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The Decline of Respect: What It Means for Your Church

Pastor John sat quietly in his office. His stress had reached a new, high level for his 23 years at the church. His mind raced with thought prayers to God: “Lord, I don’t know what to do. I’m desperate. My church is blowing up. This whole thing has gotten out of control.”

This is a true story. The pastor had familiarity with Church Doctor Ministries. One of our church doctors had conducted a church consultation for his congregation two years before. So, he called to talk with that consultant.

“We have a new situation that has come up — and it’s divided our church. About three months ago, we discovered our full-time youth leader had some inappropriate behavior with one of the young people in our youth group. Our elders confronted him, and he admitted his mistakes.

“The elders and I felt it necessary that the youth pastor be terminated. We asked him to seek counseling and restoration. We recognized his giftedness for youth ministry and, with professional help, indicated it was our hope he would likely be able to serve another church on staff in the future.

“We agreed to keep his impropriety private, as long as he promised to get professional help and guidance. We didn’t want to disrupt the entire church. So, the youth leader

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and churches become more effective in fulfilling the Great Commission, to make disciples of all people. He is the author of the just-released book *Restoring Civility: Lessons from the Master* and the free Bible study *Email Mania*.

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agreed and resigned.

“A few days later, I got this long, scathing email from a woman in the church who had two kids in the high school youth group. It was nasty and accusatory. She blamed me and the elders. Worse yet, she copied the email to 32 of her friends — all members of our church. About 20 of them had kids in the youth group.”

Our consultant responded from the other end of the phone conversation, “So, what did you do? How did you respond?”

The pastor replied, “I wrote her an email back — almost twice as long as hers. I told her that it was the elders’ right to let people go. I told her there were ‘issues’ that won’t be made public. And, as I sent the email, I copied it to the 32 people that got her email to me, along with the church council, the youth board members, as well as some of the officers in leadership at our church.

“Now, the rumors are flying, the congregation is divided, it’s a real mess. We need help. And we need it fast. This whole church is about to explode. We want to fly you out here as soon as possible to help us.”

The Issue Behind the Issues

The challenge the pastor shared is much larger than himself, the woman who sent the email, and their church. This true scenario represents a national issue in this country and our world today. It’s called “incivility.”

The word “civility” means “respect.” It is related to the idea of being “civilized.” When people act without respect for one another, it is the reflection of uncivilized behavior.

The ideas of civility and respect are related to the concept of being “polite.” The word “polite” is the root idea from which we get the words “politics” and “politicians.” (Now, that is some food for thought!) Those in leadership, by definition of their office, are to be respected and respectful. That respect is a given. We are supposed to respect our leaders, and they are supposed to act with respect toward all others.

In Titus 3:1-2, it says, “Remind people to respect the government and be law-abiding, always ready to lend a helping hand. No insults, no fights. God’s people should be bighearted and courteous” (*The Message*). When this was written, it is important to remember that the people who read this letter to Titus were under the heavy-handed rule of the pagan Roman government! Titus 3:1-2 is a good reminder that respect is non-negotiable, even in unfair conditions.

There is no need to detail the enormous drift from civility — respect — in our nation and our world today. Everyone is aware of it: with every newscast and talk show host, with many Hollywood films, television shows, magazines, and books. Incivility has crept into the church, just like in the congregation mentioned above, where the youth leader on staff had to be terminated. Have you ever heard gossip from church members? What about abuse by email? Has email helped or hurt? The honest answer? Both! The difference? Civility is a non-negotiable framework for productive living.

Our “Sophisticated World”

Has the internet helped or hurt our ability to get along? The answer is “yes” to both. It may be

that humans are intelligent enough to create the internet, but perhaps not *wise* enough to use it!

I watch our 5-year-old granddaughter glued to an iPad. Is that good or bad? The answer is probably both, depending. Depending on what?

It probably depends on moral discipline. From parents for their kids, for adults themselves. Yet, now there is evidence of increasing erosion of respect — civility — even in churches.

We have recently worked with a man representing the elders who are part of a very large church. A woman on staff accused the pastor of hitting her during an argument/discussion. The elders did a great job of working with the pastor, who reports no infringement occurred. The pastor reports that he had disciplined her bad behavior and she acted out in retribution. The elders heard her side of the story and helped the leadership to conclude that she should be let go for several connected occurrences of unprofessional and unspiritual conduct.

