



RESPECTFULLY, *I DISAGREE*

*How to Be a Civil Person
in an Uncivil Time*

DR. JIM DENISON

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in an Uncivil Time*

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ALSO BY DR. JIM DENISON

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INTRODUCTION

“Who can take it upon him to write of the proper duty, virtue, challenge, and right of every several vocation, profession, and place?” —Sir Francis Bacon

It was our annual racial reconciliation Sunday. A pastor of an African-American church in our city agreed to preach in my church. Our congregation was located in the wealthiest part of the city and was known for its historic significance, with origins dating to 1854.

The pastor stepped into our pulpit, which had been in use for half a century, placed his hands on it, and began to cry softly. He then told us of growing up in our city when the Ku Klux Klan was staging rallies and parades. He described what it was like to have crosses burned in the yards of his community.

Then he told us that, as a teenager, he was employed as a custodian in our church. He recounted the times he stood in the back of our expansive sanctuary, looked at our pulpit, and wondered if he would ever be permitted to preach from it.

On that Sunday, he was. As he wept, we wept.

I will never forget the gracious way this man of God responded to the hate he had experienced. Rather than condemning those who had condemned him, he chose to speak of them as lost souls who needed the word and love of God.

The civility and charity of his words and spirit made a lifelong impression on me.

IS CIVILITY A MAJOR PROBLEM IN AMERICA?

The Oxford English Dictionary offers thirteen different definitions of “civility.” Among them we find: “behavior or speech appropriate to civil interactions.” Unfortunately, among the definitions it labels as now “obsolete” we find: “orderly behavior; good citizenship” and “propriety, decency.”

Therein lies the question behind this book: How can we make these now-obsolete definitions into realities today?

In its research document titled “Civility in America 2019: Solutions for Tomorrow,” public relations firm Weber Shandwick found that 68 percent of Americans consider civility in America to be a “major problem.” Twenty-five percent believe it to be a “minor problem”; only 7 percent say it is “not a problem.”

According to their research, these are the “top ten consequences of incivility,” with the percentage of Americans who “agree a lot/a little”:

- Online bullying/cyberbullying: 89 percent
- Harassment (verbal, physical, or sexual): 88 percent
- Violent behavior: 88 percent
- Hate crimes: 88 percent
- Intimidation and threats: 87 percent
- Intolerance: 87 percent
- People feeling less safe in public places: 87 percent
- Discrimination and unfair treatment of certain groups of people: 84 percent
- Less community engagement: 79 percent
- Feelings of isolation and loneliness: 78 percent

For those who have experienced incivility personally, their average number of uncivil interactions per week is 10.2. Among such Americans, 49 percent said they responded by ignoring the person or people acting uncivilly; 47 percent removed themselves from the situation. Only 27 percent politely defended themselves.

This despite the fact that, when asked for “personal actions to improve civility,” the first response was “make an effort to be civil when treated uncivilly” and “encourage your family, friends, and coworkers to be civil.”

When confronted with incivility, how can we do more of what we say we should do and less of what we say we actually do?

WHY IS CIVILITY SO VITAL FOR CHRISTIANS?

This issue is far more than speculative. At risk is far more than occasional hurt feelings or strained friendships.

For Christians, as we will see, being people of civility is at the heart of our biblical character and public witness. The commitments and steps necessary to be people of true and consistent character chart the path not just to civility but to godliness and the abundant life Jesus came to give us (John 10:10).

When we learn how to be civil with others, we learn how to be Christlike with the world. Then we “shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life” (Philippians 2:15–16). As people see Christ in our actions and hear the Spirit in our words, they are drawn to the Savior who is the source of true life (John 6:40).

Civility is the invitation and commission of God.

What follows is organized around three topics: the priority of civility, the person of civility, and the practice of civility.

When our study is done, I pray that we will be the change we wish to see.

PART I

THE PRIORITY OF CIVILITY

In 2010, researcher Peter Turchin predicted that widespread civil unrest would sweep through the United States in 2020. Few people took him seriously.

Professor Turchin noted that “in the United States, 50-year instability spikes occurred around 1870, 1920 and 1970, so another could be due around 2020. We are also entering a dip in the so-called Kondratiev wave, which traces 40–60-year economic-growth cycles. This could mean that future recessions will be severe.”

He noted that “in the United States, we have stagnating or declining real wages, a growing gap between rich and poor, overproduction of young graduates with advanced degrees, and exploding public debt. These seemingly disparate social indicators are actually related to each other dynamically. They all experienced turning points during the 1970s. Historically, such developments have served as leading indicators of looming political instability.”

Then came 2020. The year began like 1973 with impeachment, then became 1918 with the pandemic, followed by 2008 (and hopefully not 1929) with the recession, followed by 1968 with nationwide civil unrest.

In days like these, civility is the urgent need of the hour. How did we get here? What should be our goal now?

Part I explores these pressing questions as we consider the priority of civility.

CHAPTER 1

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

“If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.”—Abraham Lincoln

How would you rate America from the perspective of biblical morality?

According to a May 2020 poll, 72 percent of Americans believe sex between an unmarried man and woman is morally acceptable, and 66 percent approve of gay or lesbian relationships. Having a baby outside of marriage is approved by 66 percent. Forty-four percent believed abortion is morally acceptable, while 51 percent deemed doctor-assisted suicide morally appropriate.

Pornography is considered acceptable by 36 percent, sex between teenagers by 38 percent, and smoking marijuana by 70 percent.

Imagine for a moment what would happen if Americans chose to live by biblical morality. For instance, the Bible says that sex outside of marriage is wrong. No standard would seem more outdated and irrelevant in our society, as indicated by the poll just noted.

- Covenant Eyes, a security website designed to limit pornography exposure, estimates that by 2025 virtual reality (VR) pornography will be a \$1 billion business. That's on top of the already available internet sites. Their study in 2018 showed that nearly 57 percent of teens search out porn at least monthly, and nearly 27 percent receive sexts.
- Since the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, pornography visits have been escalating in what one psychologist calls “an eroticization of fear.”
- Although teen pregnancy has been declining overall, the number of teenagers who are having sex is still high. Part of the decline in pregnancy can be attributed to more effective contraception and more information about prevention.

The Bible says that stealing and murder are wrong. Consider these related facts:

- “There were more than 1.2 million incidents of rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and murder reported in 2018, a 3 percent decline from the previous year.” These crimes are “a local phenomenon, however, and in some states, violent crime rates are nearly as high as or higher than they were nationwide in the early 1990s.” Violent crimes are more likely to be committed in urban areas and are closely tied to economic conditions.

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- “Property crimes in 2018 resulted in losses estimated at \$16.4 billion” (which was actually a decline from previous years).
 - “Gang violence has risen sharply, especially in large cities.” A recent survey of law enforcement officials in forty-five cities suggested the presence of almost 1,500 youth gangs with more than 120,000 members. “Youth gangs are becoming more violent and increasingly serve as ways for members to engage in illegal money-making activities such as drug and firearms trafficking.”
 - While violent crime and property crime showed decreases, cybercrimes and human trafficking are growing rapidly. The FBI’s Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) 2019 Internet Crime Report included 467,361 complaints of suspected internet crime, with reported losses in excess of \$3.5 billion. Over the five years from 2015–2019, IC3 oversaw 1,707,618 total complaints, totaling \$10.2 billion in total losses. There were 16,053 identity thefts, and the numbers are increasing.
 - The State Department releases an annual report on human trafficking. In its 2019 report, it found that “the top three nations of origin for human trafficking victims were the United States, Mexico and the Philippines.”

If you and I are to be models and purveyors of civility, we need first to understand why our culture is so uncivil.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

A “metanarrative” is a national “north on the compass,” a kind of cultural DNA. When we identify a society’s metanarrative, we are better able to understand its past and predict its future.

For instance, George Friedman, a leading geopolitical analyst and proponent of the “metanarrative” concept, views Iran in the context of its desire to recreate the Persian Empire. Thus Iran shows support for Syria and Hezbollah as a means to a “Shiite crescent” across the region and beyond. Turkey is pursuing an Ottoman Empire metanarrative, while Vladimir Putin seeks to rebuild “Mother Russia” along the geopolitical lines of the Soviet Union.

Applying this tool to American society, I believe we can identify three cultural metanarratives.

One: All truth is relative and subjective

It is conventional wisdom today that there is no such thing as absolute truth, only “your truth” and “my truth.” We are taught to be sincere in our beliefs and tolerant of all others.

This metanarrative makes Christianity just one road up the mountain. It renders all moral claims subjective and personal (“You have no right to force your beliefs on me”). It leads to the acceptance of the LGBTQ agenda, abortion, euthanasia, and a host of other unbiblical moral positions.

How did we get here?

Let’s consider two minutes of philosophy. René Descartes (1596–1650) championed the assertion that truth comes

through the unaided use of the mind. British empiricists such as John Locke and David Hume countered that truth comes through the senses (“seeing is believing”). The German philosopher Immanuel Kant synthesized the two by claiming that our minds interpret our senses, which results in knowledge. His view came to dominate Western culture.

Here’s the downside: Kant says we cannot know the “thing in itself,” only our experience of it. Since my senses are different from yours and my mind interprets my senses in ways that yours may not, Kant claimed that there cannot be any such thing as absolute truth.

This conviction swept Europe, turning churches into museums and the Bible into a diary of religious opinion. It came to dominate American culture after World War II, resulting in “postmodern relativism.” It is the foundational metanarrative for our culture today.

Two: All consensual sexual preferences are to be accepted

The postmodern rejection of absolute truth leads directly to its sexual corollary. The legalization of birth control in 1960 and abortion in 1973 removed consequences for sexual activity. The “sexual revolution” championed the belief that our bodies are ours to do with as we wish. Society has no right to “impose” its morals on us, or so we’re told.

This position legitimizes abortion, same-gender sexual activity and marriage, transgender acceptance, and the larger LGBTQ agenda. It elevates LGBTQ people to a “protected class” deserving of legislated civil rights. It is leading to a historic conflict between sexual freedom and religious freedom.

Three: Religion is dangerous

If a person disagrees with the first two metanarratives on religious grounds, their religion is considered dangerous to society.

The first metanarrative made Christianity peripheral, turning God from a king into a hobby. The second metanarrative made Christian morality irrelevant and outdated.

Now secularists are claiming that religion is a dangerous obstruction to social progress. We're told that religion causes events like 9/11 and leads to clergy abuse scandals and "homophobic" bigotry. We're encouraged to oppose all religious claims that contradict the ethic of "tolerance."

This metanarrative is clearly gaining momentum in American culture. It is relevant to Christian universities and ministries, religious tax-exempt status, zoning laws, and general opposition to biblical morality. This is a threat to Christian morality unprecedented in American history.

The result: an uncivil society

It is difficult to teach morality when we don't believe that objective morality exists. It is challenging to encourage civility when we cannot agree on the definition of civil behavior.

In a culture convinced that all truth claims are personal and speculative, chaos reigns. We ought not be surprised that our society is so conflicted about so many issues today.

ARE WE ROME?

In 1987, Yale historian Paul Kennedy wrote *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. His thesis has been much discussed: nations ascend due to the supremacy of their material resources, then they inevitably spend their wealth on military expansion to maintain their power and fall into decline and eventual collapse. The Roman Empire is usually cited as Exhibit A of Kennedy's thesis.

When America fought two wars overseas while struggling to recover from economic recession, it was easy to see why “declinists” linked us to Rome, accusing our nation of “imperial overstretch” and predicting our collective demise. In these days of coronavirus pandemic and the recession it created, our decline is even more predicted by some.

I have long been fascinated by the Greco-Roman world and its history. I've made some forty trips to various parts of the ancient Roman Empire and did my PhD in philosophy of religion with a special emphasis on ancient philosophy. In researching this subject, I've discovered some fascinating parallels and issues.

Comparing empires

Cullen Murphy published an excellent resource for comparing Rome and America from demographic and political perspectives. Here are some similarities he notes:

- Both built the most powerful military in their world, by far.
- The Roman road system, stretching some fifty-three thousand miles, was about the length of the US interstate system.

- The Roman Empire and its Mediterranean Sea would fit neatly inside America’s lower forty-eight states.
- Both cherish a glorious past and embrace a Manifest Destiny. Rome claimed to be an *imperium sine fine* (empire without end), while America’s dollar bill proclaims a *novus ordo* (new order).

Of course, dissimilarities are conspicuous as well:

- Rome never left the Iron Age; America has evolved from Industry to Information and Biotech.
- Slaves made up half of the Empire (some emperors owned twenty thousand or more slaves), while America (eventually) rejected slavery.
- Rome had no middle class; the middle class is America’s core economic fact.
- Rome was never remotely as democratic as America.
- The Empire generated few original ideas in technology and science; America prizes innovation and creativity.

So, are we Rome?

Comparing souls

Roman religion was transactional: place your offering on the altars of the gods so they will bless your crops and give you victory in battle. They adopted the Greek division between the soul and body, the “spiritual” and the “secular,” “religion” and the “real world.”

The Greeks believed that the gods lived atop Mount Olympus, far removed from life below. The Romans adopted their deities, renaming Zeus as Jupiter, Hera as Juno, Ares as Mars, and so forth. But they preserved this division between the gods and us.

They added emperor worship to their pantheon, but this was not out of any desire to foster an intimate, personal relationship with Caesar. Such worship was a loyalty oath, another transaction. If you burned a pinch of incense on the altar of Caesar and said, “Caesar is lord,” you were given a certificate which made you a legal Roman citizen for another year. Religion was like renewing your license or car registration.

