



Civility: American Politics and Christian Responses

SESSION 3

What kinds of commitments, behaviors, and practices does civility actually require?

Goals for the Session

Participants will confess their shortcomings when it comes to civil dialogue, write practical guidelines and commit to using them, and present reports or outline steps they will take to engage someone who thinks differently.

Preparing for the Session

- Prepare how you will present the radio clip from *This American Life* in the closing section of this session. There are three ways to do it: You may download the podcast free of charge onto a computer and use the speakers on the computer to play the segment to the group. You may download the podcast and sync it to an MP3 player (such as an iPod) and hook the player into speakers for the class to hear. Or you may stream it directly during class from the Internet (if you have wireless capabilities in your meeting space) using a computer or smartphone. Make sure people will be able to hear it. If none of these options are possible, you may either listen to the segment and give a summary of it to the group or have people listen to it at home during the week. If none of these are options, omit the activity.
- Again, talk with one or two people who have participated so far. Ask them for any ideas to improve the class if there is dissatisfaction. Consider checking in with groups during the week if they are working on a project to present.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Welcome
- Reviewing newsprint

EXPLORING

- A quick self-evaluation
- Prayer of confession
- Writing civility guidelines for ourselves
- When others are uncivil

RESPONDING

- Project presentations
- Making a plan

CLOSING

- Nemeses
- Prayer

- Depending on the size of your group and whether or not people will be presenting projects during this final session, plan your time wisely. If it is a large group it may be worth adding a fourth session in order to really engage the presentations and not go too quickly.
- Post the pieces of newsprint used so far on the wall.

- Note that the opening prayer will actually be a prayer of confession during the exploring time. The final prayer will again use the Prayer of St. Francis. Consider making copies of this well-known prayer for participants to take home.

Materials Needed

- Extra copies of Participant Handout 3
- Different colored pencils for activity 3
- Newsprint or board
- Markers
- Computer, MP3 player, or other device to play podcast

Teaching Tip

If you are not knowledgeable about podcasts and do not play the prologue to the *This American Life* episode in the conclusion, give the group the information and encourage them to listen to the episode at home next week. Listening to some current efforts at civility can be a nice way to conclude the class.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Welcome

Welcome participants as they arrive. Introduce any visitors.

2. Reviewing the Newsprint

Draw attention to the newsprint sheets on the wall. Are people happy so far with the definitions for civility and the virtues? Are there questions unanswered? Spend just a couple minutes filling in any additional definitions or things people want to add to the sheets.

Exploring (30 minutes)

3. A Quick Self-Evaluation

Distribute two colored pencils (in different colors) to each participant and have them spend a few minutes going through Participant Handout 3 underlining in one color ways they fail to practice civility. Have them underline in the other color practices they aspire to. (Some practices may be underlined with both colors if they aspire to them but fail to keep them regularly.) Then have them write a short prayer of confession based on these shortcomings.

4. Prayer of Confession

Prepare participants for the prayer of confession by telling them there will be a place in the prayer when they may admit something they fail to do by saying something like “When I . . . , forgive me.” They do not need to say anything, however, and may simply confess in silence.

Gather in a circle for the prayer and begin by saying: “If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from our unrighteousness. In humility and faith let us confess our sin to God.”¹

Almighty God,
you love us, but we have not loved you.
You call, but we have not listened.
We walk away from neighbors in need,
wrapped in our own concerns.
We condone evil, prejudice, warfare, and greed.
God of grace,
help us to admit our sin,
so that as you come to us in mercy,
we may repent, turn to you, and receive forgiveness²;

[Leader can begin by saying:]
“For times when I fail to . . . forgive me, Lord.”

[After all who wish to say something have spoken, continue the prayer as follows]
“For all things spoken and unspoken, Lord hear our prayer. Amen.”

[Then say]
“Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ is in a position to condemn us. And Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, and Christ prays for us. Friends, believe the good news of the gospel, in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Amen.”

5. Writing Civility Guidelines for Ourselves

Now have people review all the actions they aspire to in being civil and write a short, personal list of guidelines they will follow in being civil to others who believe differently than they do.

After five minutes, invite a couple of volunteers to read their guidelines.

6. When Others Are Uncivil (5 minutes)

Call attention to the section in Participant Handout 3 titled "Civility toward the Uncivil?" Facilitate a brief discussion centered around these questions:

- Do you agree with the author's approach? Why or why not?
- Do you agree with the suggestion to separate ideas from the persons who hold them?
- How can we tell whether an argument is uncivil or just something we disagree with?

Responding (10 minutes)

Depending on whether or not your group has prepared projects, do one of the following two activities.

7. Project Presentations

If people or groups have prepared presentations, invite them to present them now. You will need to agree on a time limit and what to do if there is not enough time.

8. Making a Plan

Based on what has been discussed these past three sessions, have each person choose a divisive topic they care about. They should choose a topic they disagree about with someone they know. Have them spend a few minutes outlining a plan for steps to take to discuss this issue with that person. After five minutes invite people to tell their plan to the large group.

Closing (15 minutes)

9. Nemeses

Play the 8-9 minute segment from *This American Life*. You can find it at their main Web site: www.thisamericanlife.org by searching for show #453, "Nemeses," in their archives. When you click on that show you can play the prologue. You will want to play from the beginning of the prologue to the 8:29 mark.

Facilitate a brief discussion asking these questions:

- Did either side change its position?

- If the sides didn't change their position, what *did* change through this process of dialogue?
- How does this inspire you to be an ambassador of civil dialogue?

10. Prayer

Close with the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi used in the first session 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

- Agree on the best of the guidelines participants create in activity 5 and have each participant create a poster or index card they can take home. Or work as a group to create a poster to place in your church.
- Invite a local expert on conflict resolution or civility to come and talk with the group about their work.
- Consider ways to repeat this experience with more people in your church or community.
- Work in small groups to create role-plays that teach people how to act in situations of incivility.

Key Scriptures

John 13:34-35

Endnotes

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 52.
2. *Ibid.*, 89.