The woman in question had access to the email list of the whole congregation, since she was on staff.

She and her husband pleaded their case in a biased email to more than a thousand members of the church. Several families have left the congregation. The increasing number of stories of disrespectful behavior in churches continues to increase every month.

Elements of Misbehavior

Gossip is common in many congregations. It is also commonly misunderstood. We have interviewed many church members who say, “It’s not gossip, because I know it’s true.” Yet truth is not the issue. Gossip is when you share damaging information about anyone, to *any* person except the one who is the offender.

Jesus makes this clear in Matthew 18:15-17. If someone “offends you,” there is a procedure. By “offense,” it can be to you personally or to another person, but you witnessed it. Jesus’ procedure is basic: “Go to the person and share your concern, privately.”

At this point, many Christians respond, “But I don’t like conflict.” No normal, emotionally healthy person *likes* conflict. In fact, if you like conflict, you need counseling. Discomfort with conflict is normal, and it is no excuse for gossip whatsoever.

10 WAYS TO RESTORE CIVILITY

1. Use the Bible as the definitive resource for respectful living.
2. Share the resources listed in this issue with everyone in your church.
3. Ask your pastor to preach on scriptural teaching about gossip, slander, and libel.
4. Use the Bible study *Email Mania* to help Christians grow in civil behavior.
5. Pray for civility to penetrate our society.
6. Pray for civility among leaders in every level of government.
7. Pray for civility for the leaders of churches and denominations.
8. Recognize that all the ferment that comes from disrespectful behavior makes unchurched unbelievers more receptive.
9. Don’t avoid conflict; manage it. Share what Jesus teaches.
10. Use discussions about disrespect and civility to share with others the values that Jesus brings to your life.

Jesus continues by teaching that if the person continues in the offense, you should take another person with you, as an objective witness. This person should be a mature Christian. It is better if you do **not** “brief” the person from your side of the story beforehand. Let the person hear both sides without prejudice.

Jesus goes further: If the person is unrepentant and the issue can't be solved, take it to the “church.” Does this mean the “whole church”? Scripture doesn't say. But if restoration of the person involved is the objective, probably not. The whole elder group or leadership team? Not likely. The implied desired outcome is reconciliation. Once it gets to the “take-it-to-the-church” level, it may be best to gather a small group of the most mature Christians to seek a solution.

Slander and Libel

If your gossip includes damaging content about another person's character or reputation, it is called *slander*. This is yet another sin piled on top of gossip. It is also a sure way to blow up a congregation.

If you put gossip or slanderous content into writing, it is called *libel*. Some libelous actions are punishable by law. Libel includes emails and even texting. It also includes any image or caricature or drawing of a person that sends a message of disrespect about the person. Consider all the political caricatures on the covers of news magazines!

Jesus on Civility

Jesus is the Master of civility teaching. No one in history has helped the cause of respect more than the Lord. The Scripture is the definitive source for civil conduct, polite interaction, and respectful living.

So, what is your church doing? What are you as Christians learning? How are you acting in order to curb the trend toward an *uncivilized* world? The teaching of the Scripture is our best hope to handle the challenges this generation faces with all the blessings and potential curses of an internet world.

Will you, will your church, step up for civility? If you do it right, you will direct people to the Master of civility, the Lord who restores civility — and much more, one person at a time.

KEY RESOURCES

Bejan, Teresa M. *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ Press, 2019.

Berman, Lea, and Jeremy Bernard. 2018. *Treating People Well: The Extraordinary Power of Civility at Work and in Life*. New York, NY: Scribner.

Carter, Stephen L. *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1999.

Forni, Pier Massimo. *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*. New York, NY: St. Martins Griffin, 2003.

Guinness, Os. *The Case for Civility: And Why Our Future Depends on It*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009.

Hunter, Kent R. and Tracee J. Swank. *Restoring Civility: Lessons from the Master*. Corunna, IN: Church Doctor Publishing, 2020.

Hunter, Kent R. *Email Mania: A Short, Free Bible Study Every Church Member Should Read*. Corunna, IN: Church Doctor Publishing, 2020.

Porath, Christine Lynne. *Mastering Civility: A Manifesto for the Workplace*. New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2016.

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