context, seizing on one particular part of an argument without the benefit of its larger context, in order to make an opponent appear to the voting public to be someone with abhorrent values. As a result, we don't get to know our candidates as much as we are presented straw men and women conveniently constructed for the opponent to attack.

In response, civility invites us to get to know our ideological opponents as *people*. In our communities, the easiest way to do this is to sit down and talk with them, face-to-face, not just about the issues that divide but about other interests, events, values, and concerns. Make an effort to find out more about them, who they are, what they care about, and what problems preoccupy them. In these local contexts, it could prove fruitful to begin meetings that will deal with matters of conflict with exercises designed to introduce participants to each other. Breaking up in small groups for a moment of personal sharing may be all it takes to humanize participants on the other side of the ideological line. And when we see each other as fellow human beings and citizens, rather than as strangers, we will be more inclined to extend to them the courtesy of respect, even in moments of intense disagreement.

Beyond local debates, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to have this kind of face-to-face encounter with one's ideological opponent. After all, a voter cannot call up a U.S. senator or presidential candidate just to get to know them better! But even in our contributions to national debates over national issues and figures, we can make an effort to regard our politicians as people. Pick up a sympathetic biography or listen to political coverage from a source you wouldn't normally turn to in order to get a more rounded view of the political leaders on the other side. As simple an exercise as this may help ward off the temptation to dismiss or demonize "opposition leaders" as heartless or stupid.

2. Walk in another person's shoes. In an age of sound bite campaigning, we have become quite poor at hearing deep and complicated arguments. We often lack the ear for detail anymore, so much so that politicians are reluctant to offer us subtle arguments for their positions, and they are all too happy to reduce their opponents to ridiculous sound bites. Political campaigns peddle in the stark, the simplistic, and the exaggerated because collectively Americans have shown little interest in or capacity for digesting anything more. Subtlety and nuance often are the first victims of incivility.

We have seen how the virtues of patience and integrity require something different. At the very least, they require that we respect the whole of a person's argument, instead of jumping to conclusions or painting our opponents as something they are not. Patience and integrity require that we listen to what our opponents are actually saying, not what we think they stand for. We make an effort to understand what they believe, and why they believe it, in all of its subtle detail. Only then can we respond to our conversation partner's actual argument with integrity and truthfulness.

How can we improve individually on this front? One strategy is to methodically recreate for ourselves the prevailing argument on the other side of an issue we're debating. Write it down, if it helps. What are their principal arguments? What values lie at the heart of their position? What concerns the "other side" so much about the position you hold? Recreating our opponent's argument in detail forces us to really hear the points another is making to us.

I employ a version of this exercise regularly in my ethics classes, forcing my students to represent in class debate the argument opposite to what they personally hold. Initially a large segment of the students objects to the exercise as trite and overused. But wouldn't you know, it works! In a class session on abortion, for instance, I ask students to identify themselves as pro-choice or pro-life, and then I assign the students to groups and make them argue the opposite position as if it was their own. In doing so, they are forced to identify the most compelling arguments on the other side, to internalize why abortion is so crucial an issue from that perspective, and to understand why the beliefs about abortion they personally hold are so troubling to people who disagree with them. Inevitably the students develop an appreciation for what is at stake on *both* sides of the abortion debate, even if they ultimately haven't changed their minds on their own convictions.

For that's ultimately what civil discourse requires, that we take seriously our conversation partners as persons, which includes taking seriously what they believe, why those beliefs are so personally important to them, and why our own beliefs wound them or strike them as so wrongheaded. To achieve this level of understanding requires that we exercise enough patience to really listen, integrity to get their arguments right, humility to admit the presence of wisdom or logic on the other side, and respect to take our ideological opponents' concerns seriously. And the exercise of all these virtues requires we take the time to walk in other people's shoes.

3. Refuse to see the devil where he ain't. Republicans hate women, the poor, and minorities. Democrats are the socialist enemies of free enterprise and a hard-earned dollar, and they believe in killing babies. These are the kinds of messages we receive from political "discourse" as it's practiced on the national stage! Much of what

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passes for political strategy in this country consists of depicting the other side as being in grotesque opposition to a select set of cherished American values. It's not enough to say, "we think we have a better way." A campaign hasn't tried hard enough if it doesn't call into question not only the opponent's political wisdom but also his intelligence, his religion, his patriotism, and his humanity.