When Christians spread into this Roman world, many eventually adopted this transactional division between the “spiritual” and the “secular.” By AD 250, we had separated the “clergy” from the “laity”—the “spiritual” people from the “secular”—making Christian priests like those in Roman religion who could help us execute our transactions with God. Then Constantine legalized the Christian church with the Edict of Milan in AD 313 and we began constructing buildings like Roman temples, where people could come to make their transactional sacrifices.

In the Modern Era, we began measuring success by the size of our temples: our buildings and budgets and baptisms. In the Postmodern World, we say that all truth is personal and subjective; it doesn’t matter what you believe so long as you’re tolerant of my beliefs and sincere in yours. You can worship Zeus while I worship Apollo or Athena or the emperor. Pay your dues for services received. This, of course, is a transactional religion, not a transformational relationship.

Unfortunately, many Americans have a Roman, transactional faith.

We believe that if we come to church on Sunday, he'll bless us on Monday. If we pay our spiritual dues, we'll receive the result of our investment. We have compartments in our lives, with God here and the rest of life there.

We do this with our time and money and relationships.

C. S. Lewis wrote, “We are in fact very like honest but reluctant taxpayers. We approve of an income tax in principle. We make our returns truthfully. But we dread a rise in the tax. We are very careful to pay no more than is necessary. And we hope—we very ardently hope—that after we have paid it there will still be enough left to live on.”

Transforming souls

What does God say to our consumeristic, schizophrenic spiritual culture?

Since we're comparing America and Rome, let's consider Paul's admonition to the Romans: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:1–2).

Here was God's cure for the spiritual disease infecting the Roman Empire. It is equally needed in our culture today. Consider Paul's three steps.

First, he calls the Romans to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice.”

Not the transactional, dead, one-time sacrifices made by Romans to placate and bribe their gods, but daily, continual surrender of our lives to Christ as our Caesar, our King and Lord. Not God as your hobby, but God as your King.

If Christ is your Caesar and King, you are living in his body and wearing his clothes. Everything that is yours is his. He is Lord of the money you keep as well as the money you give; of what you do on Monday as well as on Sunday; of what you do in private as well as what you do in public.

Have you offered him your body and life as a “living sacrifice” yet today?

Second, Paul instructs the Romans to refuse to be “conformed to this world” with its transactional religion and self-centered consumerism.

Your culture says that religion is private and personal. Jesus told us that we are to let our light so shine that people may see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14–16).

Your culture says that the various religions are different roads up the same mountain. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Your culture says, “God helps those who help themselves.” However, we learned this phrase not from the Bible but from Benjamin Franklin, who stated it in *Poor Richard’s Almanac* in 1757; it has become the quintessential expression

of American self-sufficient religion. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps; get up earlier and stay up later and try harder.

By contrast, God says, “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14). Self-sufficiency is spiritual suicide.

Would you refuse the mold of your self-sufficient, subjective, relativistic culture?

Third, Paul tells the Romans to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” This starts at the beginning of every day.

Begin your day by submitting it to Christ as your Caesar and Lord. Worship him; read his word; pray to him; listen to him. Then walk through your day with him. Pray about your problems and opportunities; ask his forgiveness when you sin; spend the day in his presence. (We’ll discuss this transforming topic more in chapter 4.)

In this way you will be “transformed” from within as his Spirit renews your mind, and you will experience your Father’s “good, pleasing and perfect” will for your life.

DOES DEMOCRACY REQUIRE MORALITY?

We have seen that our culture is uncivil and unbiblical on a wide spectrum of moral and biblical issues. We have diagnosed our spiritual problem as transactional religion that separates Sunday from Monday and God from the “real world.”

Now let’s ask why our discussion matters.

What difference does our moral and cultural trajectory really make? What's at stake? Why is civility in our uncivil day so urgent?

Plato, one of the greatest minds in human history, was convinced that a democracy could not last. The people could be swayed too easily by public speakers, he warned. And once the people discovered that they could vote based on their personal interests rather than the good of the nation, their democracy would begin to fail.

“Religion and morality are indispensable supports”

In a democracy, we do not seek to legislate morality. But did the founders of our nation believe that morality was essential to their democratic experiment?

In his farewell address on September 19, 1796, President George Washington told the nation:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of

justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

John Adams, our second president, wrote reflections in his diary that are especially relevant to a book on civility:

Suppose a nation in some distant region should take the Bible for their only law-book and every member should regulate his conduct by the precepts there exhibited! Every member would be obliged, in conscience, to temperance and frugality and industry; to justice and kindness and charity towards his fellow men; and to piety, love, and reverence, towards Almighty God. In this commonwealth, no man would impair his health by gluttony, drunkenness, or lust; no man would sacrifice his most precious time to cards or any other trifling and mean amusement; no man would steal, or lie, or in any way defraud his neighbor, but would live in peace and good will with all men; no man would blaspheme his Maker or profane his worship; but a rational and manly, a sincere and unaffected piety and devotion would reign in all hearts. What a Utopia; what a Paradise would this region be!

And he warned: “We have no government armed with Power capable of contending with human Passions

unbridled by morality and Religion. Avarice, Ambition and Revenge or Galantry, would break the strongest Cords of our Constitution as a Whale goes through a Net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

The Founders knew that democracy requires morality, a basic insistence on character and integrity by the culture. Returning to such a conviction is essential to our survival and future as a nation.

How do we build character?

What steps can we take toward the kind of moral renewal which is essential to our democracy?

First, believe in absolute truth and objective morality.

To claim there is no absolute truth is to make an absolute truth claim. We accept relativism when it is convenient. By this standard, the Holocaust was just “Hitler’s truth.” Either the Bible is God’s word, or it is not. Either Jesus is God’s Son, or he is not. What is his standard for us?

Second, choose to live biblically.

How does Scripture call us to relate to others?

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council;

and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:21–24)

What about sexual sin?

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (vv. 27–28)

What about those who do evil to you?

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you (vv. 38–42).

What about our enemies?

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For

he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (vv. 43–48).

Third, seek the help of God’s Spirit.

We cannot fulfill our Father’s purpose without his power. That’s why his word calls us to “be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). The text could be translated literally, “Keep on being controlled by the Spirit.”

As we will see in chapter three, this is a vital and transforming way of life.

CONCLUSION

Paul C. Vitz (Ph.D., Stanford University) published these words nearly thirty years ago:

One of the major characteristics of moral decline in the United States in recent decades has been the rapid growth of moral relativism. The idea is now widespread that each individual has some kind of a sovereign right to create, develop, and express whatever values he or she happens to prefer. . . . Hard work, self-reliance, self-control, the delaying of gratification, sexual restraint, an active concern for democracy and patriotism have all fallen on hard times. Unfortunately,

America has now reached the point where it permits almost everything and stands for almost nothing—except a flabby relativism.

How much truer is his assessment today?

We are living in a society that desperately needs the example of civility.

But to what end?

CHAPTER 2

IS AMERICA A CHRISTIAN NATION?

The soul needs to follow something in order to give birth to virtue. This something is God; if we follow him, we shall live well. —St. Augustine

Gwinnett County, in suburban Atlanta, was for many years the fastest-growing county in the United States. In 1929, a town in that county named Dacula was 65.8 percent Baptist and 31 percent Methodist.

Now its denominations include Christian and Missionary Alliance, Anglican, Assembly of God, Church of Christ, Christian Science, Episcopal, Nazarene, Presbyterian, independent Full Gospel fellowships, Southern and Independent Baptist, United Methodist, and African Methodist Episcopal. Not to mention the Eastern Orthodox, Unitarian, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Hindu residents of the town, as well as parts of a Wiccan coven or feminist spirituality groups.

Gwinnett County is a snapshot of the pluralism that is our nation today. Consider these American religious demographics ranked by size according to Pew Research Center:

- 25.4 percent: Evangelical Protestant
- 22.8 percent: Unaffiliated (religious “nones”)
- 20.8 percent: Catholic
- 15.8 percent: “Nothing in particular”
- 14.7 percent: Mainline Protestant
- 6.5 percent: Historically Black Protestant
- 5.9 percent: Non-Christian Faiths (Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, other world religions)
- 4.0 percent: Agnostic
- 3.1 percent: Atheist
- 1.6 percent: Mormon
- 1.5 percent: Other Faiths (Unitarians, New Age, Native American Religions)
- 0.8 percent: Jehovah’s Witness
- 0.6 percent: Don’t Know
- 0.5 percent: Orthodox Christian
- 0.4 percent: Other Christian

If we consider every American who identifies with the Christian religion to be a genuine Christian (a dubious claim at best), less than 70 percent of Americans can be considered followers of Jesus.

I am writing from Dallas, Texas, part of what is often considered “the buckle of the Bible belt.” We are home to some of the largest and best-known churches in America. And yet within the Dallas–Ft. Worth Metroplex, there are

at least seventy-seven Muslim mosques and fifteen Islamic schools. We are home to more than seventy-five thousand Jews, making us the fourth-largest Jewish population in the US (after New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has at least sixteen congregations in the Dallas area. We are home to large Buddhist and Hindu communities. And the second largest winter solstice event in the nation takes place in our city and is observed by those who are “spiritual but not religious.”

Is America a Christian nation? Was it intended to be so at its founding? As we strive to model and promote civility in our culture, should it be our goal to make America a Christian nation today?

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS (MATTHEW 28:18-20)

Jesus was the only person in all of human history who said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). “Authority” here means power, control, sovereign lordship. “Heaven and earth” includes everything that exists.

Jesus proved this authority by ordering the winds and the waves, healing the sick and raising the dead, then defeating death by his resurrection. He was the only person ever to do so. As a result, we know that he has “all” authority. He has authority over the way we conduct our businesses and work, our politics and government, our society and culture, and our personal lives.

He alone has the right to tell us why we’re here and what we’re made to do. Because he made us. What does he say? Let’s

review his well-known Great Commission as the foundation for what follows in this chapter.

Jesus says, “Go therefore,” as a result of his authority, “and make disciples of all nations” (v. 19). A disciple is someone who makes Jesus his King. “Of all nations” means all people groups, every person we know.

To whom is this Great Commission addressed?

Jesus’ vision statement applies to every Christian. It was addressed to every believer, not just the apostles, the so-called “clergy.” He addressed this commission to carpenters, farmers, fishermen, pottery makers, tax collectors, and soldiers—people in every conceivable career.

Your vocation—your calling—is to help people follow Jesus. Your career is how you fulfill this calling. You help people follow Jesus by being a lawyer, or a hotel operator, or a banker, or a teacher, or a coach. Your career is a means to the end of your vocation.

If God could give us a one-question test today, “What is your life’s purpose?” the only right answer is this: to help people follow Jesus. That’s your life vision, according to your Creator and Lord.

How do we do this?

Some people need to be evangelized—“baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (v. 19). We pray for the lost people we know, invite them to church or other spiritual activities, and tell them what Jesus has done for us. We show them God’s love in ours.

The Christians I met when I started going to church as a teenager evangelized me by their care, their love for me,

and their joy in Jesus. I wanted what they had. Then my Sunday school teacher simply explained John 3:16 to me and led me to my Lord. Someone did the same for you. Now we are called to pay this gift forward to others.

Other people need to be equipped to follow Jesus— “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (v. 20a). We are called to help Christians to follow Jesus more personally, more closely, more passionately.

And we are to do all of this in the presence and power of our Lord: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (v. 20b). We do this in his power and ability.

Now, what does this Great Commission say to the issue before us today?

CHURCH-STATE OPTIONS

The most famous document in American history begins:

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

These words birthed the nation whose birthday we celebrate each July 4. But what does this declaration say about America and religion? What were their options? What are ours?

Biblical Judaism: Religion controls the state

Biblical commandments formed the foundation and legal system of ancient Israel. For example:

- No interest was to be charged (Deuteronomy 23:19; Leviticus 25:35–37).
- All debts were to be remitted in the seventh year (Deuteronomy 15:1–2).
- Slavery was permitted, but females were to be freed or made part of the family (Exodus 21:7–11); males were to be freed after seven years with provisions (Deuteronomy 15:13–14, 18).
- All land was to be returned to its original tribal owners every fifty years (Leviticus 25:10).

The Roman Empire: The state controls the religion

Herod the Great built a pagan temple at Caesarea Maritime, using hydraulic cement which hardened underwater and made the base. This base extended eight hundred feet into the Mediterranean and was one hundred to two hundred feet wide. Here Zeus was worshipped, along with the Roman pantheon.

Herod also constructed a Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Its plaza was the length of five football fields and the width of three from east to west. It was created atop a hill so all would have to climb up to it. Some of its stones weighed two to five tons (one weighs around four hundred tons, more than an empty 747 jetliner).

Caesar Augustus was called both Savior and Lord as evidenced by this inscription at Halicarnassus, which is modern Bodrum in southwestern Turkey:

The eternal and immortal nature of everything has bestowed upon mankind the greatest good with extraordinary benefactions by bringing Caesar Augustus in our blessed time the father of his own country, divine Rome, and ancestral Zeus, Savior of the common race of men, whose providence has not only fulfilled but actually exceeded the prayers of all. For land and sea are at Peace and the cities flourish with good order, concord and prosperity.

Islam: No separation between religion and state

“Sharia” (“path”) governs every dimension of life in Muslim nations. Sharia is a flexible concept so that Hanbali Sharia in Saudi Arabia is very different from the Shafi’i Sharia I encountered while living in East Malaysia.

But it is united in these convictions:

- The prohibition of pork and strict dietary laws
- The prohibition of interest (*Riba*)
- Strict punishment for theft (loss of hand), drinking alcohol (flogging), accusing falsely of sexual immorality (flogging), highway robbery (execution by sword or crucifixion), or sexual immorality (flogging if non-married or non-Muslims, stoning if married Muslims).

AMERICAN HISTORY

What has been America's practice? What were the intentions of the Founders?

