

Civil Discourse?

Conservative Bridgebuilder

Think about the last time you channel-surfed the television news talk shows. Chances are, you encountered at least a few talking heads yelling at each other. Often, controversy reigns. Politics, religion, sex, or sports can ignite passion that can spill into incivility—on radio and TV, in workplaces, universities, neighborhoods, and families.

Are you exhausted or disgusted with debates and discussions that become food fights? This article considers some inspiring stories of risk-takers who build bridges of understanding across philosophical, political, and religious lines. They're helping put the "civil" back into "civil discourse" and have good lessons for us all.

First up is conservative commentator Cal Thomas. As vice president of Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority," Thomas saw his share of partisan political debate. But he tells a humorous story about civility.[\[1\]](#)

The Moral Majority often mentioned Senator Ted Kennedy in its fund appeals. The senator and his liberal friends often mentioned Falwell in their own letters, each side alerting their constituents to concerns about the other.

Once, by mistake, Falwell's group sent Kennedy a "Moral Majority membership card." When *The Washington Post* asked Thomas if his organization would request the card back, Cal replied, "No, we don't believe any man is beyond redemption. In fact, we'd like to invite the senator to visit Lynchburg [Virginia] and visit Jerry Falwell's school." The *Post* ran the quote.

A couple of weeks later, a Kennedy aid phoned to say, "The

senator has decided to accept your invitation.” “What invitation?” replied Thomas. “The one for the senator to visit Lynchburg,” came the response.

Kennedy made the trip, dined with Falwell and gave a warmly-received speech on tolerance and diversity at Liberty Baptist College (now Liberty University). Thomas says that began his own “treasured friendship” with Kennedy, who met with Falwell “on several subsequent occasions.” Cal notes, “More of eternal value was accomplished that night and in the subsequent relationship than years of political bashing and one-upmanship had produced.”

Thomas and his friend Bob Beckel, a liberal Democratic strategist who was Walter Mondale’s presidential campaign manager, have co-written lively *USA Today* columns called “Common Ground.” The two examine important issues—agreeing and disagreeing—but remain good friends. Disagreement needn’t torpedo friendship.

A Jew Among the Evangelicals

What do you get when you assign a leftist Jewish journalist to the evangelical Christian beat for major newspapers on both US coasts?

Maybe you’d expect mutual animosity: “Those wacko God-squaders are at it again,” or “The biased secular humanist liberal media is ruining America.”

But this leftist Jewish journalist made a significant discovery, one he feels can instruct his colleagues and us all. He says to effectively cover the strange tribe to which he was assigned, it helps to know its members as neighbors and friends.

[Mark Pinsky](#)’s book, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed*, [\[2\]](#) tells how this “nice Jewish boy from

Jersey”{3} ended up attending church “more often than many Christians” and sometimes more often than he attends his own synagogue.{4} During his ten years covering religion for the *Los Angeles Times*, he focused on major evangelical leaders and had little connection with grassroots evangelicals.

When he moved to Florida in 1995 to write for the *Orlando Sentinel*, they were everywhere: in the neighborhood, at kids sporting events, birthday parties, PTA meetings, Scouts. Still a committed Jew, Pinsky found they were neither monolithic nor, as *The Washington Post* once claimed, “poor, uneducated and easy to command.”{5}

Disclosure: Pinsky, whom I’ve known since our university days, is a personal friend. His *Duke Chronicle* column was titled “The Readable Radical.” He was at the vanguard of late-1960s campus leftist causes. I didn’t always agree with his politics, but I admired his concerns about justice, hypocrisy, and the disenfranchised.

He still votes with the Democratic left, but he also understands the Christian subculture he covers better than many of its members. Mutual respect characterizes his relations with its leaders.

Mark’s personal stories of “how people just like you wrestle with feelings, values, and beliefs that touch the core of their beings” provide “a glimpse of someone learning to understand and get along with folks whose convictions differ from his own.”{6}

Get to know your intellectual and philosophical adversaries, he recommends. Take them to lunch. Ratchet down the rhetoric. Maybe connection can produce understanding and civility can grow into bridgebuilding.{7}

Not bad advice in a world too-often filled with brickbats and name calling.

Confronting Our Liberal Bias

Religious and political conservatives often complain about bias in secular universities. Here's how two university professors faced that issue in their own teaching

Elizabeth Kiss is president of Agnes Scott College in Atlanta. Before that, she was a Duke political science professor and director of Duke's Kenan Institute for Ethics.^{8} With public policy lecturer Alma Blount, she wrote an intriguing 2005 article, "Confronting Our Liberal Bias."^{9} They note:

In the wake of the 2004 presidential election, we've witnessed the deep divide in this country around themes of religion and politics, the war in Iraq, and U.S. foreign policy. As faculty members at a leading university, we've also been struck by an uncomfortable realization: we need to confront liberal bias in the academy.

They cite two seminal experiences. In one, "colleagues tried to block an invitation to a conservative faculty member to speak in a class." In another, comments about "how liberal bias threatens open inquiry" met anger and disbelief.

Kiss and Blount considered how their own liberal assumptions subtly influenced their teaching. "Creating a culture of open inquiry on campus," they write, "means we first must face our everyday temptation toward political bias." They continue:

Political bias, from either the left or the right, is corrosive of open inquiry. It is the "in" joke or flippant comment suggesting that all rational people are on your side. It portrays opponents in the worst possible light, suggesting they are ignorant, self-righteous, or evil. Bias breeds an enclave mentality that encourages smug and lazy thinking. It blinds us to the complexity of public issues.

