



A Covenant for Civility

The Evangelical Covenant Church is uniquely positioned in these contentious times. We can show there is a difference between hard and harsh conversations. Hard conversations are part of discipleship. They can lead to greater fidelity in our walk with God and in service. Hard conversations are entered to build up and make better. Harsh conversations are entered to win and destroy. They breed greater recalcitrance and polarization.

One of the Covenant Church's six affirmations is "the reality of freedom in Christ." This means we focus on the evident biblical center of what unites us in Christ, not on peripheral matters not clear in Scripture. Within the boundaries of all of our other affirmations (the centrality of the word of God, the necessity of the new birth, a commitment to the whole mission of the church, the church as a fellowship of believers, and a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit), we extend "space" to each other. At times there are public issues that fall into that space. This affirmation means we actually anticipate that there may well be various opinions.

The ECC is not a self-contained echo chamber that only reinforces to each other a single voice or perspective. At our best, we speak into one another, not past each other. This both sharpens focus and softens edges. Whereas most groups have self-sorted politically left or right, having become utterly predictable in their pronouncements, we are uniquely occupying a different place. We want to live respectfully in the polishing cross-currents gained by wrestling with matters together biblically and with hope.

That is why I am a signatory to the Covenant for Civility, authored by such politically diverse Christians as Chuck Colson and Jim Wallis, among others. It does not call for agreement on every issue, just an agreeable spirit without which common ground cannot be found. A digest of the covenant follows. Hard conversations are part of following Jesus. Harsh shouting matches, I'm not so sure.

Covenant for Civility

As Christian pastors and leaders with diverse theological and political beliefs, we have come together to make this covenant with each other, and to

commend it to the church...so that together we can contribute to a more civil national discourse. The church...can offer a message of hope and reconciliation to a nation that is deeply divided by political and cultural differences. Too often, however, we have reflected the political divisions of our culture rather than the unity we have in the body of Christ. We come together to urge those who claim the name of Christ to "put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:31-32).

1) We commit that our dialogue will reflect the spirit of the Scriptures, where our posture toward each other is to be "quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19).

2) We believe that each of us, and our fellow human beings, are created in the image of God. The respect we owe to God should be reflected in the honor and respect we show to each other in our common humanity, particularly in how we speak to each other...(James 3:9-10).

3) We pledge that when we disagree, we will do so respectfully, without falsely impugning the other's motives, attacking the other's character, or questioning the other's faith, and recognizing in humility that in our limited, human opinions, "we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror" (1 Corinthians 13:12). We will "be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2).

4) We will ever be mindful of the language we use in expressing our disagreements, being neither arrogant nor boastful...(Proverbs 18:12).

5) We recognize that we cannot function together as citizens of the same community, whether local or national, unless we are mindful of how we treat each other in pursuit of the common good in the common life we share together. Each of us must therefore "put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body" (Ephesians 4:25).

6) We commit to pray for our political leaders—those with whom we may agree, as well as those

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COMPASS BEARINGS

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with whom we may disagree. “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made...for kings and all who are in high positions” (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

7) We believe that it is more difficult to hate others, even our adversaries and our enemies, when we are praying for them. We commit to pray for each other, those with whom we agree and those with whom we may disagree....

We pledge that we will lead by example in a country where civil discourse seems to have broken down. We will work to model a better way in how we treat each other in our many faith communities, even across political lines....