Each day's session of the Supreme Court begins with the invocation "God save the United States and this Honorable Court." Our national motto is "In God We Trust." Our Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag includes the words "one nation under God." And our Declaration of Independence includes the phrase "with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence."

In recent years, the assertion that America was founded as a Christian nation has been growing in energy and influence. It is typically based on three arguments.

One: America was the New Israel, called by God to settle this "promised land" for his kingdom.

There can be no doubt that Puritans under John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts Bay, came to establish a New Israel on these shores. Winthrop developed a covenant which was required of all in his colony and was patterned directly on the Torah. The death penalty was prescribed for worshiping any God but the God of the Bible and for witchcraft, blasphemy, murder, sodomy, homosexuality, adultery, and kidnapping.

The Salem witchcraft executions are only the most famous example of the Puritans' commitment to living fully by Old Testament laws in the New World. The government required church attendance, banished dissenters, and called church governance meetings. Voting and running for public office were restricted to church members.

Tragically, the Puritans viewed Native Americans as Canaanites, occupying land which had been promised to the Puritans by God. Their shameful treatment of the Indians was the result of this theology.

On the positive side, this conviction that they were creating a New Israel established a society in which the law is our highest authority and stands over elected officials. God's word stood over the kings of Israel—when they violated it, they were punished by God. We saw a modern manifestation of this authority structure with the resignation of President Nixon, in contrast to coups in Latin America and elsewhere. This elevation of law also produced citizens who were subservient to the law and sought to live by its principles.

On the negative side: this culture birthed a self-reliant “religion of moralism” independent of God's power. The “spiritual” was interpreted in individualistic terms with regard to personal ethics, but corporate institutions and the larger government were divorced from such reliance on the divine.

The Puritan experiment demonstrates the difficulty of creating a sustained “Christian” culture because culture inevitably becomes dependent on basic human nature and aspirations. In this way, selfish interest, materialism, and the lust for power came to dominate cultural development.

Two: The Great Awakening produced the American Revolution, both of which were initiated and blessed by God.

There is no doubt that the Great Awakening of the 1740s produced remarkable results in America.

By the start of the eighteenth century, the Christianity that proved so important to the founding of the colonies had largely deteriorated into either spiritual complacency or a more extreme approach motivated by fear rather than faith, as demonstrated by events like the Salem witch trials. The result of both perspectives was a spiritual decline that left much of the colonies devoid of any sense of vibrant faith.

Within a few decades, however, those trends would reverse as a result of the First Great Awakening. The preaching of ministers like Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and John Wesley helped start a revival throughout the colonies that fundamentally transformed the way individuals, and even entire communities, saw their relationship to God.

Much greater interest in personal piety was demonstrated as a consequence of the Awakening. And education was much emphasized: Princeton was established by Presbyterians in 1746, Brown by Baptists in 1760, Rutgers by Dutch Reformed in 1764, and Dartmouth by Congregationalists in 1769.

A number of spiritual leaders saw the Awakening as ushering in the millennium in America. Some even connected Great Britain's King George III with the Antichrist.

However, many church leaders resisted the Awakening's emphasis on individual regeneration as a requirement for church membership, seeking to keep church membership open as a means of sanctifying the culture.

And it is noteworthy that advocates of the Awakening did not connect the movement spiritually to the Revolution. Most were patriots, but not because they saw the Revolution

as divine in origin. Many criticized the new nation for its slavery and suppression of religious minorities.

In addition, the numbers of church members produced by the Awakening soon returned to normal levels, or, in many cases, to below-normal levels.

Three: Most of the Founders of America were Christians who believed they were creating a Christian nation.

It has been alleged that fifty-two of the fifty-five signers of the Declaration of Independence were “orthodox” Christians and that twenty-four held seminary degrees. However, their personal spiritual commitments are actually difficult to know. We can determine the personal faith of only about twenty; eleven were biblical Christians, while the rest were deists or theological liberals.

Benjamin Franklin, widely considered a deist by historians, made a motion that the Constitutional Convention open its morning sessions with prayer. However, Franklin’s motion was turned down and not taken up again. Franklin himself noted that “with the exception of three or four, most thought prayers unnecessary.”

John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the United States, desired that we should “select and prefer Christians” for office. But the Constitution specifically disallows any religious test for public office (Article VI, the only time religion is mentioned in the document). George Washington stated: “a man’s religious tenets will not forfeit the protection of the Laws, nor deprive him of the right of attaining and holding the highest offices that are known in the United States.” Jay eventually left the Supreme Court to be governor of New York, where he tried to banish all Catholics from the state.

In “Church of the Holy Trinity vs. United States, 143 U.S. 457” (1892), the US Supreme Court stated that this is “a Christian nation.” But the Treaty of Tripoli, negotiated under George Washington and ratified by the Senate under John Adams, stated, “The government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.”

Many religious and political leaders of the day were adamant that America should have a free church in a free state:

- Roger Williams, founder of First Baptist Church in America, in 1640: “An enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation or civil state, confounds the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.”
- Isaac Backus, in 1773: “Religious matters are to be separated from the jurisdiction of the state not because they are beneath the interests of the state but, quite to the contrary, because they are too high and holy and thus are beyond the competence of the state.”
- John Leland: “The notion of a Christian commonwealth should be exploded forever.” He continued by saying that “government should protect every man in thinking and speaking freely, and see that one does not abuse another. The liberty I contend for is more than toleration. The very idea of toleration is despicable; it supposes that some have a pre-eminence above the rest to grant indulgence, whereas all should be equally free, Jews, Turks, Pagans and Christians.”

- John Adams, in 1785: “We should begin by setting conscience free. When all men of all religions . . . shall enjoy equal liberty, property, and an equal chance for honors and power . . . we may expect that improvements will be made in the human character and the state of society.”

SEEK SPIRITUAL AWAKENING FOR TODAY

It is vital that we seek spiritual awakening for our culture, not so that America will be a Christian nation but so that her people will know Christ as Lord.

Christian leaders, including Chuck Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, met with other Christian leaders in 1997 to sign the following statement:

We reject the idea that ours should be declared a ‘Christian’ nation. We do not seek a sacred public square but a civil public square. We strongly affirm the separation of church and state, which must never be interpreted as the separation of religion from public life. Knowing that the protection of minorities is secure only when such protections are supported by the majority, we urge Christians to renewed opposition to every form of invidious prejudice or discrimination. In the civil public square we must all respectfully engage one another in civil friendship as we deliberate and decide how we ought to order our life together.

Colson was adamant: “The truth is that a virtuous society can be created only by virtuous people, whose individual consciences guard their behavior and hold them accountable.”

To quote a popular paraphrase of a speech by Abraham Lincoln: “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.”

Here is how the most famous document in American history concludes:

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these united Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States, that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.

How can we join them?

PART II

THE PERSON OF CIVILITY

W. Ian Thomas noted: “Godliness is not the consequence of your capacity to imitate God, but the consequence of his capacity to reproduce himself in you; not self-righteousness, but Christ-righteousness; the righteousness which is by faith.”

We cannot lead others where we will not go or give what we do not have. If we would practice civility, we must first be people of civility. However, as we will see, this is not a call to try harder to do better. Human words cannot transform human hearts.

To be people of civility, we need the power of God.

CHAPTER 3

LIVE IN THE SPIRIT

“Though the soul may seem to rule the body admirably, and the reason the vices, if the soul and reason do not themselves obey God, as God has commanded them to serve him, they have no proper authority over the body and the vices.” —St. Augustine

Rodney Smith was born in a tent and raised in a Gypsy camp. He never attended school, not even for a single day. He became a Christian in 1876 and the next year was invited by General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, to join him in his evangelistic work.

Known as “Gypsy” Smith, he became one of the most effective evangelists in history. He was based in Great Britain but made more than forty trips to the US, Australia, South Africa, and other countries. His powerful preaching influenced the lives of millions.

Smith claimed, “There are five Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the Christian—but most people never read the first four.” However, to be a “gospel” that leads to God, living with civility and character, we need the power only the Holy Spirit can give.

Jesus told his disciples that they would “receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” and then they would “be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

God calls us to serve him “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit” (Zechariah 4:6). Only when we are empowered by the Spirit can we serve the Lord in transforming ways. If we would be people of God-honoring civility, we must learn to live in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, how do we live in the Spirit?

WHO IS THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Let’s begin with some introductions. The Holy Spirit is not an impersonal neuter, an “it.” He is more than a “presence.” He is not a “ghost,” holy or otherwise.

Rather, the Spirit is a Person who works personally. He possesses the three distinctive characteristics of personality:

1. knowledge (1 Corinthians 2:10–11)
2. will (1 Corinthians 12:11)
3. feeling or emotion (Romans 15:30)

The Holy Spirit performs acts only a person can perform:

- searches (1 Corinthians 2:10)
- speaks (Revelation 2:7)
- cries (Galatians 4:6)
- prays (Romans 8:26)
- testifies (John 15:26)
- teaches (John 14:26)
- leads Christians (Romans 8:26)
- commands people (Acts 16:6–7)

He is treated in Scripture as only a person can be treated: he is grieved and rebelled against (Isaiah 63:10; Ephesians 4:30); insulted (Hebrews 10:29); and blasphemed (Matthew 12:31–32).

Why do we believe the Spirit to be God? For five biblical reasons:

- He possesses the four distinctly divine attributes: eternity (Hebrews 9:14), omnipresence (Psalm 139:7–10), omniscience (1 Corinthians 2:10–11), and omnipotence (Luke 1:35).
- He performs each of the three distinctively divine works: creation (Job 33:4; Psalm 104:30; Genesis 1:1–3), impartation of life (John 6:63), and authorship of prophecy (2 Peter 1:21).
- Old Testament statements about God are applied to the Holy Spirit in the New Testament (see Exodus 16:7 and Hebrews 3:7–9).
- The name of the Holy Spirit is often coupled with that of God (1 Corinthians 12:4–6; Matthew 28:19–20; 2 Corinthians 13:14).

- The Holy Spirit is called God. Peter asked Ananias, “Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?” (Acts 5:3). Then the apostle warns, “You have not lied to man but to God” (v. 4).

While the Spirit is God, he is also distinct from the Father and the Son. At Jesus’ baptism, the Spirit descended while the Father spoke (Luke 3:21–22). We are to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (Matthew 28:19). The Son promised that the Spirit would come when the Son left earth for heaven (John 16:7).

When we survey the names given to the Spirit by Scripture, we get a better sense of his divinity and significance:

- the Spirit (Psalm 104:30)
- the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 3:16)
- the Spirit of Jehovah (Isaiah 11:2)
- the Spirit of the Lord Jehovah (Isaiah 61:1–3)
- the Spirit of the living God (2 Corinthians 3:3)
- the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9)
- the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:19)
- the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7)
- the Spirit of his Son (Galatians 4:6)
- the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13)
- the Holy Spirit of promise (Ephesians 1:13, RSV)
 - of holiness (Romans 1:4)
 - of judgment (Isaiah 4:4)
 - of burning (Isaiah 4:4)
- the Spirit of truth (John 14:17)

- of wisdom and understanding (Isaiah 11:2)
 - of counsel and might (Isaiah 11:2)
 - of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2)
 - of life (Romans 8:2)
 - of grace (Hebrews 10:29)
 - of compassion and supplication (Zechariah 12:10, RSV)
 - of glory (1 Peter 4:14)
- the oil of gladness (Hebrews 1:9)
 - the eternal Spirit (Hebrews 9:14)
 - the Comforter (John 14:26 KJV)
 - Christ in us, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27)

WHAT DID THE SPIRIT DO IN SCRIPTURE?

We've learned that the Spirit is a Person and that he is Holy. What does this holy Person do?

The Bible likens him to:

- fire (Isaiah 4:4)
- wind (John 3:8)
- water (John 7:37–39)
- a dove (Genesis 1:2; Luke 3:22)
- a “seal for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30; 2 Timothy 2:19)
- a “guarantee” or down payment on the future (Ephesians 1:13–14)
- an anointing oil (2 Corinthians 1:21–22).

The Spirit was extremely active in the Old Testament:

- He created the material universe and humanity (Psalm 33:6; Job 33:4).
- He empowered individuals for specific tasks (Judges 14:6,19; 15:14; 1 Samuel 10:6, 10; 2 Chronicles 15:1–2; Zechariah 4:6).
- He maintains living creatures (Psalm 104:29–30).
- He sides with the helpless, poor, wretched, and oppressed (Psalm 103:6).
- He anticipated the Anointed One, the Messiah (Isaiah 42:1–2), and that he would one day be poured out on the house of Israel (Ezekiel 39:29).
- He would be experienced universally (Joel 2:28–29).
- He would write God’s laws on the hearts of all (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

The Spirit was active in the life and earthly ministry of Jesus:

- Our Savior was born of the Spirit (Luke 1:35).
- Jesus lived a sinless life in the power of the Spirit (Hebrews 9:14).
- He was anointed and fitted for service by the Spirit (Acts 10:38; Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:14, 18–19; 3:22).
- The Spirit led Jesus in his earthly movements (Luke 4:1).
- He taught Jesus and was his source of wisdom (Isaiah 11:2–3; 42:1, fulfilled prophecy in Matthew 12:17–18).
- Jesus worked his miracles through the Spirit (Matthew 12:28).

- By the power of the Spirit, Jesus was raised from the dead (Romans 8:11).
- After his resurrection, Christ gave commandments to his apostles through the Spirit (Acts 1:2).
- Now the Spirit bears witness to Jesus (John 15:26, 27).

