

**“Grace in the Midst of Differences:
A Call for Civility”**
Politics, Polarization, and Our Christian Witness #5
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(Col. 3:12-17)

Introduction.

The week of September 28th earlier this fall was quite a week in America. It began with the introduction of Amy Coney Barrett who was nominated to the Supreme Court, and it ended with the president in the hospital with the coronavirus. But in between on Tuesday night we had the first presidential debate between President Trump and former Vice President Biden.

And what a debacle that debate was. It was certainly not one of the highpoints in American politics. One of the more shocking statistics that came out of the debate didn't even relate to either of the candidates but that the debate itself received an 83 percent disapproval rating by the American public. In other words, everyone thought this was a terrible national conversation.

The headlines that followed up on this event said things like this: “It’s like the worst fight your uncles have ever had at Thanksgiving.” “No one wins.” “Race to the Bottom Debate.” And “Why are there so many more days left until the election?” I think that last headline is in the form of a prayer! “How long, O Lord, will we have to endure and get through all this?”

People have always had problems getting along in this world, but right now there seems to be something different about the contentiousness, the disunity, and the acrimony of what’s happening in this moment in American politics and in our country. John Perkins, a remarkable civil rights leader and follower of Jesus Christ, spoke at a gathering recently, and he asked, “Why is it that in this generation we are attempting to turn hate into an asset?” These days we’re experiencing levels of contempt in our culture that seem to be unprecedented. The words of Mother Teresa ring true in a moment like this, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten we belong to each other.”

How is a Christian to bear witness to his/her faith in these contentious times? How can we offer an alternative picture of how people are supposed to deal with each other when differences exist between us? And what does living out our faith with grace really look like for the follower of Jesus Christ when it comes to the political arena, or any other arena for that matter?

I. The Problem of Incivility Today.

A couple of Sundays ago, there was a full page in the Sunday Review section of the *New York Times* which had the words emblazoned on the front of it – “America is Ungovernable.” It captures the concern, perhaps even fear, that many people have these days about the

polarization in our country. Some people are openly wondering about the future of democracy in America.

Aristotle was a philosopher who lived in the 4th century BC, and one of the subjects he wrote about was government and politics. He boiled down the various forms of government that existed in the world to three – monarchy, aristocracy, and polity (which he described as an enlightened form of democracy). He said that because of the desire for power, a monarchy tended to devolve into tyranny. Aristocracy tended to devolve into oligarchy. And polity, or democracy, tended to devolve into mob rule. We see some of that going on in our country today, and it's led to a breakdown of community and rampant incivility.

Incivility is defined as rude or unsociable conduct or speech. It's a general term for social behavior which lacks the kind of good manners that encourages people to communicate with respect, restraint, and responsibility. In the workplace, incivility can show up as bullying, harassment, and isolation. On social media, 73 percent of people surveyed said they had personally experienced incivility online, and 92 percent said that social media allows people to be more rude and aggressive compared to when they are in person.¹

Nowhere is the problem of incivility more prevalent than in the world of politics. *U.S. News and World Report* came out with an article entitled "The American Uncivil Wars." It confronts the rude state of affairs in politics today, and it concludes that incivility is one of the greatest problems facing America. According to a recent survey, the majority of Americans expect incivility will get worse in the years to come, and they believe that politicians, the internet, social media, and the news media are the main ones to blame. But we're at fault too, aren't we?

What are we to do? How can we change this situation in America? And as Christians, how are we to become counter to the culture and learn to express our disagreements in a manner that honors the Lord in a better way?

II. Grace in the Midst of Differences: A Call for Civility.

Civility is a Latin word that originated in 509 BC when the Romans founded their republic and warrior kings were driven from the city. The word *civis* meant "citizen," and it referred to people who were citizens in the city of Rome. The word matured into the Latin word *civitas* which meant the rights and duties of being a citizen. And then *civilitas* appeared, meaning the art and science of citizenship.

