

Beyond Mere Civility



Monte Wolverton

Yes, sir, my buddy answered his father. I was about 15 years old and this was not how my Pacific Northwest friends normally talked to anyone. But Caleb (not his real name) was from Louisiana. His affable southern quips and gentle drawl made him fun to be around. Not that he wasn't into wayward teen activities—just that he'd been culturally conditioned to be genteel and civil when it was in his best interest. My other friends and I were a rather uncivil lot (insolent comebacks and raunchiness are teen survival skills), but I still respected my parents, and I thought maybe Caleb was onto something I could adopt. Beyond that, “Sir” and “Ma’am” had a rigorous charm. I might even score an increase in allowance!

I was wrong. After a couple of days of “yes sir” and “yes ma’am,” my dad sternly demanded: “What’s going on here? Why are you talking like that?” Sure, he

appreciated respect, but he valued authenticity over formal politeness. He didn't trust pretense. This was family, not military. And my dad was well acquainted with the two-faced teen character Eddie Haskell (from the 1960s TV sitcom *Leave It to Beaver*)—obsequiously polite to adults but otherwise a rogue. My dad's concluding thought was, “You don't need to call me ‘sir.’ Just do the right things.”

He understood that civil words and affectations were not necessarily an indication of good character, intent or behavior.

But now, 60 years later, it seems like even civil words have been tossed out the window. Now, boorishness can catapult you to the top! Now, we idolize people who come right out and “speak their minds” without tact, diplomacy, empathy or mercy. Now, civility and politeness have become weakness. Should we be alarmed? Is this brash and rude behavior the

final disintegration of society as we know it?

Western culture, if not the entire world, is undergoing a sea change. Hostile polarization bulldozes dialog and tolerance out of the way. We have trouble dealing with ambiguity or shades of grey. Extreme has become mainstream. Many of us have cast aside goodwill, compassion and empathy. Worse yet, this new incivility is contagious, especially when modeled by leaders.

Experts debate several possible reasons for our decline:

- General stress and unrest.
- Anger in reaction to abuse of power by authorities and institutions.
- Deep-seated racial, gender, religious and class prejudices.
- A sense of unreasonable entitlement.
- Media sensationalism and overemphasis on scandal.
- Tribalized and polarized information sources.
- Leaders and celebrities who promote hostility and anger.

But when in human history have these factors not existed?

Just What Do You Mean: Civility?

Author of the book *The Soul of Civility*, Alexandra Hudson maintains that civility and politeness are different. “Politeness is manners, etiquette, and technique—it's a type of behavior—whereas *civility is a virtue far deeper and richer than mere*

conduct. Instead of focusing on the form of conduct, civility gets to the motivation of any given action.” While this is insightful, motive and practice are always linked.

To get a better handle on civility, consider incivility, which includes things like:

- Rude, crude, violent language.
- Insults, threats and humiliation.
- Violation of personal space.
- Bullying and snubbing.
- Vandalism and hooliganism.

Does incivility injure? Yes it does, and stunningly so. Sociologist Christine Porath, author of *Mastering Civility: A Manifesto for the Workplace*, researched the psychological effects of incivility. She observes, “When you’re exposed to hostility or aggression, you behave differently. *Incivility sneaks into your subconscious*. It’s easy to see how plagues of incivility can take shape and spread.” In repeated studies, she found that when people were exposed to an act of incivility:

- Cognition decreased by 30%.
- Nearly 50% of people decreased their work effort.
- 80% of people lost work time worrying about the incident.

Incivility is not a victimless crime. When we behave or speak uncivilly we hurt people, families, institutions and society.

How Did We Get Civility?

Somewhere in the dim mists of ages past, powerful rulers learned the last thing a king needed was infighting and warring factions. Instead, rulers needed their officials to work together agreeably to keep order, dispense justice, settle disputes and build commerce and wealth—to maintain and grow an empire. That required *civility*—which in that day meant standards of conduct between rulers and the subjects who served them.

