



Civility: American Politics and Christian Responses

SESSION 1

The ideal of civility is deeply rooted in American politics.

Introduction

Americans increasingly recognize that the lack of civility in politics is a significant problem. Polls suggest most Americans believe that the lack of respectful political debate is a serious problem for the country and that our politics are more divisive than they have ever been in the past.¹ Now it would be naive for us to argue that the incivility that runs rampant in American politics today is entirely new to the scene. Anyone familiar with the history of political campaigning in this country knows different. In the presidential election of 1800, for instance, John Adams's supporters labeled Thomas Jefferson an infidel, an atheist, and (worst of all!) a friend of the French. Jefferson's supporters countered by depicting Adams as a warmonger and a little nutty. Incivility in politics is as old as America itself, but many would argue that the level of incivility in the current political culture has reached unprecedented heights.

Why the change? The cooperative spirit that allowed politicians to govern despite serious ideological difference has been replaced with deep distrust and dislike for folks on the other side of the aisle. Gone are the days of Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neil waging political battle with one another, only to sit down together away from the cameras and forge compromises on important matters. Now we have Democrats and Republicans playing chicken with the American economy, blaming

and demonizing each other in the process. Politics at the national level, and in some state governments, has become less about governing than about winning, sometimes at any cost. Politics is a contest with increasingly few standards for sportsmanship. Impatience, mutual suspicion, hubris, and a polarizing "us against them" attitude divide our national leaders against each other and put them at odds with the common good. As seen in

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the debt crisis of 2011, incivility is a dangerous problem for politics because it can render our leaders incapable of governing responsibly.

This session and the two sessions that follow argue for a better way of thinking about politics and public debate. Rather than treating politics as a winner-takes-all, no-holds-barred fight to the finish, I want to encourage us to see politics as discourse, as conversation, and as a cooperative venture in which we work together, despite our sometimes intense differences, to ensure the common good. To do so requires that we regard those with different ideologies and values not as enemies but as partners in the protection of a stable society. It requires

that we replace angry and insulting political banter with respectful dialogue. It requires that we moderate our political discourse with the virtues of civility. In this first session I will suggest what we might mean when we commit ourselves to a renewal of civility and how that ideal is deeply rooted in the history of American politics. In the second session I will show how civility is also a long-standing virtue (or set of virtues) in Christianity. Finally, in the third session I will explore what a commitment to civility does and does not require in real live political debate. Together these sessions are written to encourage you to think creatively and energetically about how you and your community can contribute to a renewal of civility in our public life.

The Four Virtues of Civility

Civility represents a commitment to negotiating our differences in a way that allows us to live with one another in peace and with respect. Civility does not attempt to ignore or minimize our differences, but it insists that there is a better way to deal with them than the mutual disparagement and hostility we see so regularly on display in our current political scene. In my book, *In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues That Divide Us*, I define civility as “the exercise of patience, humility, integrity, and mutual respect, even (or especially with) those with whom you disagree.”² Only through a collective commitment to these virtues do I think we will find our way out of the polarization that now paralyzes American politics.

Patience is a key component of the virtue of civility. It pushes us to relate to our ideological opponent as a conversation partner, not simply as an obstacle to getting what we want or a heathen to evangelize. Exhibiting patience in civil conversation leads us to talk with those who disagree with us, but at least as importantly, patience insists that we *listen* to them. Civility requires that we have enough decency to hear our neighbor’s position in his or her own terms and familiarize ourselves with the values and viewpoints that inform it. Patience requires that we take the time to understand our opponent’s position, rather than dismissing it out of hand, trivializing it, or attributing our own slanted reinterpretation of those beliefs. It requires that we extend the courtesy of space to others to articulate their most deeply held beliefs in full, without the threat of ridicule or stifling.

Related to this virtue of patience, **integrity** is the com-

mitment to represent our own positions and those of our opponents truthfully. Integrity demands that we represent and respond to their positions honestly and accurately. It prohibits the quick dismissal or intentional mischaracterization of our opponents’ views, which are popular strategies in the current incivility in American public discourse. Integrity also insists that we represent our own views fully and fairly. Participants in public debate who lack integrity will misrepresent their motivations or will exhibit hypocrisy in their positions across different public issues. By contrast, integrity requires that we remain consistent and honest in our reasons for advocating our positions.