The Spirit then worked in the apostles and prophets:

- He gave them special gifts for specific purposes (1 Corinthians 12:4, 8–11, 28–29).
- Truth was hidden before the Spirit revealed it (Ephesians 3:3–5).
- The apostles and prophets spoke not in their wisdom but the Spirit's (1 Peter 1:10–12) as they were carried along by him (2 Peter 1:21).
- The Spirit spoke prophetic utterances (Hebrews 3:7; 10:15–16; Acts 28:25) so that when we read their words, we find not the speech of men but of God (Mark 7:13; 2 Samuel 23:2).

In a very real sense, every time we open the pages of Scripture, we hear the voice of the Spirit as he speaks to us today.

WHAT DOES THE SPIRIT DO TODAY?

The Holy Spirit:

- shows us our guilt as sinners, convicting us of righteousness and judgment (Acts 2:36–41).
- imparts spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1–5, cf. Titus 3:5; John 3:3–5).
- indwells the believer (1 Corinthians 6:19–20)

- sets us free from sin (Romans 8:2)
- forms Christ within us (Ephesians 3:14–19)
- brings forth Christlike graces of character (Galatians 5:22–23).
- guides the believer into the life of a son (Romans 8:14)
- bears witness to our sonship (Romans 8:15–16).

The Spirit also:

- brings to remembrance the words of Christ and will teach us all things (John 14:26).
- reveals the deep things of God which are hidden from and foolishness to the “natural man” (1 Corinthians 2:9–13).
- interprets his own revelation to us (1 Corinthians 2:14), enabling Christians to communicate to others in power the truth which we have been taught by him (1 Corinthians 2:1–5).
- guides the believer in prayer (Jude 20; Ephesians 6:18)
- inspires and guides us in thanksgiving (Ephesians 5:18–20)
- inspires and leads our worship (Philippians 3:3).
- infills the believer (Ephesians 5:18).
- sends us into definite vocations (Acts 13:2–4).
- guides us in daily life (Acts 8:27–29; 16:6–7).

THE “BAPTISM” AND “FILLING” OF THE SPIRIT

Finally, we come to the most practical dimension of our entire chapter. An electric drill is not much good unless it’s plugged into a power source. You can make a hole in a piece

of wood if you try hard enough, but the tool isn't fulfilling its purpose without its intended power.

So it is for all Christians: we cannot accomplish our purpose without the power of the Spirit. The daily "filling" of the Holy Spirit is the most crucial experience of the Christian life. Next to our salvation, it is the most important decision we make.

And it is a decision we must make every day.

Some traditions believe that we can become Christians without experiencing the "baptism" of the Spirit. But Romans 8:9 makes clear that if we do not have the Spirit, we do not belong to Jesus. I believe that the moment we ask Christ to be our Savior and Lord, the Holy Spirit comes to indwell us. In fact, when we "ask Jesus into our hearts," it is actually the Spirit who answers our prayer.

Unfortunately, while every Christian is "baptized" in the Spirit, not every Christian is "filled" with the Spirit. The command in question is Ephesians 5:18, "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit." "Filled" means "controlled." The Greek literally says, "be continually being controlled by the Spirit." This is an ongoing, daily decision we must make.

Why be filled with the Spirit?

When we are living under the control of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered for our purpose and work (Acts 1:8). We find the comfort of Christ (John 14:1, 18, 27–28). We experience his teaching, counsel, guidance, and wisdom (John 14:26). The Spirit anchors, stabilizes, grows, and matures us (Ephesians 4:14–16).

The Spirit then equips us against Satan (Ephesians 6:10–17; 1 John 4:4). And he makes us witnesses to the world (Matthew 28:18–20). Without his power, we cannot fulfill his purpose. With his power, no purpose is beyond our fulfillment.

How are we filled with the Spirit?

Begin at the beginning of the day.

A runner does not finish the race and then warm up. We don't fill the car's tank after the trip is done. The earlier you give your day to the Spirit, the more of your day he can bless.

First, we must confess our sins, for the “Holy” Spirit cannot control a person in rebellion against the Lord.

As we have seen, we can lie against the Spirit (Acts 5:3), grieve him (Ephesians 4:30), and quench his power in our lives (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

Next, surrender every dimension of your life to the Spirit.

Put him in charge of your plans for the day, i.e., your decisions, problems, and opportunities. Ask him to guide your steps and protect your character. Yield all that you will do this day to him.

Now, step out by faith, believing that he has answered your prayer.

The Bible nowhere describes how it *feels* to be filled with the Spirit. It takes just as much faith to believe that the Spirit is controlling your day as it did to ask Jesus to be your Savior.

Here is what will *not* result from this decision:

- continuous emotional heights (Ephesians 5:19)
- permanent filling (Ephesians 5:18)
- sinless perfection (1 John 1:8)
- any particular gift (1 Corinthians 12:29–30).

Here are results of this decision as seen in the book of Acts:

- preaching and witnessing in the power of the Spirit (Acts 2)
- gathering in fellowship (2:42, 46)
- performing signs, wonders, and miracles (2:43; 19:11)
- giving sacrificially to needy brethren (2:44–45)
- healing the sick and the lame (4:9–10)
- adding new believers (2:47; 5:14)
- expanding the faith and establishing churches in new areas (9:31)
- maintaining the unity of the believers (4:32)
- raising the dead (9:36–41)
- defeating Satan and his demons (13:6–12; 16:16–18)

When we are surrendered to the Spirit, we are empowered for God's purpose and plan for our lives. And eternity is always affected by our obedience.

What hinders the Spirit?

Dwight Moody preached to over one hundred million people in his ministry. He founded what became Moody Bible College and was widely considered one of the godliest

men in America. His prayers have been recorded and published; his passion for the lost was legendary. And yet Moody often said of his own soul, “We are leaky vessels, and we have to keep right under the fountain all the time to keep full of Christ, and so have a fresh supply.”

If he needed this experience, so do I. Do you? What keeps us from being “refilled” by the Spirit?

Scripture warns us, “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19) and “do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Ephesians 4:30). Your last sin quenched and grieved the Spirit and kept him from “filling” and empowering your life.

But when we confess our sins, God is “faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). He then separates our sins from us “as far as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12), buries them in “the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:19), and remembers them no more (Isaiah 43:25).

THE “FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT”

The best description of incivility I know is found in Galatians 5:19–21: “The works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.”

By contrast, the best description of civility I know is found in the verses that follow: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (vv. 22–23a).

If we would be people of civility, clearly we need to be people who manifest the “fruit of the Spirit.”

Note that “fruit” is singular—these are nine manifestations of the one “fruit” demonstrating the Spirit at work in our lives. And note that they are the Spirit’s “fruit,” not ours. We are not called to try harder to make more fruit. Rather, we are to stay surrendered to the Spirit so he can produce his fruit in and through us.

Love

Our list begins with love. Why does it come first?

“Love” translates *agape*, which refers to unconditional acceptance, the commitment to put the other person first regardless of circumstances or challenges. It contrasts in the New Testament with *phileo*, friendship love, and *eros*, erotic or sexual love. To choose *agape* is to love other people regardless of how they treat you. It is to choose others’ best interest regardless of the cost to you. It is to love them as Jesus loves you.

Those who construct houses in Southern California have discovered that buildings survive earthquakes only when they are bolted several feet down into solid rock. Otherwise, they simply slide off their foundation and collapse.

The foundation of our relationship with God and others is love—his for us and ours for them.

Joy

When J. S. Bach returned from a yearlong concert tour to discover that his wife and child had died, he wrote in his diary, “Dear Lord, may my joy not leave me.” Imagine even thinking of joy at such a time. But Bach was right: the joy of the Lord is ours whatever our circumstances hold.

What is “joy”? First, let’s note what it’s *not*:

- A feeling. Nowhere does the Bible describe what it feels like to have God’s joy.
- A circumstance. Joy is not “happiness,” which depends on “happenings.” You can have joy even in hard times.
- A temporary experience. Joy transcends the moment, the feelings, and the circumstances of this day. You can have joy no matter what the past has been or the future holds.

So, what is joy? I define it as “a deep state of well-being that transcends circumstances.” Romans 14:17 states that “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Paul said he was “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 6:10).

How can you have joy? By surrendering to the Holy Spirit. You can know the degree to which he is controlling your life by the degree to which you are experiencing and manifesting his joy.

Then you can “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4). You can sing hymns at midnight in jail (Acts 16:25). You can respond to persecution as did the apostles: “They left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41).

Peace

In Mark 4, we find Jesus in a storm. His disciples were fighting for their lives, but he was asleep. After they

exhausted all their efforts, they woke him in fear. He then said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” With this result: “And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (v. 39).

Why didn’t they wake Jesus earlier? Why don’t we?

Some of us don’t think we need his help. We think our boat is big enough, the storm small enough, our abilities good enough, or that our training and experience are all that’s needed. Like these veteran sailors, we’ve been through storms on our lake before and we know how to handle our boats. We like rowing. We don’t need help. We want to do this ourselves. We think we can.

But no boat, ability, money, possession, or resource is enough to live at peace without God. That’s just how he made the world—and us.

Some of us have given up on peace. We accept storms as a way of life. We’ve been through so many downpours, so many hurricanes, that we’ve given up on peace in our hearts or homes. We’re accustomed to a life filled with stress and strife, hectic hurry and perennial pressure.

All the while, the Prince of Peace waits to give peace to our hearts and souls, to calm our storms, to bring tranquility to our lives—if we will ask.

And some of us have given up on God. He’s been asleep in our boat before. We prayed without answers, or so we think. We grieved without hope, suffered without help, rowed on our own. Or so it seems to us. So we let him sleep. All the while, he’s waiting for us to turn to him first.

What storm are you facing today? Where is your ship battered? How can Jesus bring you peace?

Invite him to captain your boat. Go to him at the first sign of a storm. Settle for nothing less than his peace. Then decide to begin each day's voyage with him at the helm.

Patience

Success seldom comes quickly with God's people. Abraham was seventy-five when God first promised him offspring (Genesis 12:4, 7) and one hundred when Isaac was born (Genesis 21:5). Moses was a shepherd for forty years and wandered in the wilderness for forty more until coming to the edge of the promised land.

If we are to succeed in life and in God's kingdom, we must have the fruit of the Spirit called patience.

"Patience" translates *makrothumia*, which literally means to be "long- or large-tempered." It can be rendered, "to be longsuffering, patiently enduring under injuries inflicted by others." God displays such patience with us:

- He "is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).
- "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Psalm 103:8). The Old Testament repeats this affirmation four more times.
- "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the

foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:15–16). God was patient even with Paul, the murderer of his people. He is therefore patient with you, no matter what you’ve done.

Now he calls us to display his patience with each other. Paul prayed for the Colossians to be “strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy” (Colossians 1:11). If you’ll make Paul’s intercession yours, the Holy Spirit will answer your prayer today.

Kindness

“Kindness” translates *chrestos*, which means “goodness, kindness, generosity toward all people, no matter what they have done to us.” God graciously manifests such kindness toward us despite all our sins.

Scripture teaches that “when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:4–5). God saved us “so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7).

Now our Father calls us to choose kindness with others, no matter what they do to us: “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:17–18).

Lewis Smedes' excellent book, *Forgive and Forget*, explains what forgiveness is and what it is not. Forgiveness is *not* excusing, or forgetting, or explaining away. To forgive is to pardon—to refuse to punish, even though you could, as a governor pardons a convicted criminal. To forgive is to release the person from the punishment they deserve.

Let God be the judge while you offer kindness. If you'll make this choice, the Spirit will give you the kindness you need.

Goodness

“Goodness” translates the Greek word *agathosune*, which means “goodness in action.” Scripture says that our Lord is a “good” Father.

Consider Nehemiah 9:35: “Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works.” Hundreds of times the Scriptures call God “good.”

All through the Bible we find God initiating such goodness toward us:

- “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). He took the initiative to find us when we didn't want to be found.
- This was his Son's mission in life: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

Now God calls us to initiate goodness toward others:

- “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone” (Matthew 18:15).

- “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23–24).

Think of the last sin God forgave in your life. Now think of the person whose sin you need to forgive and choose to initiate goodness today.

Faithfulness

“Faithfulness” translates *pistis*, which means “faith” in relation to God and faithfulness in relation to people.

All through Scripture we read that our Father is “faithful.” For instance, 1 Thessalonians 5:24 states, “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.” In 2 Thessalonians 3:3, Paul writes, “The Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.”

Now your Father calls you to be faithful with him and others as he has been faithful with you: “Fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you” (1 Samuel 12:24). And he will reward your faithfulness in eternity: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21).

Where do you need the faithfulness of God today? With whom is he calling you to be faithful?

Gentleness

Frederick Buechner is one of my favorite writers. Here is his definition of “anger”:

Of the Seven Deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

Now we come to the fruit of the Spirit called “gentleness.” This term translates *praus*, one of the truly great words in the Greek language. No one English word adequately describes this Greek word.

Aristotle gave the word its classic definition: the man who is always angry at the right time and never at the wrong time. It describes someone who controls his or her emotions no matter the circumstances. Plato used it to describe the power to soothe and calm, as an ointment on a wound. Socrates used it for a man who could discuss emotional things without losing his temper.

Our holy King has every right to condemn each of us for our sins. Instead, he is angry at our sins but forgives us when we confess them (1 John 1:9) and forgets all he forgives (Isaiah 43:25). Now he calls us to manifest such *praus* with each other.

Gentleness is one of the greatest hallmarks of a life led by the Holy Spirit:

- “Let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious” (1 Peter 3:4).

- “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness” (Galatians 6:1).
- “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness” (2 Timothy 2:24–25).
- We are to defend our faith “with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).
- “Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness” (Ephesians 4:1–2).

When you cannot be forgiving and gentle, know that the Spirit can do what you cannot.

Self-control

We have learned that when the Holy Spirit takes control of our lives, he manifests the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness. The last characteristic of his fruit is “self-control.” This term translates *ekrates*, someone who controls his or her desires.