As time went on, every great civilization prided itself in its own brand of *civility*, which spread from imperial courts into the daily world of business and law. The word



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courtesy literally expresses the respectful dignity of courts. **In the Roman empire**, the Latin word *civilis* denoted *society, public life, civic order, good citizenship and orderly behavior*.

To be *civil* was to fulfill the duty of a citizen. Yet these same proudly civil Romans built their empire on violence, slavery and crucifixion. Despite their ingenuity, organization and civility, they were one of the most murderous and barbaric empires in history.

A millennium later, across the Atlantic, **the Aztec culture** prized its civility, with each social interaction governed by strict etiquette. Polite, aristocratic Aztecs did not interrupt—respected the elderly—didn’t mock each other publicly—were careful to use appropriate language—valued humility and emotional control. Civil? To be sure—but this same civilization practiced *human sacrifice*—by some estimates over 250,000 times per year!

In Britain, around 450AD, the invading pagan Saxons were considered barbarians by the established Christian Roman-British culture. Later in the 800s, Christianized Saxons became the dominant culture and viewed invading pagan Vikings as uncivil, until Christianized Vikings conquered England in the 11th Century and became the arbiters of civility. By the 1500s, devout British citizens believed their empire was the apex of civility while others were barbarians. Yet the meticulously civil

British used horrific drawing and quartering (also practiced in other countries) to punish anyone who “offended” the crown. And in every royal court, elegant ladies and gentlemen hatched murderous schemes under the camouflage of politeness and civility.

Sadly, **the Christian church** has been no exception for the last two millennia. Not only has it taken political sides and sanctioned violence, inquisitions and pogroms, but has it has split into thousands of hostile factions over elements of doctrine—each side often excommunicating and condemning the other to torture in everlasting hell fire—all the while practicing pious religiosity and sincerely believing they are serving God.

The takeaway is this: *Human civility is a good thing. But even the most purely motivated civility can become a hypocritical veneer to hide the gross barbarity within all of us*. It’s safe to say that to this day, every sophisticated civilization continues to employ some forms of slavery and torture right alongside politeness and civility. *Every ethnicity, every culture, every religion, every human being is both civil and uncivil*. Given the right set of circumstances and enough provocation, the most benign of us can become a rude, violent bully.

Human Civility—Unstable and Inconsistent

But wasn’t there a golden age, where human civility flourished—where people treated all others with respect

and kindness and never was heard a discouraging word? Let's see...when was that exactly? Maybe King Arthur's court (fictitious). Maybe in the 1950s? Maybe the 1890s? Maybe biblical times? Nope. Not then, not ever. *There is no credible record of any such golden age.*

Civility, incivility and barbarity has always fluctuated and careened over time and culture, for better or worse, driven by social and political forces. Therefore our recent precipitous downward trend should be expected and should cause no great surprise. It's not necessarily the end of the world—not even a confirmation of the “end times”—it's just a continuation of the same old stuff.

What is different now is that the stakes are far higher. A barbarian wielding an axe is dangerous, but not nearly so much as a barbarian wielding a thermonuclear weapon.

What can we do? We urgently need a plan of action. But to summarize the last several paragraphs—incivility is part of our nature. So practicing a list of steps to achieve the virtue of civility, when we are the way we are, will not work. *What will work is the complete inversion of perspective we call “The Gospel.”*

The Way Forward

You won't find the word *civility* in Scripture, but you'll find plenty of

examples of treating each other with love. As part of his description of love in action, Paul tells us to *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse,”* and *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone”* (Romans 12:14,18).

And then there's what we call the Golden Rule: *“So in everything, do to others, what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the law and the prophets”* (Matthew 7:12). This powerfully compact statement, part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, is such a universal truth that variations of it are found in teachings of Hillel, Philo of Alexandria, Confucius, Muhammad, Buddha, Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates and Seneca. Jesus teaches that *everyone, no matter what their current condition, belongs to him,* and that we should never write anyone off—because he does not.

Ironically this “rule” can't be obeyed by human effort alone. In fact, the Apostle Paul points out in Galatians 5:22-23 that when we treat others with *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control,”* it's the fruit of the Holy Spirit living in us.

