

# Uncommon Decency

*Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*



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## What Christian Civility Is Not



I was trying out some of my ideas about convicted civility on a group of Christians in a retreat setting. As I presented my thoughts, I could tell that one woman was bothered by what I was saying. When it came time for group discussion, I asked her to speak up: “You look like something is troubling you. Would you like to tell me what it is?”

She paused before she responded: “My problem is that what you are saying makes good sense to me so far. But I’m worried about what you might be getting us into!”

Her worry was a legitimate one. I have my own fears when I hear people encouraging Christians to be more civil. Civility borders on many things, and some of them are problems. This is why I want to make it clear what I am *not* trying to “get us into” with all of this talk about civility.

### NOT RELATIVISM

At a recent gathering of seminary professors, one teacher reported that at his school the most damaging charge one student can lodge against another is that the person is being “judgmen-

tal.” He found this pattern very upsetting. “You can’t get a good argument going in class anymore,” he said. “As soon as somebody takes a stand on any important issue, someone else says that the person is being judgmental. And that’s it. End of discussion. Everyone is intimidated!”

Many of the other professors nodded knowingly. There seemed to be a consensus that the fear of being judgmental has taken on epidemic proportions.

Is the call for civility just another way of spreading this epidemic? If so, then I’m against civility. But I really don’t think that this is what being civil is all about.

Christian civility does not commit us to a *relativistic* perspective. Being civil doesn’t mean that we cannot criticize what goes on around us. Civility doesn’t require us to *approve* of what other people believe and do. It is one thing to insist that other people *have the right* to express their basic convictions; it is another thing to say that they are right in doing so. Civility requires us to live by the first of these principles. But it does not commit us to the second formula. To say that all beliefs and values deserve to be treated as if they were on par is to endorse relativism—a perspective that is incompatible with Christian faith and practice.

Christian civility does not mean refusing to make judgments about what is good and true. For one thing, it really isn’t possible to be completely nonjudgmental. Even telling someone else that she is being judgmental is a rather judgmental thing to do!

And suppose we *could* actually suspend judgment about other people’s beliefs and values. Would that be a desirable thing to do? The Bible regularly tells us to exercise judgment about questions of truth and value: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil” (Isaiah 5:20 NIV); “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). Indeed, in the very

same passage in which the apostle Paul calls us to cultivate kindness, patience and generosity, he insists that we take a strong stand against such “works of the flesh” as sexual immorality, impurity and drunkenness (Galatians 5:16-23). So it seems Christians can hardly avoid “judging” certain attitudes and behaviors.

At the same time, there are many texts that apparently lean against judgment. Didn’t Jesus himself tell us, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged”? And didn’t our Lord show us what this means by his own example, accepting people just the way they were—including prostitutes and tax collectors, who were generally considered to be very undesirable types?

Those are important questions. But they do not get at a real conflict between the example of Jesus and the “judgmental” texts in the Bible. In both cases where Jesus is recorded as commanding us not to judge, he was warning against a certain kind of judgmental spirit. In Matthew’s account he is speaking about hypocritical people who criticize others without paying attention to their own faults, and in Luke’s Gospel Jesus is referring to people who criticize others with a condemning and unforgiving spirit (Matthew 7:1-5; Luke 6:37-38).

Similarly, we must pay close attention to the *sense* in which Jesus accepted people just as they were. Much of the loose talk these days about “accepting” and “affirming” people is very different from Jesus’ patterns. Certainly there is nothing in his example or teachings that would tell us not to try to change people’s lives. In one way, perhaps Jesus wants us to “affirm” heroin dealers and to “accept” members of the Ku Klux Klan just as they are—but surely that doesn’t mean we should make our peace with drug-trafficking and racist crusades!

When Jesus showed “acceptance” to prostitutes and tax collectors, he did not condone their sexual or economic behaviors.

He loved them *in spite of* their unsavory ways. He called Mary Magdalene and Zacchaeus to correct their ways and become faithful disciples.

But Jesus refused to define people in terms of their present sordid circumstances. He affirmed their *potential* for living as faithful and creative children of God.