The word originally meant to grip something, to control it. Plato and Aristotle used the word for a man who had powerful passions and desires he controlled. He was always their master, never their servant. The word was typically used with regard to sexual desires but was also applied to food, love, and ego. Someone who controls his desires, no matter how tempted he or she is, manifests *ekrates*.

Where do you need self-control today?

Scripture calls you to choose this character trait:

- “A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls” (Proverbs 25:28).
- “Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control” (2 Peter 1:5–6).
- We are to be “hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined” (Titus 1:8).

But know that your Father does not expect you to manifest self-control in your own ability. The Bible assures us that “God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Timothy 1:7). The Holy Spirit is ready to empower you with the self-control you need, if you will ask him for such grace today.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have learned that the Holy Spirit is God indwelling us. He affects and empowers every dimension of our lives. He directs every step and decision of our days. He is the Lord who gives us significance and purpose, life and a future.

And when he manifests his “fruit” in us, he makes us civil people in an uncivil day.

One of my favorite stories concerns a father arriving home from work one day.

His two little girls ran to meet him.

The five-year-old got to him first, throwing her arms around his legs. Hedges on either side of the sidewalk kept the three-year-old from going around her big sister to her

father. Standing on the sidewalk, she began to cry.

So her father reached down and picked her up.

The big sister then taunted her little sister, “Ha, ha, ha—
I’ve got all of Daddy there is.”

The little sister replied, “Ha, ha, ha—Daddy’s got all of me
there is.”

If Jesus is your Lord, you have all of God there is.

Does he have all of you?

CHAPTER 4

PRACTICE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

“My third maxim was to try always to conquer myself rather than fortune, and to alter my desires rather than change the order of the world, and generally to accustom myself to believe that there is nothing entirely within our power but our own thoughts: so that after we have done our best in regard to the things that are without us, our ill-success cannot possibly be failure on our part.”—Rene Descartes

To be people of civility, we must be empowered by the Spirit of God who manifests the character of God in the people of God. As we have seen, his “fruit” is the result of his work rather than our achievement.

In this chapter, let’s consider our side of this partnership.

There are spiritual disciplines that will help transform your spiritual life by replacing old, destructive habits with new character-building, life-giving routines. Jesus practiced them and gave us personal examples we can follow today.

An accomplished ice-skater has freedom on the ice because she is disciplined. Being on the ice without the discipline of training only creates chaos and fear for the skater. The key to the accomplished skater's grace and confidence comes through hours of self-imposed discipline. She defeats her enemies—fear, lack of confidence, and lack of control—with discipline.

As Christians, we too can have grace, strength, and beauty through embracing the spiritual disciplines. Without them, spiritual life is often chaotic, even confusing.

In this chapter, we will focus on prayer, meditation, solitude, fasting, Scripture study, accountability, confession, and worship. They are not an exhaustive list, but the faithful practice of these disciplines can transform your life and prepare you for a deeper walk with Jesus Christ.

However, as Richard Foster taught us in his classic book on spiritual disciplines, *Celebration of Discipline*, these disciplines are *not* the end in themselves. They are the means *to* the end.

It is my prayer that these studies will be transforming for you as you follow Jesus.

PRAYER

“Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’” —Luke 11:1

Blaise Pascal, the mathematical and spiritual genius, believed that “all of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.” Oswald Chambers, a great theologian, agreed: “Prayer is the way the life of God is nourished. . . . We look upon prayer

simply as a means of getting things for ourselves, but the biblical purpose of prayer is that we may get to know God Himself.”

How can we know our Father more fully by praying more effectively?

How to pray

Jesus’ instructions on prayer are so simple we can all follow them: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). With this promise: “Everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” (v. 8). There is no such thing as “unanswered prayer,” if only we will ask, seek, and knock.

Note the progression: A child asks for his mother’s help. But he cannot find her, so he seeks her. He still cannot find her, so he knocks at her bedroom door until she opens and answers.

So with us. We ask, but when it seems he does not hear, we seek him. When it seems he is not to be found, we knock. It may seem that the door is closed, but it is not. “The LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!” (Isaiah 30:18 NIV). He wants to hear your prayer even more than you want to pray it.

So pray with urgency. Jesus’ words are imperatives, not options but commands. Charles Spurgeon advised: “He who prays without fervency does not pray at all. We cannot commune with God, who is a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24), if there is no fire in our prayers.” So pray urgently

and continually. Jesus' words are in the present tense: pray and *keep on* praying.

How do we pray with continual urgency?

- **Begin.** Make an appointment to meet with God. A man put on his calendar each day, 7–7:30, prayer. But he kept missing his appointment. Then he changed it to say 7–7:30, God. That's harder to neglect. Keep a specific prayer list and note the ways God answers your requests.
- **Pray in Jesus' name:** "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:13–14 NIV). To pray in Jesus' "name" is to ask by his merit, to draw on his "account." If I write a million-dollar check and sign it with my name, the check is worthless. If I sign a billionaire's name, the check is good. To pray in Jesus' name is to ask the Father's help by the merit of his Son. He never refuses such a request.
- **Pray according to God's will:** "This is the confidence we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him" (1 John 5:14–15). He will give us what we ask or something better.
- **Pray for God's glory:** "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13 NIV). Do you seek your glory or his?

- **Pray with a clean heart:** “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer” (Psalm 66:18–19). Is anything blocking your fellowship with your holy Lord? If you’re not sure, you may ask him.

If God seems silent, check yourself by these biblical standards. But know that your Father wants to hear you even more than you want to be heard. So pray. Let nothing stop you. Meet with him today.

When God seems silent

When you pray but God seems silent, consider several possibilities. Perhaps he is still preparing you for his answer—you need more time in prayer to be able to hear him and obey his will. Perhaps he is still preparing your circumstances. You’re praying for a job, for instance. God must move the person in your next job to their next place so you can take theirs. He’s not done with what he must do to answer you.

Perhaps you’re not obedient to what he is saying. Maybe sin clouds your eyes and ears, and you need more time in prayer to be right with him. Often, he has a better answer than the one for which we are asking. He has already answered us, but we must keep praying until we see that he has.

Prayer is spiritual breathing. So “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). There is much we can do after we pray, but little we can do until we pray.

Is your Father waiting on you now?

(For more on prayer, see my book, *The Greater Work: How Prayer Positions You to Receive All that Grace Intends to Give.*)

MEDITATION

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” —Proverbs 3:5–6

Meditation is active, not passive. It connects you to the living God and his purpose for you. Eastern religion has held the concept of meditation captive for too long. There is a vast difference between the Eastern concept of meditation and the Christian concept. The Eastern concept calls upon the practitioner to empty self and become nothing. The Christian concept calls those who practice mediation to be filled and transformed.

Meditation keeps you spiritually and emotionally equipped to face the Enemy. When you listen to God’s voice, you can respond in obedience to his word. The world constantly pulls us in multiple directions. Meditation allows a person to focus on what is important.

Busyness is often the most significant obstacle to being transformed from a believer into a follower. Meditation involves changed behavior as a result of consistent, reflective encounters with the living God. You turn from yourself and your own resources to God, seeking his power to become all he has called you to be.

So, how does a Christian meditate?

It’s like learning to ride a bike. No matter how much you’ve studied cycling, you don’t really know how to until you climb on and experience it. With meditation, don’t be as concerned with “how” as with “what.”

Find a quiet place and establish a regular time for meditation. Take a particular Bible passage and savor every word and nuance of it. Or, consider the magnificence of the creation around you and apply that awe and wonder to the One who created it all. Essentially, you learn to meditate by meditating.

Here are four methods which can guide you in meditating:

- **Meditate on Scripture.** Don't rush through a passage, hoping to gain an insight or two. Rather, "ponder in your heart" what God is saying through his word (Luke 2:19). Study the background. Why were these words written, and to whom? Our tendency to rush through quiet times reflects our internal state of busyness, and that is what needs to be changed through meditation.
- **Meditate on God's creation.** Be still and know him as Creator. Focus on something God has created and study it. If God is so intricate with a simple leaf, if he is so mindful of the birds of the air and the grass of the fields, how much more so is he concerned with our lives! (Matthew 6:25–34).
- **Meditate on a life issue.** Our minds are cluttered with fragmented thoughts involving every area of our lives. Meditation centers our thoughts on God. Focus on a problem for which you need God's help or on a good thing that has happened to you. Use symbolic gestures to help you. With palms down, lay down your cares. Then, with palms up, receive God's provision.
- **Meditate on a significant event.** Seek God's mind about it. View the truths of God's word as you reflect on world and community events. Pray for those in power. You have the ear of God—and that's real power.

SOLITUDE

“And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, ‘Everyone is looking for you.’ And he said to them, ‘Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.’ And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.”—Mark 1:35–39

Are you one of those people who has to have the television or radio on just for the noise, even when studying? The fear of being alone drives some of us to constant noise.

Don't be misled: solitude does not produce loneliness or emptiness. Loneliness is inner emptiness, but solitude is inner fulfillment.

Jesus found it necessary to be alone with his Father. He needed that time of solitude and focus for direction in his life.

If Jesus needed the discipline of solitude, how much more do we?

How does one achieve solitude, especially in a world so cluttered with noise and activity?

Pray.

In many ways, solitude is nonstop prayer. Solitude is not about being alone; it's about being focused. Ask God to prod you to develop the discipline of solitude.

How does one experience solitude?

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- **Set aside a quiet time.** Most people who have quiet times do so in the morning before the day begins. Jesus did this daily. If you are to find God’s direction and strength for each day, solitude is a key ingredient.
 - **Find ways to experience an extended time of solitude.** A worthwhile goal is to work toward spending an hour in solitude at least once a week. Then, you’ll discover that you want to find a way to spend a whole day in solitude, perhaps monthly. Some will take the next step of finding a whole week, perhaps annually, to spend in solitude and communion with the Lord.
 - **Retreat to advance.** As you grow through the discipline of solitude, try to withdraw regularly, perhaps three or four times a year, to redefine your life goals. Stay late at your office or find a quiet place at home to reevaluate your objectives and your progress toward them. Take a retreat once a year with the purpose of solitude. “In quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (Isaiah 30:15).
 - **Use the small times.** Early morning is a great time to experience solitude. Use the moments before the family awakens, before the daily grind, the few minutes in bed before getting up, or time spent over a morning cup of coffee. Redeem some of the time you cannot control: rush hour traffic on the freeway, waiting in a doctor’s office, waiting for an appointment at work. Instead of wasting those minutes, use the time to focus your mind on God. Small snatches of time like these, which we often fill with fretting, can be used as an inner quiet, a spiritual recharging of sorts, for your mind and body.

FASTING

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” —Matthew 6:16–18

Throughout the Bible, fasting is mentioned as abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. In most biblical cases, it involved private matters between individuals and God and was not intended for public display.

Should believers fast today?

Jesus spoke of fasting, as he did of praying and giving, teaching all three as part of a life of Christian devotion. While most of us don't consider a Christian life without praying or giving, why do many of us exclude fasting?

Today, especially in Western culture, fasting seems to be the antithesis of a fulfilled Christian life. Most of us are well fed. Fasting almost seems fanatical.

Why fast? There are both physical and spiritual benefits.

- **Fasting reveals what controls us.** Often, we cover up the turmoil and pain of daily life with food. But through fasting, things like greed, pride, resentment, etc. are revealed.
- **Fasting also reminds us that we are sustained by “every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).** When the disciples brought food to Jesus, thinking he was

hungry, he said, “I have food to eat that you do not know about. . . . My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:32, 34). Jesus was actually being nourished by the power of God.

So, how do you fast?

The Scriptures teach we are to fast regularly, humbly, joyfully, and expectantly. Fasting does not earn God’s blessings but positions us to receive his grace.

Some simple guidelines for fasting are:

- **Don’t announce your fast.** This is personal and usually private. Announcing it may seem self-promoting and give others the wrong impression of why you are fasting.
- **Begin with a partial fast.** Because many of us are not used to fasting as a discipline, it is wise to begin by giving up one or two meals. You may attempt this once a week for several weeks before attempting a normal fast. Use the mealtime you’re giving up to spend time with God and give the money you would have spent on the meal to him as well.
- **Move on to a normal fast.** In Scriptures, the typical fast was from sunup to sundown. When you practice this kind of fast, drink plenty of water. Whenever you feel hunger, think of God and his sacrificial love for you.
- **Seek God’s will for a longer fast.** Fasts of three to seven days are the most common in this category. However, some people follow Jesus’ example and fast for forty days. (It is wise to consult your physician before beginning such an extended fast.) This seems

to be the physical limit the body can endure. In a longer fast, you may experience more physical discomforts, including headaches, stomach pains, dizziness, and weakness. These will improve with time. Your physical bearings will amaze you, but it is more important to monitor your inner bearings. You will continue your daily routine, but inwardly you will be in prayer and adoration.

- **Break your fast with fresh fruits and vegetables and with inner rejoicing.** Fasting helps equip us for great battles. It can bring about breakthroughs in the spiritual realm that are not possible in any other way.

Fasting does not necessarily have to involve food. You could fast from television, technology and social media, or your favorite pastime. Abstaining from the physical and material for the sake of the spiritual is the call and invitation of Jesus.

BIBLE STUDY

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” —Acts 2:42

Visitors to Hampton Court in London are amazed by the maze they find there. Bushes form head-high solid walls. In the center sits a guide high on a platform. When pilgrims get lost wandering through the hedges, they look up to this guide, who points them to the next turn on their way.

God gave us his word to guide us in living for him. But, as with any guide, we must follow its directions correctly. If our guide points south but we turn north, we will soon be lost, no matter how accurate our guide’s suggestions. How do we follow his direction?