With human civility, if someone crosses a line in their incivility to you, then it's expected that you may reciprocate with equal

incivility. This is how feuds and wars happen. But Jesus teaches us (and the Holy Spirit leads us) not to reciprocate—but to *“answer evil with good”* (Matthew 5:38-42).

But wait—careful readers of the Gospels can't help but notice that Jesus himself never shrank from passionately telling people what they needed to hear. Didn't he drive profiteers out of the Temple? Didn't he have harsh words for the religious establishment? Yes, he did—and he never backed down from speaking the plain truth. And since Jesus was *“tempted in every way, just as we are”* (Hebrews 4:15), we may expect that his initial human impulse at times may have been to lash out with uncivil words. Yet he did not—and he stayed on message.

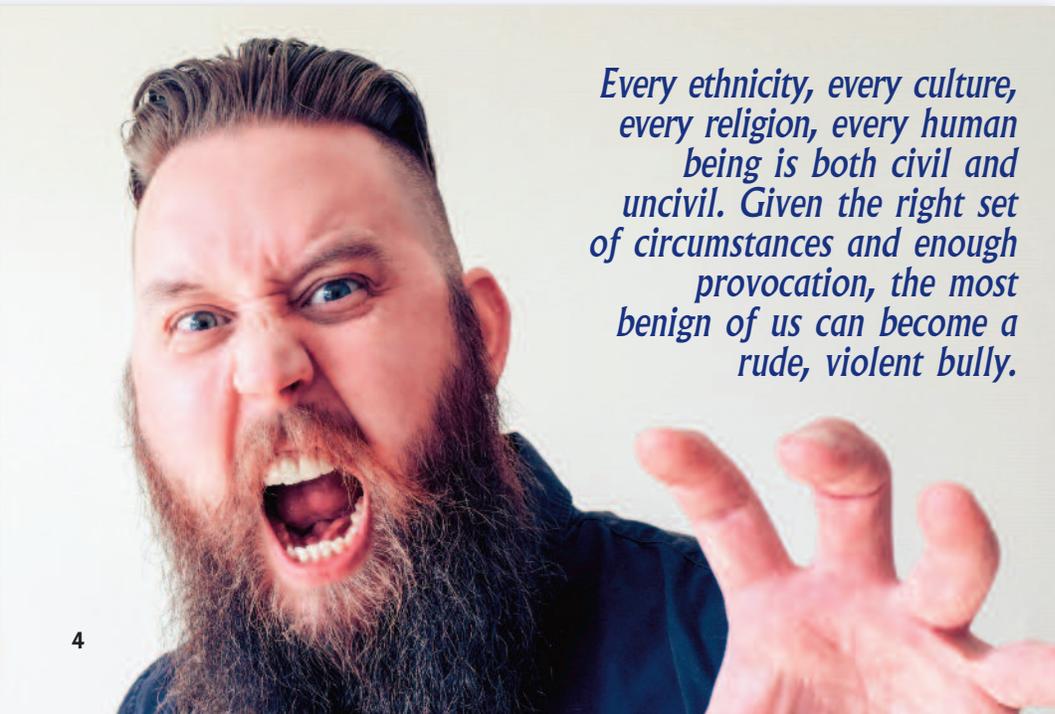
Further, we may also notice that Jesus (despite the dourly pious manner that some institutional religion imputes to him) often gave rebukes with a good dose of trenchant humor and irony (as in Matthew 23:13-37) that his words might pierce human defenses. Where we might use verbal abuse, he uses straightforward language of reason, empathy, love and compassion.

What About Incivility?

So what can we do about incivility? We can complain, we can holler at everyone to be more civil, we can chalk it up to the impending end of the world and try to scare incivility out of everyone. But none of this will make any enduring difference.

Or—we can merely follow the Jesus Way, which leads infinitely beyond mere civility. By following that Way, we transcend the hypocrisy of human civility and the horror and chaos of human incivility. Whether we agree or disagree with our friends or enemies, we will live at peace. We will be—*merely like Jesus!* □

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