In creating an empire that eventually expanded around the world, the Romans believed in honest debate, civility in the streets, and treating adversaries with respect, even after defeating them in battle. Historians who have studied the fall of the Roman Empire have tried to discover the reasons why this great empire failed, and many see the loss of civility as one of the major reasons for their demise. People stopped treating each other with respect, and the Empire itself ceased to treat those they conquered with respect too. The very values that made the Roman Empire great were the values they left behind, and it led to their downfall and ultimate ruin. Could the same be happening in America today?

In Paul's letter to the Colossians we read a profound statement which I believe is a foundation for any Christian who wants to make our world a better place and ensure that everyone in our community is treated with dignity and respect. Verse 12 contains a five-fold list of great Christian virtues, we would do well to try and cultivate them in our own personal lives.

They are compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. The five virtues form a powerful combination. If these character qualities are present in the lives of individuals and in society as a whole, it will significantly reduce friction and conflict.

Compassion speaks of a tenderness expressed toward someone who is suffering. The word that is translated **kindness** combines the ideas of goodness and graciousness. **Humility and gentleness**, which are related terms, were not considered virtues by the pagan world at the time of Paul. However, the NT deepened and enriched the meaning of these words and made them two of the noblest of the Christian graces. **Humility** came to describe a humble disposition in which a person didn't think of themselves more highly than they ought, and **gentleness** was being considerate of the rights and feelings of others. It was the opposite of arrogance and self-assertiveness. **Patience**, or long-suffering, means self-restraint. It's what enables one to bear insult and even injury without resorting to retaliation, and it's mentioned elsewhere in Scripture as an attribute of God Himself (Rm.2:4) and a fruit of the Spirit (Gal.5:22).

All of these characteristics speak of the need to look beyond our own concern, and even our own hurt, and to seek to understand and care about others, even those with whom we disagree. In verse 13, Paul writes, *"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."* This verse expands what Paul has just said, and he urges us to be willing to bear with those whose faults or unpleasant traits are irritating to us. And we should also be willing to forgive people when they wrong us.

If our country is ever going to become the great nation it aspires to be, it's citizens will need to recover these character qualities. Even if our leaders don't reflect these characteristics, you and I can form a resistance movement to the tide of incivility in our world today. We can sail against the crosscurrents of our culture, and we can do it for Christ. It should be our aim to express these Christian qualities in our dealings with each other when we disagree, even if no one else around us is willing to.

III. Civility in Practice.

Twentieth century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote, "Whenever the followers of one political party persuade themselves that the future of the nation is not safe with the opposition in power, it becomes fairly certain that the nation's future is not safe, no matter which party rules. For such public acrimony endangers the nation's health more than any specific policy."² Clearly, we are at the moment Niebuhr once feared. Incivility isn't just a political problem. It's a theological problem for American Christians, and we've got to find a better way to deal with people with whom we disagree.

In contrast to the negativity our culture accepts as "politics as usual," I would urge each of us to pursue a radical commitment to cultivating civility in all our social interactions. Civility requires that we treat people with whom we disagree as conversation partners, not obstacles to overcome. And we can do this even as we acknowledge our disagreements with them and remain committed to our own particular convictions.

Civility doesn't guarantee that we will reach agreement on issues like abortion, sexual mores, racial justice, or the environment, but infusing our public debates with civility promises to make our exploration of those disagreements more productive and fruitful. Civility doesn't ask us to retreat from our most cherished values, but it does require us to negotiate our

disagreements in healthier ways that honor and respect even our adversaries as human beings made in the image of God.

Let me give you an example of what this looks like in real life. One day after the 2016 election, an Asian American woman named Justine Lee decided she needed to do something about the problem of incivility in America. Along with her friend Tria Chang, they co-founded a group they called Make America Dinner Again. The group says that while people have many venues where they can protest, donate, and fight, Make America Dinner Again is a place where people can learn to listen.