Meet the qualifications

To hear the Lord speak through his word, first join his family by making his Son your saving Lord. We must be close enough to hear his voice. Otherwise, we cannot understand the Spirit's speech to our hearts (1 Corinthians 2:10–11, 14).

Second, be willing to work and study hard. Paul's encouragement to Timothy applies to us: "Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13; "devote yourself" in the Greek requires previous, private preparations). Start with a good study Bible. Then acquire study tools such as a Bible dictionary, a concordance, an atlas, topical Bibles and encyclopedias, and good commentaries. But use such tools only to assist you in your personal study of God's word.

Third, choose to obey what you discover. Jesus was clear: "Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or I speak on my own" (John 7:17 NIV). The Lord of the universe will not reveal his word as an option for us to consider. Only when we choose to follow his will can we fully hear his voice.

Choose the right assumptions

Next, we choose presuppositions which will guide our study. A mathematician assumes that parallel lines never intersect and that arithmetic certainties today will be certain tomorrow. The study of God's word requires similar assumptions.

First, know that Scripture can be understood. Church, creed, or council can guide us, but they cannot prescribe to us. Because of the "priesthood of the believer," every Christian has the right and responsibility to study the Scriptures personally (1 Peter 2:5).

Second, understand that the New Testament interprets the Old. The Bible centers on Jesus Christ, the One who fulfills the Hebrew Scriptures (Matthew 5:17). We seek in the New Testament guidance for interpreting the Hebrew Bible. For instance, an Old Testament law which is renewed in the New Testament retains the force of law for us today (cf. the Ten Commandments and Matthew 19:16–19). An Old Testament law not renewed in the New Testament retains the force of principle for Christian living but is not binding law (cf. the dietary codes of Leviticus and Acts 15:28–29).

Third, use Scripture to interpret Scripture. The Bible is its own best commentary. Study difficult parts of the Bible in light of its clear teachings. For instance, Luke records Jesus' statement that we must "hate" our family to follow Christ (Luke 14:26). But Matthew's version clarifies that we must not love them more than we love Jesus (Matthew 10:37). Paul teaches that we must provide for our family (1 Timothy 5:8) and that a husband must love his wife as Christ loves the church (Ephesians 5:25).

Learn the background

Now we're ready to understand the text in its context. No literature makes complete sense unless we answer these questions first:

- Who was the writer?
- Who were the recipients?
- What was the author's purpose?
- What kind of literature is this (e.g., history, law, poetry, letters, or symbolism)?

A good study Bible will give you the basics here, and encyclopedias and commentaries will round out the story.

Take these four steps

Once we understand the context of the passage we're about to read, we are ready to take these four steps to personal study and understanding:

- **Grammar:** What do the words and sentences of the text mean to say? Define unfamiliar words. Restate the text in your words to be sure you know its literal meaning.
- **History:** Is geographical knowledge assumed in this passage? Are social or cultural customs employed? Do differences exist between the original intention of the text and our culture today? For instance, a Samaritan was a despised half-breed when Jesus told his famous parable in Luke 10, but today such a person is a benevolent hero.
- **Theology:** Once we know the words and historical context of our passage, we are ready to identify its theological teachings. What does the text tell us about God, humanity, creation and the world, sin, salvation, missions and ministry, and/or the future? What abiding principles should we gain from this passage?
- **Practice:** Now we are ready to apply the text to our lives. Write out the intended meaning of the passage and its theological truths. Make direct applications where they are intended by the author (“prescriptive” truth), such as with the Ten Commandments or the Great Commission. Seek principles when the text does not intend to apply directly to our actions (“descriptive” truth), such as learning from David and Bathsheba that adultery is always destructive. Finally, define at least one action that the text requires of you today. You have not finished your study of God’s word until your life is different as a result.

A potter must touch the clay he wishes to mold. Scripture is a tool God uses to shape us into the image of his Son (Romans 8:29).

When last did reading the Bible change your life?

ACCOUNTABILITY

“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” —James 5:19–20

As we actively pursue these disciplines in our lives, there is another one which is often overlooked but is essential for spiritual success: accountability.

Accountability is basic to life. Banks hold us accountable for our financial transactions. Schools hold students accountable for academic growth and achievement. Employers hold employees accountable for work performances. Coaches hold players accountable. Parents hold children accountable.

And God holds us accountable.

The Scriptures tell us that we are all accountable to God.

According to 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Romans 14:12, we will have to give an account of our actions to God. However, we are also to hold each other accountable. In Luke 17:3, Jesus says, “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.”

God can save you from heartache and sin if you are yielded to him and his will. How do we follow the discipline of accountability with each other?

- **First, find someone you trust.** A spouse, a good friend, a coworker, or a counselor are some of the people you may want to consider. Find someone with whom you can share honestly and who will be unreservedly honest with you. The last thing most of us need is someone else telling us what we *want* to hear rather than what we *need* to hear.
- **Form an accountability relationship.** After you find someone to trust, work with that person on a regular basis. Accountability is asking that person to help you accomplish your goals, not that person imposing their standards on you.
- **Allow your partner to restore you.** Likely, when you need accountability the most, you desire it the least. You must allow your partner to restore you gently and with humility. Their purpose is not to criticize or judge you but to build you up and help you meet your spiritual goals.

Our burdens are too great for us to carry alone. God never intended Christianity to be a solo act. We are to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). We need each other.

CONFESSIO

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!” —
Psalm 51:1–2

God is a God of redemption and forgiveness. When Jesus died on the cross, he took upon himself the sin of the world. God “made him to be sin who knew no sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21). This was the only way total redemption was

possible. The Bible promises, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

How do we confess to God our sins? How do we get cleansed?

- **Agree with God and call sin what it is.** Our conscience has to bother us. Under the gaze of God, examine yourself and deal with definite sins, not generalizations.
- **Agonize over your sins.** Genuine sorrow—godly sorrow—means hating what we have done so much that we are willing to turn, even run, from the sin. That is repentance.
- **Avoid the sin and the circumstances where it appears.** You must then have a determination to avoid the confessed sin. You must desire what God desires for you, which never includes sin.
- **Accept God’s forgiveness.** If you hold onto past sins you have confessed to God, you will not be empowered by him. God is faithful. His faithfulness is not contingent on our willingness to receive his forgiveness. He is faithful in spite of us, not because of us. But our transformation is contingent on accepting his forgiveness. You must accept it, incorporate it, believe it, and act on it.

To experience this discipline in a very practical and personal way, I encourage you to take a spiritual inventory. Set aside a few minutes to be alone with the Lord. Take a pen and piece of paper in hand.

Now, ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind anything in your life that is displeasing to your Father and write down

what comes to your thoughts. No one else will see this paper, so be very honest and specific.

Next, work through the list, repenting of each sin specifically and genuinely. Claim your Father's promise to forgive all you confess (1 John 1:9) and then to separate your sins from you "as far as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12), cast them "into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19), and remember them no more (Isaiah 43:25).

WORSHIP

"In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!'" —Isaiah 6:1–3

Football is America's favorite spectator sport. Bud Wilkinson, head coach of the University of Oklahoma football team, described the game as "twenty-two boys on the field badly in need of rest, and forty thousand people in the stands badly in the need of exercise."

We can afford to be spectators in some areas of our lives, but not with our souls. You and I will each stand personally before the God of the universe one day to give account for the years he gave us to live. Here will be his first question: Did you "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30)? Did you worship your Maker? We need to know what worship is, what it isn't, and why it matters so much to our God and to our souls.

What is worship?

Let's begin with what worship is, as God sees it. It's not what our culture thinks it is, or even what many church attendees think it is.

God defines worship as "love." In "love the Lord your God," *love* is a verb, not a noun or an adjective here. It requires doing, not just attending, watching, or believing. You haven't worshipped by attending church, listening to a sermon, singing hymns, or giving money. You've only worshipped when you've loved, adored, and honored. Worship is love.

Worship is loving God: "Love the Lord *your God*." Worship is about God, not us. It's not about what we "get" from the hour, but what we give to God. You are not the audience and staff members are not the performers. Their job is to help you do your job, to be worship "coaches," to lead you to love God.

And worship is loving God in every way a human can love.

- With all our *hearts*: The word refers to our emotions, our senses. Worship involves an intuitive expression of love for God.
- With all our *souls*: The word means the life force itself, that which gives our bodies life, our very essence—not as a peripheral matter but as your highest purpose and value today. Worship involves a passionate love for God.
- With all our *minds*: We are to have no ungodly thoughts, songs, movies, television shows, or books in our minds. We are to think about our faith, to study God's word, and to engage intellectually in the worship of God.

- With all our *strength*: This means to love God with our actions when the worship hour is done. God is looking for Monday Christians, Monday worshippers, Monday disciples.

Did you know that you can love God in the same way you love anyone else who matters to you?

You can spend the day with him, talking with him and thinking about him. Tell him how you feel and what you're thinking. Thank him for the good things you experience, for "every good and every perfect gift is from above" (James 1:17). Ask him for what you need and praise him for what he gives.

Spend the day with Jesus. Love him. Worship him.

This is his first commandment, his first expectation, for every day.

What worship is not

By these standards, worship is not performance, whether by the pastor or other worship leaders. God has called them to help you worship God, but the attendees are the performers. Don't evaluate worship by the preacher's performance, but by yours.

Worship is not entertainment. It is to be exciting and encouraging, but churches are not in the entertainment business. Worship leaders do not exist to impress the congregation as their audience. Rather, the congregation is present to impress God.

Worship is not therapy. God helps us as we worship him, but our first purpose is to express our love for him. Interestingly, we get far more out of worship when we come not for us but for him.

Worship is not evangelism. Evangelism results from worship as people see Christ in our joy. But God doesn't evaluate worship by how many public decisions get made at the front of the church. He measures our worship by how many hearts adore him all across the church.

Worship is not about us. It is about loving God, every service and every day.

Why does worship matter?

God made us for worship. This is why we were created. It's why he gave us free will—so we could choose to worship him. Love must be a choice. God made us to make this choice. Nothing else fulfills us. St. Augustine was right: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in him.”

God empowers us when we worship. When did God empower Isaiah to go for him, Daniel to face the lions, or the first Christians to witness at Pentecost? When did God shake the doorposts in Jerusalem and the prison bars in Philippi? When did Jesus reveal his heavenly splendor to John on Patmos? In worship.

The power to serve God is found in worshipping God. If you want God's power for your life and purpose, you must worship God every day. That's how he empowers us.

And God deserves our worship. We love him because he first loved us (1 John 4:10). He created and redeemed us and made us a place in his perfect heaven forever. He watched his Son die on our cross to save our souls and purchase our salvation. He gave everything for us. He deserves our worship.

When last did he receive yours?

CONCLUSION

The spiritual disciplines do not earn what God can give only by grace. Rather, they position us to experience all that his Spirit wishes to do in conforming us to the character of Christ (Romans 8:29).

If we would be people of genuine and transforming civility, we must be molded by the Spirit, who alone can change our hearts and lives. As you practice the spiritual disciplines, you will see a difference in your life and in your world.

What would that difference look like in our uncivil day?

PART III

THE PRACTICE OF CIVILITY

Martin Luther observed: “The believing man hath the Holy Ghost; and where the Holy Ghost dwelleth, he will not suffer a man to be idle, but stirreth him up to all exercises of piety and godliness, and of true religion, to the love of God, to the patient suffering of afflictions, to prayer, to thanksgiving, and the exercise of charity towards all men.”

We have explored the priority of civility and learned to be people of civility. Now we step from principles into praxis, looking for biblical ways to speak and act with uncivil people in an uncivil day.

We will focus upon a movement that changes the culture, then we will learn how to imitate the greatest culture-changing example in history.

CHAPTER 5

HOW TO CHANGE THE CULTURE

“Dear God, be good to me. The sea is so wide and my boat is so small.” —Breton fisherman’s prayer

The devil was holding a garage sale.

All his tools were on display, where they were labeled and priced. Shoppers could purchase anger, hatred, lust, and all the rest.

At the end of the table stood a tool with no label but with the highest price of all. Someone asked the devil to identify it.

He said, “It’s discouragement.”

“Why is it priced so high?” he was asked.

He explained: “Because no one knows it’s mine.”

Reading the day's headlines is enough to feel the devil's highest-priced tool at work. Even when we submit to the power of God's Spirit and practice spiritual disciplines that enable him to manifest godly character in and through our lives, we can wonder how much difference our lives can truly make.

If every person reading this book were to set an example of true civility, would anything change?

Absolutely.

JOIN THE MUSTARD-SEED MOVEMENT

One enslaved Jewish servant was used by God to save the Jewish race in Egypt. A single shepherd standing before Pharaoh was used by God to save that nation from Egyptian slavery.

The story of Scripture is the story of God's power at work through God's people. Seldom have we been a majority in any nation or culture. Whether it was kings or prophets, fishermen or tax-collectors, former Pharisees or imprisoned apostles, God's Spirit has used his people as salt and light in ways that changed the course of history.

Jesus taught his disciples this parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (Matthew 13:31–32).

The mustard seed is the "smallest of all seeds" used in Jesus' day (about the size of a period at the end of a sentence today).

Would anyone believe that a tree some ten feet tall could grow from it?

But the farmer has faith. He plants it, waters it, and waits for it. It takes time, several years, in fact.

Eventually, that tiny seed becomes a tree so large that birds come from all over to settle on its branches. They eat some of the seeds it produces. And that tree multiplies itself until it makes more and more trees—all from one seed so small you must strain even to see it in your hand.

That, says Jesus, is how God builds his kingdom on earth. Here we have the mustard-seed movement: God uses anything we entrust to him to do more than we ever imagined he would. If only we believe he can.