The third virtue of civility, **humility**, recommends that we enter every public conversation open to the possibility that we could change our minds, that we could be persuaded to think something different than we believe now. Humility reminds us that we do not know everything there is to know on a particular issue, so that it is likely we have something to learn from the perspective of our ideological opponents. To exercise humility does not require that we abandon our convictions, but it does require that we remain open to the likelihood that the folks on the other side of the conversation might have something to teach us about their own beliefs, about the consequences of ours, or about the issues that divide us.

Even if we enter public debate with a deep commitment to our beliefs, humility keeps us open to the possibility that our beliefs may be refined by what we encounter in those conversations. Sometimes that refining might be drastic; we may conclude after conversation that we were wrong and our opponent was right, and we may reverse our position. Or perhaps our beliefs are informed in more subtle ways by an openness to the position of others. Perhaps we leave the conversation with substantially the same views, but we understand an aspect of the issue better than we did before. Perhaps we sympathize with our opponents and have a greater appreciation for the way our position causes them pain than we did before (even if we ultimately conclude that we cannot conscientiously abandon our views). What humility ultimately signals is that we think there’s something worthwhile to *engaging* another in conversation, rather than just talking at them.

This engagement with others in conversation shows a **mutual respect** for them, which is the fourth virtue of

civility. Mutual respect demands that even in the midst of intense disagreement, we honor our opponents as human beings, as citizens with a right to engage in politics and to be heard. It reminds us that, in the midst of our most meaningful and intractable disagreements, we can thoroughly disagree with another's views while still valuing them as fellow citizens who presumably care as deeply about our national well-being as we do. Mutual respect, then, certainly requires that we avoid demonizing one another, as is so common in our public debates. It means not disqualifying your neighbor from the conversation or dismissing his views as unimportant because he is conservative, or liberal, or religious, or not. Suggesting that God hates your ideological opponent, or that she is un-American or evil for disagreeing with you, makes it difficult to show respect. Nazi allusions and name-calling certainly fail to show regard for others as fellow citizens. By contrast, exercising civility ultimately requires respect for the other as a person and fellow citizen, with a right to represent his or her moral worldviews in public. Civility means that even if I think you are tragically mistaken, I honor your right to participate in the American enterprise of public moral conversation.

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Patience, integrity, humility, and mutual respect—the collective exercise of these virtues provides the foundation for a return to civility. There are probably other virtues that are important to civility, too. Self-control, tolerance, and a good sense of humor come to mind; perhaps you can think of others. What these values have in common is that a recommitment to them is essential for a return to civility in American politics. Civility promises to make our political processes more effective, but more importantly it contributes to a stable society. In the end, civility serves the common good better than the divisiveness that paralyzes our current political landscape.

What Civility *Doesn't* Require

With all this emphasis on listening and learning, patience and respect, it may be tempting to think that a

commitment to civility means that we should shy away from strong convictions altogether. Does believing that I am right and others are wrong necessarily undermine civility?

Many critics of civility will make just this objection. Politics is conflict, say the critics, and so the call for civility is unrealistic. It requires people to round off their dedication to their most cherished values in the name of tolerance. And it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of politics, which is a contest for power and social control. Dreams of a civil politics are naive at the least, these people argue, and dangerous to both politics and a commitment to serious moral convictions at the worst.

In some ways, the critics of civility are right. The nature of politics *is* conflict, so any attempt to rid politics of conflict undermines the nature of politics itself. But civility does *not* require us to avoid conflict. It is important to distinguish between civility and passivity. Passivity assumes all conflict is bad, so if we are in conflict we must be doing something wrong. Passivity seeks to avoid conflict at all costs, even at the cost of a robust engagement of the issues that most perplex or divide us.

By contrast, a commitment to civility as I understand it takes for granted that politics involves conflict, because politics is the competition of various visions of a stable society, visions that are not necessarily

easily compatible. So it is naive to try to rid politics of all conflict. But I contend that there is good conflict and bad conflict. Bad conflict is demonizing, destructive, and intolerant. Good conflict is patient, engaging, enlightening, and productive. Rather than avoiding conflict, efforts at civility simply seek to make the inevitable conflict in a civil society, well, civil—productive rather than destructive. Those who argue that civility amounts to passivity misunderstand what civility is after.