That is the kind of free and open acceptance we owe to people. A relativistic embrace of anything others do is no favor to them. It is not genuine Christian civility.

#### NOT LIKING EVERYONE

When I told a friend that I was writing a book on civility, he winced. "Oh, no," he said. "I never thought that you would join the 'feel good' crowd. Whatever happened to the good old days when we could just dislike some people without having to feel guilty about it?"

I'm not preaching a message about having positive feelings about everyone. To be civil toward people does not mean that we have to *like* them.

As I write this, my thoughts quickly move to a person whom I find very unlikable. Instinct tells me that try as I might, I will never be able to like him. But my instinct could easily be a sinful one. Maybe I could learn to like him, although it would certainly require much time and effort. Civility is a different matter, though. I can treat this person with gentleness and respect even if I haven't manufactured those feelings that would count as "liking" him.

I learned a good lesson on this subject from a crusty old Irish Catholic judge who spoke at a conference on the ministry of the laity. His assignment was to tell how his life in the legal system is influenced by his Christian faith.

As he began his speech, he sounded almost cynical. His

days are filled with the routine and not-so-routine patterns of inner-city crime, and he confessed that he found it very difficult to see many connections between the gospel and his courtroom decisions.

Then he went on to tell us of a recent experience. In a Sunday morning homily, his parish priest had talked about the importance of seeing things through the eyes of Jesus. Some time during the next week, the priest encouraged the congregation, stop and ask yourself how Jesus would view the situation you are presently in.

A few days later a young man from the inner city appeared before the judge's bench. He had been there several times before. "I was ready to give him a rather harsh sentence," the judge said. "Then suddenly I remembered the priest's words. I stopped and asked myself, *What would Jesus see if he were sitting in my place?*

"I decided that he would see a young person with much street-savvy, who is using his considerable intelligence and skill to get the most he can from a social system that he feels is stacked against him. I looked this young man in the eye and told him that I thought he was a bright and talented human being. And then I said to him, 'Let's talk together about how we can get you living in more creative and constructive ways.'

"We had a surprisingly good conversation. I don't know whether it will do much good in the long run, but for once I think I really did act in a Christlike manner in the courtroom!"

This judge had done more than deal with the young man in terms of a formal kind of "honoring." He had actually shown him a gentleness and a reverence. Does this mean that he had quickly learned to like the young man? Probably not—but liking him was not really necessary.



What the judge had done was to reflect on this young man's *value and potential*. And this same attitude is what I owe to the person whom I find it impossible to like. I can choose to concentrate, not on his disagreeable characteristics, but on the value and potential he has in the sight of God.

Every human being is a center of value. The value may not always be obvious to us. This is why we have to go out of our way to reflect on the value of specific human beings. We Christians can do this by reminding ourselves that the person in question is created by God. If an artist friend produces a work of art that I don't particularly like, I can still treat that artifact with reverence if I remind myself of the value it has for the person who made it. The more I respect the artist, the more I will go out of my way to revere her work.

Every human being is a work of divine art. God has crafted each of us; we are all "special creations." Even when we have rebelled against God and distorted his handiwork in our lives, he continues to love us—much as an artist loves something that she has worked on lovingly, even when it has been severely damaged. I can learn a lot about how to treat an unlikable person with reverence if I keep reminding myself of the value the person has in the eyes of God.

And I can also concentrate on people's potential rather than their present disagreeable condition. The judge did not necessarily like the young man standing before him; but he did admire what the young man *could* be. Reflecting on people's capabilities for betterment is a way of cultivating a gentle and reverent spirit toward them.

#### NOT NATIONALISM

But let's go back to the two angry drivers on the narrow city street. They don't have time to reflect on each other's God-given

potential. For them to become more civil is to learn to be kind and gentle in brief encounters with total strangers.

We must not lose sight of this very public dimension of civility. Being civil isn't just trying to be respectful toward the people we know. It is also to care about our *common life*. It involves not only working hard at close relationships but also cultivating a deep concern for the *civitas*, for the way things go in our public spaces—on sidewalks and highways, at football games and national parks, in malls and legislatures.

