

# Voices: A call for returning Christian civility to politics

August 5, 2019

“Let’s talk politics and religion.” For many, this suggestion sounds the same as, “Let’s give each other 100 paper cuts.”

When these topics emerge in conversations, many instantly go into flight, fight or freeze mode. “How about them Cowboys,” is a classic example of flight.

Discussing politics combined with faith can be highly personal and immensely explosive. In our society today, we seemingly lack the ability to discuss the complexities of politics and religion unless we agree with everyone around us and just bash “the other side” together.

Discussions with others who differ from our views often don’t go well, including among Christians who disagree with each other. In the past few years, Christian leaders have referred to fellow Christians with whom they disagree politically as “[spineless morons](#)”—in the case of Robert Jeffress speaking of NeverTrump evangelicals—and as “theocrats”—in the case of Jim Wallis, in *God’s Politics* when he included Christian Fundamentalists with Al Qaeda and the Taliban. This type of incivility on all sides has detrimental effects on Christian witness.

## Effects of Christian incivility

According to the research found in David Kinnamon’s *UnChristian*, non-Christians associate Christians with terms like “hypocritical,” “insensitive” and “judgmental.” These descriptions are opposite of how we should be known.

Why have Christians abandoned Christ-likeness for gutter politics? Perhaps we've abandoned understanding opposing points of view to embrace "fighting back." Perhaps we've abandoned humility and embraced "owning the other side."

Or maybe we've abandoned moral leadership for transactional politics and political gain. Maybe we've abandoned the eternal values of the gospel for temporary political expediency at any cost. And in the process, we've ceased practicing civility in our engagements with the culture in order to "win the argument."

We must return to civility.

## **Returning to civility**

Our witness as Christians is harmed when we are not civil.

Civility doesn't require that we always agree. Christians can and will have different political viewpoints. So often, though, we convince ourselves that "true Christians" must hold a certain political view.

Our tribalism leads to harsh rhetoric and attitudes that do nothing to further the kingdom of God. However, no biblical mandate exists requiring Christians to agree politically. And no political party holds a monopoly on political positions.

We shouldn't apologize for disagreeing politically but should seek to understand or humbly to persuade others while also examining our own motivations and biases.

The political issues we face are quite complex. We may try to approach each issue with a right or wrong position, but when examined, we find there is quite a bit of gray in each issue.

In his book, *Love Your Enemies*, Arthur Brooks stresses we should not agree more or disagree less but should disagree better by “engaging in earnest debate while still treating everyone with love and respect.”

## **The tension of civility**

Because disagreeing better can be hard, we often are tempted to avoid controversial topics altogether. But that’s not civility. That’s abandoning our calling to be salt and light in the world.

The absence of tension or disagreement does not mean we are practicing civility. In fact, our silence on issues may lead to further incivility and injustice to those most affected by our silence

Concerning abandonment of political involvement, Jon Meacham, in *The Soul of America*, wrote, “Those who disdain the arena are unilaterally disarming themselves in the great contests of the soul ... To believe something creates an obligation to make that belief known and to act upon it within the arena.”

We must remain engaged as selfless, servant leaders seeking to promote the common good of humanity.

## **Three civil values**

The prophet Micah shares three values God requires of us: justice, mercy and humility.

Do we see these values in our political discussions today? Not just on cable news, but in our interactions with others, do our conversations emphasize justice, mercy and humility?

Or have we solidified our views—even if those views are proven to be

misinformed—and refuse to listen to others, thereby revealing arrogance, selfishness and hypocrisy?

## **Our responsibility to be civil**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “True peace is not merely the absence of tension, it is the presence of justice.”

In order to “do justly,” we will experience tension outwardly and inwardly. This tension is a good thing and not something to avoid.

We shouldn’t cover our eyes or ignore situations because we fear disagreements. Our silence in the face of injustice isn’t civil, but is an example of not loving our neighbor.

In his final message before he was assassinated, Dr. King shared his take on the Good Samaritan. Discussing the difference between the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan as they each pondered just what was their responsibility to the man on the side of the road, Dr. King said: “And so the first question that the priest asked, the first question that the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’”

As Christians, we don’t have the option to avoid political disagreements in order to avoid discomfort. We have the responsibility to speak out for justice and mercy with humility.

Civility requires that we learn how to communicate, reflect and listen in uncomfortable situations, not avoid them altogether.

As Christians, we need to lead the way in practicing civility as we respond to Dr. King’s question: “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”

*Jack Goodyear is the dean of the Cook School of Leadership and professor of political science at Dallas Baptist University. The views expressed are those solely of the author.*