The mustard-seed movement in Scripture

Let's examine the mustard-seed movement in Scripture:

- Noah worked for one hundred years by himself to build an Ark to save the human race when it had never rained before.
- Moses stood before Pharaoh with nothing more than a rod in his hand and God's call in his heart.
- David fought the mighty Goliath with a slingshot.
- Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel spoke divine revelation with effects all out of proportion to their social status.

One of the most remarkable Old Testament examples of the mustard-seed movement is the story of Gideon at the Spring of Harod. I have led more than thirty study tour groups to this spot, one of my favorite sites in all of Israel.

The Midianites were the enemy of the Jewish people and an indestructible army: “They would come like locusts in number—both they and their camels could not be counted—so that they laid waste the land as they came in” (Judges 6:5). Yet God called Gideon to march against them, his thirty-two thousand foot soldiers against their vast army (Judges 7:3).

Then God said, “The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’ Now therefore proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, ‘Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hurry away from Mount Gilead.’ Then 22,000 of the people returned, and 10,000 remained” (vv. 2–3).

Then he told Gideon:

“The people are still too many. Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there, and anyone of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall go with you,’ shall go with you, and anyone of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ shall not go.” So he brought the people down to the water. And the Lord said to Gideon, “Every one who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself. Likewise, every one who kneels down to drink.” And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was 300 men, but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water” (vv. 4–6).

Now “the LORD said to Gideon, ‘With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your

hand, and let all the others go every man to his home.’ So the people took provisions in their hands, and their trumpets. And he sent all the rest of Israel every man to his tent, but retained the 300 men. And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley” (vv. 7–8).

With these three hundred, each bearing a trumpet and a torch, they went to battle. And this was the result:

Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch. And they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars. They held in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out, “A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!” Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the army ran. They cried out and fled. When they blew the 300 trumpets, the LORD set every man’s sword against his comrade and against all the army. And the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath (vv. 19–22).

The New Testament demonstrates the same pattern. Jesus told us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13–16). It doesn’t take much salt to change the flavor of food or much light to shine in the dark. You can think of examples immediately: Peter, the fisherman who failed his Lord before preaching the Pentecost sermon; Paul, the Pharisee who persecuted

Christians before taking the gospel across the Empire; John, exiled on Patmos where he received the *Revelation* for the world.

The first-century church had no strategy for political power or cultural engagement. They simply went where they went as the people of God, and, by Acts 17:6, they had “turned the world upside down.”

The mustard-seed movement in history

Martin Luther was an unknown monk when he nailed ninety-five topics for discussion on the community bulletin board and sparked the Reformation. William Wilberforce read an unknown book by Thomas Clarkson about the horrors of the slave trade and then worked to abolish it.

All that God has ever done, he can still do. Consider four examples from American history.

The First Great Awakening began in 1734. The crisis in the colonies was severe. Moral conditions were dire. Not one in twenty people claimed to be a Christian. Samuel Blair, a pastor of the day, said that “religion lay as it were, dying and ready to expire its last breath of life.”

But Theodore Frelinghuysen, a Dutch Reformed minister who had come to the colonies from Holland in 1720, would not give up on his adopted homeland. He began praying fervently for revival to come to the colonies, first with himself and his church, and then with his larger community. Others began joining his fledgling prayer movement. The Spirit began to move.

Then Jonathan Edwards experienced the anointing and power of God. His famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands

of an Angry God,” shook his church and then the young nation. The preaching of George Whitefield gathered and galvanized thousands.

The First Great Awakening was the result. A majority of the colonial population became identified with a Christian church. It started with a group who prayed for the power of God to extend the kingdom of God in their Jerusalem and around the world.

The Second Great Awakening began in 1792. After the War for Independence, social conditions grew even more deplorable than before. Drunkenness became epidemic. Women were afraid to go out at night for fear of assault. Bank robberies were a daily occurrence.

John Marshall, Chief Justice of the United States, wrote to James Madison, Bishop of Virginia, that the church “was too far gone ever to be redeemed.” A poll taken at Harvard University found not a single believer. Two were found at Princeton. Tom Paine claimed that “Christianity will be forgotten in thirty years.”

But he was mistaken.

In 1784, a Baptist pastor named Isaac Backus gathered a number of ministers. They wrote a circular letter, asking believers to pray for awakening. Prayer groups spread all over New England. In 1792, revival broke out on college campuses, where hundreds were converted. “Camp meetings” spread across the frontier; eventually, more than a thousand were meeting annually. Churches doubled and tripled in membership. One Baptist church in Kentucky with a membership of 170 baptized 421 during a single revival meeting.

In that year, William Carey began the modern missions movement. The American Bible Society, American Tract Society, and a variety of missions organizations began as a result of this Awakening. All because a group prayed for the power of God to extend the kingdom of God in their Jerusalem and around the world.

The Third Great Awakening is dated to 1858. The Gold Rush of 1848 had led to a booming economy, which crashed in 1857. If it were not for the Great Depression of the 1930s, the collapse of 1857 would have that title. Fear of civil war was increasing. Turmoil was everywhere.

In the midst of such fear and anxiety, a group of laymen began meeting for prayer on Wednesday, September 23, 1857, at the Old North Dutch Church in New York City. They were led by a Presbyterian businessman named Jeremiah Lanphier. The first day, six people came to his prayer meeting. The next week, there were fourteen, then twenty-three, and then the group began to meet daily. They outgrew the church and began filling other churches and meeting halls throughout the city. Such meetings spread across the country.

The result was one of the most significant movements in Christian history.

Out of a national population of thirty-five million, more than a million were converted in a single year. The revival continued into the Civil War, where more than one hundred thousand soldiers were converted. Sailors took the revival to other countries. Thousands of young people volunteered for mission service. It all happened because a group prayed for the power of God to extend the kingdom of God in their Jerusalem and around the world.

The Fourth Great Awakening began in Wales in 1904 in the heart of a coal miner named Evan Roberts. He was convicted of his sins by the Spirit and turned to God in prayer and repentance. He then began preaching to the young people in his church, calling them to prayer and repentance.

Prayer meetings broke out all over Wales. Social conditions were affected dramatically. Tavern owners went bankrupt; police formed gospel quartets because they had no one to arrest. Coal mines shut down for a time because the miners stopped using profanity and the mules no longer understood their commands.

The revival spread to America, where ministers in Atlantic City, New Jersey, reported that out of fifty thousand residents, only fifty adults were left unconverted. In Portland, Oregon, more than two hundred stores closed daily from 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. so people could attend prayer meetings.

All because a group prayed for the power of God to extend the kingdom of God in their Jerusalem and around the world.

To change the culture, begin by believing that you *can* change the culture in the power of God.

CHOOSE TO ENGAGE THE CULTURE WITH BIBLICAL TRUTH

In 1951, Richard Niebuhr published a work titled *Christ and Culture*. It was my textbook in biblical ethics and is still considered foundational to the discipline today. Here Niebuhr sketches the five ways Christians can relate their faith to their society and culture.

One: Christ against culture

This model argues that we must reject the fallen world in every way, that we must have as little engagement with it as possible. We are to have nothing to do with the cultural issues of the day.

However, the Incarnation seems to give the lie to this approach. If the physical world is inherently fallen, how could Jesus have remained sinless while inhabiting flesh?

Two: Christ of culture

This model attempts to integrate the world and the word of God, the culture and the Christian faith. It blurs the distinction between the two and adopts the prevailing culture as the way to understand the faith. Whatever the culture adopts will be adapted by the faith as well.

However, the Great Commission gives the lie to this approach. Why “go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) if the nations do not need to be evangelized and discipled?

Three: Christ above culture

This approach teaches that we live in two worlds, the spiritual and the secular, and we must give each its due. The one is not the other.

However, the great problem with this approach is the sinfulness of humanity. This model does not do enough to transform the culture it seeks to help.

It lives in Sunday and Monday without seeking to bring Sunday to Monday.

Four: Christ and culture in paradox

This approach rejects the third approach by arguing that culture is so inherently sinful as to be beyond saving. Yet it contradicts the first approach, Christ against culture, by arguing that we must try. We must preach grace to law, the gospel to the lost. We respond to the issues of our culture by preaching the gospel of salvation, for only when souls change can the world change.

The problem with this approach is that it does not speak to issues the Bible itself addresses, such as the treatment of the poor. It is not as holistic as the Scriptures.

Five: Christ transforming culture

This model seeks to bring the biblical worldview to bear on every dimension of society for the purpose of redeeming the culture for the kingdom.

Unlike the first model, it does not ignore the culture. Unlike the second, it does not adopt it. Unlike the third, it does not separate the two realms. Unlike the fourth, it seeks the salvation of souls but also the transformation of society. The fifth approach works to apply biblical truth to cultural issues for the sake of advancing the kingdom of God on earth.

I am convinced that God is calling his people to be catalytic agents of cultural transformation. However, this model comes at a risk.

The *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche* (German Evangelical Church) enjoyed the support of the Third Reich because it supported the Nazi movement. The swastika replaced the cross and *Mein Kampf* replaced the Bible.

Likewise, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement forms the only state-sanctioned or registered Protestant church in mainland China today. Registered churches face less persecution from the Chinese government than illegal “underground” churches, but their sermons are often edited and their finances and activities are carefully monitored.

Why should America’s Christians be countercultural? Why not “stick to the gospel”?

I have heard pastors say that they “speak where Jesus spoke and are silent where Jesus was silent.” If he didn’t address issues such as gay marriage, why should we? (I think he did, but that’s another subject.)

Why not focus on evangelism and discipleship, leaving cultural issues that require religious liberty to the side? Because evangelism and discipleship require us to speak to the whole of society and its issues.

Why focus on our fallen society? After all, “the world is passing away along with its desires” (1 John 2:17a). But John’s statement continues: “whoever does the will of God abides forever” (v. 17b). It is the will of God that we speak the word of God to the cultural issues of our day, seeking transformation by the Spirit of God to the glory of God.

We are called to speak truth to culture

Old Testament prophets clearly spoke out against the sins of their day.

Hosea condemned the “swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery” of his culture (Hosea 4:2). He warned his society against drunkenness and sexual immorality (v. 18) as well.

Amos condemned enslavement (Amos 1:6–8), mistreatment of pregnant women (1:13) and the poor (2:6), sexual abuse (2:7), drunkenness (4:1), greed (5:11), and corruption (5:12). Obadiah warned against violence (v. 10); Micah condemned theft (Micah 2:1–2).

Are these sins increasingly prevalent in American culture today?

Paul, like the prophets of old, was grieved by idolatry (Acts 17:16) and the sins of his day, many of which he listed specifically (Romans 1:18–32; Galatians 5:19–21). He had “great sorrow and unceasing anguish in [his] heart” (Romans 9:2) for his fellow Jews who had not made Jesus their Messiah. And he gave his life as a missionary to the Gentile world (Galatians 2:7–8).

In his cultural engagement, the apostle followed the example and ministry of our Lord. Jesus fed the hungry (John 6:1–14), healed the sick (Mark 1:33–34), and befriended the outcast (Luke 19:1–10).

He taught us to do the same.

As a result, the first Christians gave their goods to anyone who “had need” (Acts 2:45) and ministered to “the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits” (Acts 5:16).

Clearly, they did more than “preach the gospel.” Or, better said, they preached the gospel of God’s love in actions as well as in words.

They met felt needs in order to meet spiritual needs, earning the right to share the message of salvation in Christ.

INFLUENCE THE INFLUENTIAL

James Davison Hunter is the LaBrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory at the University of Virginia. He is also the founder and executive director of UVA's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. He is widely considered one of the most perceptive interpreters of culture in America today.

His remarkable work, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, is essential reading for those interested in cultural transformation. Dr. Hunter explores in detail ways culture changes and ways it does not.

He begins with the negative: culture does not change simply by winning elections. For instance, during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, divorce rates escalated. Gay marriage made significant inroads in American culture during the presidency of George W. Bush. Neither trend was the fault of these presidents, of course. But both illustrate the fact that elected officials by themselves cannot change culture positively.

Culture does not change merely through evangelism and church attendance. More than 75 percent of Americans are identified with some faith community, yet our culture is intensely secularistic and materialistic. By contrast, the Jewish community comprises only 2.1 percent of our population, yet its contributions to science, literature, art, music, film, and architecture have been remarkable. At least 170 Jews have been awarded the Nobel Prize, constituting 37 percent of all American recipients.

Nor does culture change by popularity. While more evangelical books are being sold than ever before, they primarily target the

faith community and are rarely popular outside the cultural mainstream. Few are ever reviewed by the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal*. Most people have heard of Rick Warren and Joel Osteen, but we cannot claim that our culture has been changed by their popularity.

How does a culture change? By influencing the influential. Culture changes top-down, according to Dr. Hunter. Here is the progression:

- For knowledge: From academic think tanks to elite research universities and opinion magazines, to elite publishers and colleges, to public education and Christian schools.
- For morality: From academic philosophy and law schools to schools of public policy, to think tanks, to grassroots politics and activism.
- For aesthetics: From visual arts to theater and dance, to museums, to public television, museums, and film, to prime-time television, mass-market movies, and mass-circulation publishing.

How can we influence change in these cultural arenas?

Dr. Hunter encourages us to “manifest faithful presence” where we are with those we influence, seeking to develop leaders at places of the greatest effective influence in our culture.

Applying his model to cultural engagement, Christians can express our faith through movies, television, music, and other media. Christian business leaders can make decisions based on kingdom principles. Christian health care professionals can follow biblical moral guidelines. Christian public servants can exercise political office as servants of God and their constituents.

Define your cultural resources: the gifts, abilities, possessions, education, and experience that give you influence with others.

Identify your cultural influence: the people who look to your example and platforms by which you touch the lives of others.

Then ask God to use your word and works to make a kingdom difference in your culture.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

It never will.