I can be zealously committed to my values and convictions and still respectful of those who disagree with me. I can be firmly committed to my worldview and still exhibit enough humility to allow for the possibility that I could learn something from you. I can be confident in my arguments while still respecting your right to offer yours. I can respect you as a citizen and a human being

while thinking your views are tragically mistaken. And I can be firmly committed to my convictions while still extending patience and integrity while you articulate your own. Civility requires neither passivity nor relativism. It does not require that we avoid conflict, and it does not require that we deny that there is a right and a wrong. It simply requires that as we are negotiating the conflict in our politics and engaging one another's differing understandings of what makes for a fruitful and stable society, we do so with patience, humility, integrity, and, above all, mutual respect.

Inciting Incivility

Among the factors that contribute to the disease in American politics is the polarizing role of the media, in particular cable news and the Internet. The media operate on market principles; they are in the business of selling air-time, exposure, and advertising. They want you to watch their channel more than the others. And many of them long ago decided that the best way to do that was to cater to the crassest impulses in the American population, to play to particular constituencies and feed them what they want to hear. So MSNBC, FOX News, and other outlets abandoned any pretense to balanced reporting (despite their slogans). Rather than expanding and challenging our views on important issues, they instead feed us selectively chosen information and packaged propaganda that largely confirms and intensifies the ideological predispositions of their most strident viewers.

The Internet can be even more polarizing and even less obliged to standards of decency and decorum. It also brings another threat to civility—anonymity. Blogs and chat rooms encourage “hit and run” commentary. Hiding behind the protective veil of a user name, faceless antagonists offer hateful critique of political figures and events, savagely excoriating anyone foolish enough to offer an opinion with which they disagree. Absent any accountability for their remarks, bloggers sometimes demonstrate the vicious depths to which our incivility has fallen.

Civility in American History

The unprecedented access to information and the unbridled means of communication that the Internet provides are the main reasons that incivility is at an all-time high in American politics. Thankfully, though, this is not all there is to say about our political culture. In contrast to the viciousness often on display presently, there is a

larger tradition of civility that runs deep in the history of American politics. John Adams feared the rise of political parties in the new republic precisely because he thought they would undermine the civility on which the social good depended. In a letter to a prominent Massachusetts politician, Thomas Jefferson lamented the discord that resulted from that contested election of 1800 in which he was elevated to the presidency. He yearned for a restoration of public civility, insisting that “it will be a great blessing to our country if we can once more restore harmony and social love among its citizens. I confess, as to myself, it is almost the first object of my heart, and one to which I would sacrifice everything but principle.”³

Abraham Lincoln was arguably the embodiment of civility. He prosecuted a war with a saintly combination of conviction and humility, always prioritizing the restoration of national kinship and reaching out to his bitterest political enemies (even giving some of them cabinet posts in his administration). In his second inaugural address he reminded his fellow Americans that both North and South bore responsibility for the Civil War and that the country's future depended on how quickly the United States could get down to the business of healing together:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.⁴

A century later, Martin Luther King Jr. reminded his fellow activists for civil rights to love the image of God reflected in every human being, even the staunchest white supremacist, without retreat from the conviction that segregation was an evil that had to be eradicated from the American landscape. And in an important speech delivered at American University, President John F. Kennedy commended civility as a pathway to both domestic and global peace:

So let us not be blind to our differences, but let us also direct attention to our common interests and the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's futures. And we are all mortal.⁵

Despite the rancorous nature of political debate in American history, our greatest leaders have still held out the hope for greater civility. Indeed, civility is rooted in our founding principles. Civility historically has been a cherished, if not consistently practiced, American virtue, and its importance to our collective identity is part of the reason so many Americans are so intuitively turned off by what we see in our news today.

Conclusion

As many of our greatest leaders knew, the future of our national character depends on our commitment to living in civility with one another. The exercise of patience, integrity, humility, and respect toward one another allows us to negotiate our deepest disagreements without paralyzing our nation in gridlock and mutual hostility. Civility represents our national character at its best. It also represents virtues of great importance to the Christian theological tradition. As the next session will suggest, American Christians should see the commitment to civility as patriotic duty *and* religious responsibility.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. See, for instance, the Public Religion Research Institute/Religion News Service Religion News Survey (November 2010).
2. John 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).
3. Thomas Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry (a letter also known as "Reconciliation and Reform"), The Electronic Text Library of the University of Virginia, 1089: <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefLett.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=138&division=div1>.
4. Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865. The speech can be found at <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html>.
5. John F. Kennedy, American University Commencement Address, June 10, 1963. The speech can be found at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkamericanuniversityaddress.html>.