The dinners are small, six to ten guests who hold to a variety of political viewpoints. During the evening, facilitators help ensure respectful conversation and guide activities, while everyone shares some good food. What is the common denominator for all who attend a dinner? They want to know and understand their neighbors who may think differently. Make America Dinner Again is about developing empathy for other people, and it's about creating a safe space where perspectives are respectfully aired, and unlikely relationships are formed.

Here's another example. In October 2015, there was an unexpected controversy on the campus of Yale University over – of all things – Halloween costumes. Administrators, wanting to avoid hurting the feelings of minority students, issued instructions not to wear culturally insensitive costumes like feathered headdresses, turbans, and sombreros.

One professor, Erika Chrisakis, objected to what she felt like was a heavy-handed bureaucratic intervention, and she sent an open email to the university suggesting an alternative way to handle potential conflicts. Acknowledging the good intentions of the administrators, she nonetheless suggested that there wasn't a need for the university's administration to police their student's attire. She suggested the students were mature enough to handle the matter, and she wrote, "If you don't like the costume someone is wearing...tell them you are offended. Talk to each other. Free speech and the ability to tolerate offense are hallmarks of a free and open society."

A firestorm ensued. Students demanded that both she and her husband Nicolas, who was a sociology professor, be removed from their posts. An angry student mob surrounded Nicholas as he tried to get in his car and berated him for two hours. A video of the episode went viral, and it showed students calling him "disgusting" and ordering him to be quiet while they screamed at him. He was accused of being a racist. No one, least of all the Christakis, had defended insensitive Halloween costumes. Erika had simply suggested that college students were not so fragile as to be unable to work out these matters without bureaucratic regulation.

While being berated, Nicholas talked civilly, and he looked the students in their eyes. And when the viral video made the Yale students look like bullies, Christakis tweeted, "No one, especially no students exercising their right to free speech, should be judged just on the basis of a short video clip." In the coming days, he and his wife invited students who disagreed with them to join them for brunch at their home. They invited them to brunch! It was an invitation to break bread with people they didn't agree with. That is the spirit of liberty in action.³

It's way too easy for us to reduce other people to their political points of view. While it's important for us to acknowledge our beliefs and convictions, and the need to speak up and contend for them, it is impossible to have meaningful dialogue and make progress in this nation if we are unwilling to treat others with dignity and respect. And civility is impossible if we are unwilling to listen.

Conclusion.

Take an inventory of your life the past couple of weeks. What have your comments been like in person or on social media when talking with other people about politics? Is there anything of which you need to repent today? What about how you think about the candidates you don't like. Do you view them as people made in the image of God, or do you demonize them, like I tend to? And how does God want you to engage differently when it comes to conversations about politics, or any other subject for that matter?

We are living in a period of unprecedented upheaval. Community is collapsing, anxiety is building, and we're destroying each other with our political differences and what could even be called our political hatreds. This can't endure. And if it does, America won't. The alternative is to work to restore community in this new day, and it will require a new neighborliness rooted in civility. How is God calling you to be a part of this new work of His Holy Spirit?

Whoever is elected president in November, Jesus is still King, and God is still on His throne. As my friend Rick Wesley reminded us during the time when our church was seeking dismissal to a new denomination, "There is no panic in heaven."

I am freed up from having to save the world, and I can leave the future of this country in God's hands. Jesus is the only Savior, and He is at work both to will and to do according to His good pleasure. My calling is to reflect His life and love in all my dealings with people, which means I should treat each person in a civil manner, even when I disagree with them, and even when they make me angry. Will you join me in this holy crusade?

¹ Statics about and some ideas regarding incivility are drawn from an online article by Ray Williams - <https://raywilliams.ca/the-rise-of-incivility-in-america/>.

² Reinhold Niebuhr, "Democracy and the Party Spirit" (1954), in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1957), 66.

³ This story is adapted from Ben Sasse's book *Them* (New York: St. Martin Press, 2018), p. 152.