



"Kindness makes a person attractive. If you would win the world, melt it, do not hammer it."

—Alexander Maclaren

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Recovering Civility

A session of the British Parliament, particularly the House of Commons, can be almost hilarious. Speakers there are frequently interrupted with hissing, booing, and other forms of caustic disagreement, but through it all a kind of strange (and hypocritical) courtesy exists between the MPs. One of them might thoroughly demolish another's ideas, crushing his proposals with sledgehammer blows of ridicule, all the while calling him "our Distinguished Colleague" or "the Learned Gentleman." It is a strange mixture of courtesy and near-hatred.

In America, we have something similar in talk radio. Depending on the host, the atmosphere ranges from amiable to vicious. Every once in a while, even on the normally placid shows, someone calls in with venom dripping from his or her voice, and a verbal melee ensues. If the two sides were in a ring, it would be a death-match. On talk radio, everybody hates something and feels the need to vent it in public. It is refreshing to hear the rare caller who respectfully pitches his side of the argument and then takes his leave to let someone else have a turn.

And of course, we are thankfully near the end of another mudslinging political campaign. Politicians drag the country through the muck and the mire every election, something they have done for more than two centuries. They always begin by declaring to campaign cleanly and only on the issues, and it always ends up that they really focus on the other candidate's determination to take away Grandma's retirement or to sell the nation down the river. The electorate often chooses the candidate with the lesser amount of mud still sticking to him.

Such incivility filters down to all levels of society. When was the last time you heard a kid other than your own say, "Yes, ma'am," or, "No, sir"? When was the last time you saw a young person give up his place in line or his seat to an older person? When was the last time you noticed a young person not sullen or disrespectful to any authority figure like a policeman?

The April 26, 1996, issue of *US News and World Report* published a cover story by John Marks titled "The American Uncivil War: How crude, rude, and obnoxious behavior has replaced good manners and why it hurts our politics and culture." It featured a then-recent poll that revealed that 90% of Americans thought incivility was a serious problem, and almost half considered it extremely serious, "evidence of a profound social breakdown." The article continues:

More than ninety percent of those polled believe that it contributes to the increase of violence in the country; eighty-five percent believe that it divides the national community; and the same number see it as eroding healthy values like respect for others.

Talk to Americans, and a picture emerges of a nation addicted to the pleasures of an unruly society with emphasis on individual expression, flouting convention, and its free vent of emotion, but shocked at the effect of this unruliness. Americans feel embattled in their personal and professional lives by a rising tide of nastiness.

Says Martin Marti, a philosopher of religion who has written on this subject, "The alternative to civility is first incivility and then war."

It is good to remember the principle that if a thing happens in [the world](#), it will eventually find its way into the church. Human nature will find a way to rear its ugly head. Living in the culture day by day, we find it difficult not to absorb its attitudes and behaviors and begin to practice them. We have to be especially concerned about this in terms of our children, who often encounter the world in full force at the nation's godless school and on the playground.

The apostle Paul calls these evil attitudes and behaviors "[works of the flesh](#)," listing a number of them in [Galatians 5:19-21](#):

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: [adultery](#), fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, [heresies](#), envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the [kingdom of God](#).

We will cull out five of those mentioned in verse 20: hatred, contentions, outbursts of wrath, dissensions, and heresies. A few short explanations from commentator William Barclay in *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* will help us grasp what kind of attitudes these are.

He writes, "The idea [of "hatred"] is that of a man who is characteristically hostile to his fellow men; it is the precise opposite of the Christian virtue of [love](#) for the brethren." Hatred, then, is the exact counterpart of *philadelphia* love, love of the brethren. It is 180° removed from what [God](#) wants us to show in our lives. How can we love God if we hate one another ([I John 4:20](#))?

"Contention" or "variance" (KJV), Barclay says, "more commonly . . . means the rivalry which has found its outcome in quarrellings and wrangling." It is competitive arguing, fighting another verbally to prove who is best. It is quarreling to win, to have the last word. Such contention occurs on talk radio every day, and sometimes our doctrinal "discussions" mimic it.

On "outbursts of wrath," which could be translated as "uncontrolled temper," he comments, "The word Paul uses means bursts of temper. It describes not an anger which lasts but anger that flames out and then dies." Normally placid individuals can be provoked to explode in fury and live to regret what their lack of [self-control](#) produced.

Of "dissensions" or "seditions" (KJV), Barclay says, "Literally the word means *a standing apart*. . . . *Dissension* describes a society . . . where the members fly apart instead of coming together." This word portrays a person who goes off on his own because he holds a different opinion than the group does. In this way, the group, community, or church fragments. Sound familiar?

Finally, Barclay writes, "[Heresies] might be described as crystallized dissension. . . . The tragedy of life is that people who hold different views very often finish up by disliking, not each others' views, but each other. It should be possible to differ with a man and yet remain friends."

Unfortunately, "crystallized dissension" is the state of the church right now. One member will never again talk to another because they no longer agree on some point of doctrine. So we see many factions and a hardened and unbending party spirit. It is like the Hatfield-McCoy feud where the positions have concretized to the point that little chance of reconciliation remains.

These carnal behaviors reside at the roots of our society's incivility, creating the division and disunity that are hallmarks of our time. As [II Corinthians 13: 5](#) advises, we need to ask ourselves if, in the press of our daily battles, we have allowed some of these fleshly works to creep into our lives. A little more civility could go a long way in restoring unity among God's people.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

Anger (Part One)

by Martin G. Collins

The world is becoming angrier. Anger, whether explosive or smoldering, can lead to high blood pressure, migraine headaches, or can ultimately lead to our spiritual demise. God gets angry with the wicked every day, but is solution oriented. Jesus had anger toward the Pharisees for the hardness of their hearts as well as for the money changers defiling the temple. We ought to have indignation and anger at our own sin with righteous or godly sorrow. If we love God we must hate evil motivated by a hopelessly debased, reprobate mind. While we are commanded to be indignant or angry, we can not be angry in a sinful manner, allowing ourselves to become provoked or irritated, seething with rage. Anger should not be nursed until it becomes an entrenched condition. We parents dare not provoke our children to wrath, discouraging them. Several wrong ways to deal with anger are to try to bury anger, to bottle it up, or to ventilate it. We must ask God for the power of the Holy Spirit to remove uncontrolled anger.

From the Archives: Featured Article

Abstaining From Evil

by John O. Reid

God does not just want us not to sin, He also wants us not even to appear to be doing evil. John Reid shows how Christians must guard their thoughts, words and deeds at all times.

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