Needless to say, citizens engaged in respectful dialogue reject the demonization of political opponents. The construction of straw men and women and engagement in personal attacks are out of bounds in a commitment to civility. As difficult as it is when the issues that divide us are so intimately important to us, citizens dedicated to civility draw a line between matters of substance (the proper focus of public debate) and the rhetoric of character assassination. Respectful dialogue distinguishes personal attacks from honest disagreement over matters of policy or values.

4. Employ healthy conversation strategies. Instead of empty negative rhetoric, respectful dialogue employs

strategies designed to get at the heart of issues and to elicit accurate understanding of multiple views. Public dialogue should take place in a setting that encourages everyone at the proverbial table to share her views honestly and openly. A moderator should enforce standards for the conversation that protect free exchange of ideas while ensuring that everyone has a chance to contribute and that the conversation moves along in a productive direction. Participants should have the opportunity to question others in the conversation directly, so they can better understand each others' views and the reasons for holding them. Comments should be made to the other participants to reduce generalizations and pontification, but they should refrain from personal attacks (and be ruled out of order if they cross the line). Different communities will construct different strategies for maintaining respectful dialogue. The point here is that the effort to ensure civil discourse needs to be intentional and structured, while avoiding an artificial rigidity that inhibits genuine conversation.

Whatever the particular arrangement employed, the participants should be confident those structures further the virtues of civility and provide room for honest sharing, patient listening, and open conversation.

Civility toward the Uncivil?

But what about those who refuse to show civility to us? What should be our relationship with those who refuse to sign on to this commitment to civility? I believe this is one of the toughest challenges confronting those who would labor to make our political arena more respectful. For to show patience and tolerance for truly uncivil arguments or behavior risks enabling, justifying, or legitimating those arguments or that behavior. On the other hand, if we disqualify them from our public debates, are we not guilty of hypocrisy, of showing civility only to those who agree with us?

I would argue that the virtues of civility require that we show respect for *all* persons in our public debate, regardless of the arguments they offer or the convictions they represent. But we are not necessarily required to respect, or make room for, the uncivil *ideas* themselves, that is, arguments that peddle in hate speech or violence. The distinction I am employing here is familiar to anyone who has been exposed to the thinking of Martin Luther King Jr. In his struggle against racial injustice,

King insisted on distinguishing between the convictions of prejudice and the human holders of prejudice. He insisted that the *imago dei*, the image of God, in every human person, dictates that we love even the bigoted sinner. But justice requires that we do not legitimate the hatred in their convictions by making an artificial place at the table for them.

But how will we tell the difference between arguments that are uncivil themselves and arguments we just don't agree with? Won't it be tempting to categorize arguments we don't agree with as uncivil and thus justifiably disqualified from public debate? The way we tell the difference is to ask whether the arguments themselves (and their representatives) abide by the virtues of civility. Are they offered with patient regard for the convictions of their opponents? Are they articulated with honesty and integrity? Are they offered with humility and openness to learning from those with whom they disagree? And do they show respect for all persons—those with similar convictions and those with different—as fellow human beings and citizens dedicated to the project of a stable society? If the answer to these questions is “yes,” then we are obligated to show them and their representatives civility in return, even if we vehemently disagree with the convictions they represent.

If, however, the arguments are based in a fundamental disrespect for those who disagree with them, if they are accompanied by the demonization of other people or characterization of them as somehow less than human, if they are so certain of their convictions that they dismiss counterarguments without a hearing, then they fail to live up to the virtues of civil discourse. They refuse to play by the rules of the game. They fail to buy in to

the essential conditions for a civil discourse and a stable society, and thus our response should be to pay them no attention. The proper response to an uncivil contribution to debate is simply to ignore it, to refuse to give it press time, attention, or a rise from us. Do not give it Nielsen ratings or a vote. Ignore it, with the hope that its ineffectiveness will make it simply go away.

Conclusion

In the end, this tactic of ignoring incivility may be just as useful as exercising civility. If one reason for incivility's prominence in contemporary American politics is that it sells votes and ad time, then a concerted effort by citizens to ignore such tactics undermines the assumption that incivility works. And when enough of us have impressed on our media and our politicians that we are not buying those tactics and will not reward them with our votes, then perhaps politicians and media will cater to what does capture our attention—substantive argument and robust debate.

If that happens, we ordinary citizens will have managed to do what our leaders have not. We will have set a tone for more respectful dialogue. We will have elevated the standards for public debate. We will have established humility, patience, integrity, and respect as the litmus test for what gets a hearing at the proverbial table of public discourse. Above all, we will have made some progress in the project of reclaiming our culture for the virtues of civility.

About the Writer

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