Here too there are some excesses that we should worry about. Caring about our common life can take on a dangerous shape. Some Christians seem to think the only way to show a genuine love for the public square is to cultivate a passionate and uncritical devotion to their nation.

This is not what I mean by civility. Being civil does not require us to be superpatriots. From a Christian point of view, that would not be a very healthy thing to advocate.

To honor your nation—your "fatherland" or "motherland"—is a legitimate thing. There can be something very noble and healthy about patriotic sentiments, just as there is something good about nurturing positive sentiments for our parents. We don't even need to worry if these sentiments get expressed with a little exaggeration. I don't get upset when I hear someone say to her parents on a special occasion, "You are the most wonderful mom and dad in the whole world!" Our patriotic expressions can be viewed in the same way: sometimes it's a good thing to get carried away with enthusiasm for the nation that "births" us as citizens.

The problem comes, of course, when our nationalistic statements are not meant as affectionate hyperbole. I would be very nervous about a person who is absolutely sure that her parents simply *are* the best mom and dad in the whole world. I have

even bigger worries about people who feel that way about their own nation.

The Best-Parents case does not pose a serious threat to others. The daughter may *believe* that her parents are actually superior to all other parents, and she may look with disdain on everyone who has a special affection for another set of parents. But her attitude is not likely to grow into anything more than an isolated case of weirdness.

The threat is much bigger, though, when people start singing the Best-Nation song with intense seriousness. Nations often want things that belong to other nations. Nations have armies, and armies use weapons. When a specific nation starts thinking of itself as Number-One-in-the-world, it is time to start worrying.

But from a Christian point of view the problem starts with the attitude itself, quite apart from any bad consequences that may flow from it. My nation does not deserve my uncritical loyalty. No country should ever be encouraged actually to think of itself in Best-Nation terms.

Nationalism and superpatriotism are forms of idolatry. And the Bible makes it very clear that this is the kind of idolatrous attachment that Jesus wants to free us from. Christians are being gathered into a new kind of community in which all the older allegiances of our present world begin to take second place:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9-10)

#### NOT AN EVANGELISTIC STRATEGY

As a college student, I was returning to school one year on a Greyhound bus. One of the other passengers was a middle-aged man who seemed to be making the rounds, engaging various people in quiet conversation. Walking down the aisle, he would exchange pleasantries with a person, and if the person seemed willing he would sit down and talk a while.

Finally it was my turn. We chatted for about fifteen minutes; he asked me questions about myself—family, studies, hobbies. Then the conversation took an abrupt and rather forced turn toward religion; as I remember it, he went quickly from remarking on the heat of the noonday sun to a comment about the warm love of the Son of God.

I immediately told him I was a Christian. His irritated retort caught me off-guard: “I wish you would have told me that a little earlier!” Then he got up and walked down the aisle, looking for another conversation partner.

I hope there are not too many Greyhound evangelists who operate with that style. But the encounter, crude as it was, illustrates a point. This Christian man’s “civility” was a mere ploy. His questions about my family, studies and hobbies were quite insincere. Someone had probably told him that evangelism works best when you show an interest in the other person. So he “showed an interest” in me for fifteen minutes before he made his move. I felt manipulated. And I would not blame a non-Christian if she too felt very manipulated by this person’s approach.

Christians need to be careful about seeing civility as a mere strategy for evangelism. As an evangelical Christian I want to be careful not to be misunderstood as I make this point. I want people to accept the evangel, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. I place a high priority on the evangelistic task. But

this does not mean that Christian civility is simply an evangelistic ploy—being nice to people merely because we want them to become Christians.

Evangelism is an important activity. The apostle Peter tells us that we should always be ready to give an account to anyone of the hope that lives in our hearts. But he immediately adds: “Yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15-16). I did not feel that I was treated gently and reverently by the evangelist on the bus.

Civility has its own value, quite apart from any evangelistic or political results it might produce. To become a gentler and more reverent person is itself a way of being more like what God intended us to be.

Does that seem like a provocative thought—maybe even a questionable one? I suspect that it will for many sincere Christians. Reverence toward others is not an attitude that has been highly prized in the Christian community. We need to look at how to state the case for civility in a way that will be convincing for people who take the gospel seriously.