CONCLUSION

Changed people change the world.

Use your influence for the kingdom of God, praying for those in other spheres of influence. Make your work, home, and school your mission field. Ask God to make you his faithful presence there. See every person you meet today as a subject for ministry, every problem and opportunity and temptation as a way to serve your King.

And, step by step, day by day, as we serve our King with civility, faith and joy, he uses us to change our world.

To that end, let’s close our exploration with this statement by the brilliant Chinese theologian Watchman Nee:

A day must come in our lives, as definite as the day of our conversion, when we give up all right to ourselves and submit to the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. . . . There must be a day when, without reservation, we surrender everything to Him—ourselves, our families, our possessions,

our business and our time. All we are and have becomes His, to be held henceforth entirely at His disposal. From that day we are no longer our own masters, but only stewards. Not until the Lordship of Jesus Christ is a settled thing in our hearts can the Holy Spirit really operate effectively in us. He cannot direct our lives until all control of them is committed to Him. If we do not give Him absolute authority in our lives, He can be present, but He cannot be powerful. The power of the Spirit is stayed.

Is today that day for you?

CHAPTER 6

HOW TO BE CIVIL WITH UNCIVIL PEOPLE

“In case of dissension, never dare to judge until you’ve heard the other side.” —Euripides

It’s been said, “If two people always agree, one isn’t necessary.”

Disagreements are an obvious and inevitable fact of life. Even when people share precisely the same worldview, they can differ in its applications to circumstances and challenges.

I taught on seminary faculties where we all affirmed the same statement of faith and denominational affiliation, but we disagreed over a wide range of theological and practical issues. Disagreements are natural in marriage, friendship, and families as well.

Now add the systemic, foundational worldview differences we've discussed in this book. Secularists and materialists deny or minimize spiritual truth and reality. Relativists reject the concept of objective or absolute truth. Claiming biblical warrant for your position will be no more persuasive for many nonbelievers than a Muslim's appeal to the Qur'an would be for you.

Not to mention our divisive political environment, arguments over sexual morality, and disagreements over geopolitical realities. Our culture has not been this divided in my lifetime.

In such days, how do we speak the truth in love, as instructed in Ephesians 4:15?

Let's learn how to dialogue redemptively with those who disagree with biblical truth.

A MODEL TO FOLLOW

When I joined the board of the Baylor Health Care System some years ago, I quickly learned the value of "best practices."

The physicians and administrators, whenever considering a new policy or practice, immediately consulted the leaders in the field. They wanted to learn from the best so that they could be the best.

In the same way, Christians should emulate in all things the best model in history, the Lord Jesus Christ. He gave us an example of how to engage people with whom we disagree, a conversation that was recorded in Scripture by the Holy Spirit as guidance for us.

Build a relationship

John 4 finds Jesus in the first year of his public ministry. The Pharisees learned of his growing success. To avoid conflict at this early stage of his work, he left Judea for Galilee. And so “he had to pass through Samaria” (v. 4), both geographically and spiritually.

Samaria was located between Judea to the south and Galilee to the north and was thus the most direct route for Jesus’ journey. However, most Jews avoided it, for reasons we’ll soon discuss. They crossed the Jordan River to the east, traveled north through Perea, and then recrossed the Jordan into Galilee.

But not Jesus. “Had to” translates the Greek *dei*, “to be necessary,” which, elsewhere in John’s gospel, describes divine requirement. Our Lord was compelled by the Spirit of God to go through this forsaken, despised, rejected region.

He found himself at Sychar, the modern village of Askar. It was an important place historically: Joseph’s bones were buried there (Joshua 24:32), and “Jacob’s well” was located half a mile south (John 4:6). The well is one hundred feet deep. I have drunk from its water.

It was “about the sixth hour” (v. 6), 12:00 noon, the hottest part of the day. So Jesus sat on the wooden platform built around the mouth of the well. Here he spoke with a Samaritan woman, one of the most shocking things our Lord ever did.

Why was this so surprising?

She was a Samaritan, and “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (v. 9).

When the Assyrian king captured the Jewish Northern Kingdom, he replaced the Jews in Samaria with foreigners who worshiped the Lord but also their own idolatrous gods (2 Kings 17:24–25). The Jews despised them, so the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim to rival the one in Jerusalem, rejected all the books of the Jewish Bible except the first five, and made their own high priest.

In 129 BC, John Hyrcanus led the Jews to attack Samaria and destroy their temple. In retaliation, the Samaritans worked with the Romans against the Jews. They welcomed all who had been excommunicated by the Jews. As a result, the Jews considered them the worst of the human race.

And this woman was one of them.

In addition, she was obviously a woman. No Jewish rabbi would speak to a woman in public—not even his own wife, daughter, or sister (cf. John 4:27).

And she was a sinner. She’d had five husbands and was living with a sixth man now (v. 18). She was so rejected by her society that she walked half a mile, past eighty springs in the area, to get water from this well during the heat of the day.

What would people think if they saw a visiting minister, a single man, alone with the most notorious adulteress in town?

Jesus didn’t care what the crowds or disciples thought. He cared only for this lonely soul. He knew her past mistakes and her present challenges, but he loved her enough to initiate relationship with her.

His example calls us to do the same with those with whom we disagree. Before we can persuade them that our position is correct, they must first see our compassion for them as people. They are not enemies to defeat but fellow humans to love.

God's word explains that "the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). The real enemy is clear: "the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4).

We must go to them before they will come to us.

Find common ground

This woman came to the well for water, so "Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'" (John 4:7). He started where she was, with what she wanted, and shared her need with humility and honesty.

Paul followed Jesus' example. When he spoke in a "synagogue of the Jews" (Acts 17:1), he "reasoned with them from the Scriptures" (v. 2). By contrast, when he spoke with Greek philosophers at the Areopagus, he quoted their poets Epimenides and Aratus of Soli (v. 28).

To follow their example, ask the Spirit to lead you to words and topics he can use to influence this person. He knows their thoughts, attitudes, past, and needs far better than you do. He has been preparing them for your conversation and will guide you in ways that are most effective.

Then find points of agreement with which to begin your discussion. This person might disagree with you on the status of an unborn child, but they probably agree that children, after they are born, are to be treasured and protected. Perhaps you can work from this agreement to explain why you believe on medical grounds that the same protections should be afforded children before their birth.

If you are seeking to share Christ with a Muslim, you might begin with the fact that Muslims believe Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, ascended to heaven, and will return to earth at the end of history. After affirming what you both believe, you might then ask how Jesus could do all these things and yet be only a man. Then you could explain what the divine Christ has done in your life.

If you are talking with someone who affirms same-sex sexual activity, you might begin with your shared belief that all people deserve the “pursuit of happiness,” as the Declaration of Independence states. Then you could turn to secular evidence that homosexual activity puts people at medical, psychological, and relational risk.

Lead to Jesus

This woman was shocked that Jesus would speak to her: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (John 4:9). She could tell that Jesus was Jewish since the Samaritan prayer shawl used blue fringes while the Jewish prayer-shawl fringes were white.

What Jesus said shocked her even more: “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (v. 10). “Living water” refers to fresh water taken from a flowing spring, not the stale

water sitting in this well. Of course, it refers to the spiritual “water” of salvation as well: “On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, “Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”’ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:37–39).

God called himself “the fountain of living waters” (Jeremiah 2:13). He invites “everyone who thirsts” to “come to the waters” (Isaiah 55:1). The apostle John was shown a day when “the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:17).

He was later given this amazing vision:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no

light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever (Revelation 22:1–5).

This was the “living water” of salvation that Jesus offered the outcast Samaritan woman.

Similarly, in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–3), Berea (v. 13), and Athens (v. 16), Paul moved from common ground to a call to faith in Jesus. And each time, people responded to the gospel by giving their lives to the Lord Jesus.

Nonbelievers are not debate opponents to defeat but eternal souls to love. Our call is to lead them to the place where they will meet Jesus for themselves. If we will ask the Holy Spirit to lead us, he will use us to guide those we know to the Savior they need to know.

You and I cannot convict anyone of sin or save anyone’s soul. But the Spirit does both (John 16:8; Luke 2:26–32). He will use us if we will seek to honor God rather than ourselves and lead people to our Savior with humility and grace.

In discussing difficult subjects, it is vital to remember that this person will live forever, either with God in heaven or separated from him in hell. Their eternal destiny is far more significant than any other subject you could be debating.

Remember: winning arguments is not the point. Winning souls is what matters eternally.

Turn opinions to truth

Let’s continue our story. Jesus assured the woman at the well, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him

will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13–14). The woman responded, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water” (v. 15).

But Jesus knew that she had not yet admitted or repented of sins that would keep her from his living water. And so he said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here” (v. 16). She replied deceitfully, “I have no husband” (v. 17a). Jesus then exposed her immorality: “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true” (vv. 17b–18).

The woman then added distraction to her deceit: “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship” (vv. 19–20). “This mountain” was Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans built their rival temple before it was destroyed by the Jews more than one hundred and fifty years earlier. Jacob’s well was situated at the foot of this mountain. A broad flat rock atop the mountain is still held sacred today by the few Samaritans who remain to represent their race and its customs.

But Jesus would not be sidetracked: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him” (vv. 21–23).

Then he added this imperative: “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (v. 24). The woman replied, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will teach us all things” (v. 25). She referred to the Samaritans’ belief that a Messiah would come one day to explain their laws and lead their nation.

Jesus replied with one of the boldest statements in Scripture: “I who speak to you am he” (v. 26). And she responded by putting her faith in him and leading her entire village to him as well (vv. 28–29, 39–42).

Many of the disagreements of these days are over opinions. Like the dispute over worship sites in Jesus’ day, they are important but not essential. Whether people disagree over political positions, social issues, or personal morality, it is vital to turn from opinion to truth.

This is the job of the believer: to lead people to God’s word and Son.

As you engage with people on divisive issues, follow the Spirit’s leading in turning the discussion to your Lord.

HOW TO DISAGREE AGREEABLY

The Apostle Paul was clear: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1). There seem to be no exceptions or qualifications here.

Peter was equally clear: “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (1 Peter 2:13–14).

And yet, Paul and Peter were both executed by Rome because they would not submit to its authority when the Empire demanded that they cease their ministries.

In a similar vein, when Peter and John were ordered by the religious authorities to stop preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus, they responded: “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). When arrested again, the apostles made a similar response: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

So, how should Christians relate to those who disagree with biblical truth and morality?

We are taught “to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one” (Titus 3:1–2).

Peter urged us to defend our faith “with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Peter 3:15–16).

Scripture calls us to be:

- respectful (Titus 3:2),
- considerate (1 Timothy 2:2),
- and reverent (1 Peter 3:15).

But we are also to be:

- bold (Acts 4:29; Ephesians 6:19),
- strong (1 Corinthians 16:13),
- and courageous (Philippians 1:28).

Consider these imperatives:

- “Avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” (Titus 3:9–11).
- “Let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor” (Ephesians 4:25).
- “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:29–32).
- “You must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth” (Colossians 3:8).
- “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled” (Hebrews 12:15).
- “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18).
- “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (James 1:19–20).

To what degree do your attitudes, words, and actions align with these commands?

Are there commitments you need to make to be more civil today?

DISAGREE PRIVATELY AND PUBLICLY

Jesus taught us: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother” (Matthew 18:15). Similarly, he said, “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23–24).

Whether someone injures you or you injure them, you are to initiate reconciliation. You are to go to this person. You are not allowed to speak *about* them before you speak *to* them.

We find this principle in action across Scripture.

Moses and Aaron confronted Pharaoh personally, appealing to him to free the Jewish people (Exodus 5:1). Nathan confronted David concerning his horrific sin with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:1–14). Jesus confronted Peter after the apostle’s threefold denials of his Lord (John 21:15–19).

On the other hand, there are times when we must deal with unbiblical beliefs and behaviors in a public manner.

Jonah warned the entire city of Nineveh of pending judgment unless they repented of their sins (Jonah 3:4). After instructing us to go directly and personally to the

brother who “sins against you” (Matthew 18:15), Jesus told us what to do if this person refuses to respond appropriately: “But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (vv. 16–17).

When Jesus faced the Pharisees’ hypocrisy, he challenged them publicly and directly (Matthew 23). John the Baptist did the same when “he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism” (Matthew 3:7).

When Peter separated himself from Gentiles in Antioch in deference to the Judaizers, Paul recorded, “I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. . . . When I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas [Peter] before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?’” (Galatians 2:11, 14).

CONCLUSION

God’s call to civility does not preclude dealing with controversial people and subjects. Rather, the likelihood of such discussions in these divisive days shows the need and urgency of biblical civility.

If God’s people model biblical character even in contentious days and conversations, our light will be apparent in the dark and will draw people to the Light.

A MOVEMENT OF CIVILITY

Theologian D. A. Carson noted:

People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.

This book is a biblical call to civility in an uncivil time.

We have focused on the priority of civility, discovering how we got here and what our goal should be. We have learned how to be people of civility by living in the power and fruit of the Spirit.

We have explored ways to practice civility by building relationships for sharing biblical truth and modeling biblical character.

Now we must move from studying civility to practicing civility. With this subject as with any other biblical imperative, “If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like” (James 1:23–24).

Conversely, “the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing” (v. 25).

May we be “blessed” in the “doing” of civility, and may we be catalysts for a movement of civility in these uncivil days, to the glory of God.

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ABOUT DENISON MINISTRIES

DENISON MINISTRIES exists to create culture-changing Christians who are committed to advancing the kingdom through that sphere of influence.

We aspire to influence 3 million Christians every day to experience God through a daily devotional resource (First15.org), to speak into real life through daily cultural commentary (DenisonForum.org), and to bring Jesus into parenting moments (ChristianParenting.org).

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