Blount and Kiss are arguing not for academic neutrality, but rather for conviction with disclosure, appreciating dissent as part of the learning process. They advocate political diversity in assigned readings, welcoming differing student viewpoints in class, inviting guest speakers of various perspectives, plus modeling dialogue and debate. “Confronting liberal bias won’t be easy,” they conclude. “But it’s the right thing to do.”

Their refreshing candor is all too rare. An excellent example for all sides in making civil discourse more “civil.”

“Gotcha” Politics

President Bill Clinton’s Special Counsel and scandal spokesperson was Lanny Davis, a prominent attorney and now-ubiquitous television figure.

Now, some of my readers may consider Bill and Hillary Clinton to be Mr. and Mrs. Antichrist. But I ask you to please segment your emotions about the Clintons momentarily to consider their former coworker’s passionate appeal for civility in public discourse.

Davis, a liberal Democrat, has authored an important book, *Scandal: How “Gotcha” Politics is Destroying America*.^{10} He says, “The politics of healthy debate have been replaced by the politics of personal destruction, and the media, politicians, lawyers, and the Internet revolution are all complicit,” as are the American people who reward the politicians and consume the media.^{11} With admirable transparency, he admits concerning parts of his past, “I am ashamed to say all this today—but I was just as much caught up in the gotcha culture as partisans on the Republican right.”^{12} He regrets having jumped into “food fight” TV on occasion,^{13} and admits to some past blindness to “politically expedient hypocrisy.”^{14}

Davis often seeks to build bridges. During the 1992 Democratic National Convention, Pennsylvania Governor Robert Casey “had been barred from delivering an anti-abortion, ‘pro-life’ speech to the convention.” Davis, who is pro-choice, asked some of his fellow liberal delegates to join him in a resolution to allow Casey to speak, in the name of freedom of expression and tolerance of dissent. Alas, he was shouted down.[{15}](#)

In 2000, his longtime friend Senator Joseph Lieberman—Democratic vice presidential candidate and an orthodox Jew—garnered liberal criticism for “bringing up God too much.” Reflecting on a famous Abraham Lincoln speech invoking divine assistance and encouraging prayer, Lanny wondered, “Would my liberal friends have regarded Abraham Lincoln as ‘bringing up God too much?’”[{16}](#) He decries intolerance and “contempt or disrespect for the deeply religious and those who believe in the power of prayer.”[{17}](#)

At the 2006 National Prayer Breakfast, rock star Bono, advocating bipartisan cooperation to fight poverty, cited Jesus’ statement, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”[{18}](#) “You cannot believe in Bono’s words,” comments Davis, “without being tolerant of those whose religious faith leads them to political views vastly different from that of a pro-choice Democrat.”[{19}](#)

May his tribe increase.

Bridgebuilding: From Food Fights to Finding Common Ground

How can we cultivate respect and learn to disagree without being disagreeable? Maybe you’ll enjoy this story.

I entered university in the turbulent late 1960s. The Vietnam War, Civil rights, sexual revolution, and campus upheaval

permeated our lives. The fraternity I joined was quite diverse. We had political liberals and conservatives; athletes and scholars; atheists, agnostics, Christians, and Jews. Late night bull sessions kept us engaged and learning from each other.

When I was a freshman and a new believer in Jesus, our fraternity agreed to allow a Campus Crusade for Christ meeting in the chapter room. I posted a sign inside the front door for all the guys to see, announcing the date and time. As a gag, at the bottom I wrote "Attendance Mandatory." Needless to say, the sign quickly filled with graffiti. My favorite said, "Jesus and His Lambda Chi Alpha disciples will be autographing Bibles in the hallway during intermission."

The night of the meeting, one fraternity brother welcomed visitors from the head of the stairway, literally tied to a cross. Some members heckled the speaker, who gracefully engaged them in dialogue. He demonstrated how to disagree but remain friendly.

Our diversity taught me lots about tolerance and civility. We lived, worked, studied, and played together and forged friendships that have endured despite time and distance. Many of us still gather for reunions and still enjoy each others' company. That environment was a crucible that helped me develop communication and relationship skills.

How can you cultivate civility? Consider three suggestions:

1. Learn about views different from your own. Read what others believe and ascertain why they feel and think as they do. Ask yourself how you might feel in their situation.

2. Discover Common Ground. Starting where you agree can help overcome many emotional barriers.

3. Befriend people with differing views. Friendly conversation or shared meals can help open hearts.

Conservatives, take a liberal to lunch, and vice versa.

Paul, an early follower of Jesus, had good advice on how to deal with those who differ. It applies in many contexts. He wrote:

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. {20}

Notes

1. Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded By Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) 55-56.
2. Mark I. Pinsky, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).
3. *Ibid.*, vii.
4. *Ibid.*, 18.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, vii.
7. *Ibid.*, 148.
8. <http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu>
9. Alma Blount and Elizabeth Kiss, "Confronting Our Liberal Bias," *Duke University News & Communications*, May 19, 2005; http://www.dukenews.duke.edu/2005/05/politicalbias._print.ht, accessed March 4, 2007. Article first appeared in the Spring 2005 issue of the *KIE Connection* newsletter, produced by the Kenan Institute for Ethics; <http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/newsletter/KIE.pdf>, accessed March 4, 2007.
10. Lanny Davis, *Scandal: How "Gotcha" Politics is Destroying America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
11. *Ibid.*, 199.
12. *Ibid.*, 188.
13. *Ibid.*, 88.

14. Ibid., 125-126.
15. Ibid., 211-212.
16. Ibid., 212.
17. Ibid., 214.
18. Luke 6:31 NIV.
19. Davis, op. cit., 213.
20. Colossians 4:5-6 NIV.

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