

A Set of Lesson Plans for At This Point
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For the Fall 2012 Issue
“Resisting Politics as Usual: Civility as Christian Witness”

Session 1

Concept

The purpose of this session is to explore James Calvin Davis’ claim that “(t)he values of Christian character are also the antidote to our political disease.” The lesson will allow participants to explore the ideas of humility, patience, integrity, and respect as we enter this fall’s election season. Participants will be challenged to consider how character may or may not reflect faith in all aspects of life, but particularly when it comes to the political arena.

Timeframe

The lesson is written for a 45-minute class period. However, adjustments can be made to accommodate particular situations as needed.

Goal

The goal of this session is a) familiarize participants with Davis’ claim regarding theological traditions and respectful engagement, b) to synchronize each character trait with one or more scripture passages in order to clarify the theological imperative behind it, c) encourage participants to reflect on their own ways of engaging and interacting with those of differing opinions, and d) to begin imagining ways that we might more genuinely reflect God’s will for humanity as we move into this highly contentious election season.

Objectives

Participants will:

1. Identify the four traits which Davis lifts up as the set of virtues that should govern our conversations and interactions with each other.
2. Identify at least one scripture passage that points to each of the of the four traits in Davis’ essay as models of Christian character.
3. Name a concrete way from their own lives in which one or more of these traits is or is not exhibited.
4. Summarize Reinhold Niebuhr’s opinion regarding partisan politics and a nation’s future.
5. Describe possible ways in which Niebuhr’s fear is being realized in the present day.
6. Identify ways in which their own lives might better reflect Christian character when faced with disagreement, political or otherwise, in the future.

Preparation

1. Participants should have read James Calvin Davis’ lead article, “Resisting Politics as Usual: Civility as Christian Witness.”

2. Arrange the room in a way that is conducive to both large group discussion and small group sharing, ideally with tables for four to six people that are easily accessible and arranged to face a common space in one area of the room
3. Write the following statement on the board: **As we gather, read and reflect together on the following quote by Reinhold Niebuhr: “Whenever the followers of one political party persuade themselves that the future of the nation is not safe with the opposition in power, it becomes fairly certain that the nation’s future is not safe, no matter which party rules. For such public acrimony endangers the nation’s health more than any specific policies.”**

Materials

- Bible
- White / Chalk board or a sheet of poster board and pens / chalk
- Paper and writing utensils at each table

Sequence

1. Opening – (See question on board) As participants gather, have them share with one another their thoughts and reactions to the Reinhold Niebuhr quote. **Have a scribe write key phrases on the white/chalkboard or on a sheet of poster board for later reference.** Before moving on, it might be helpful to read aloud the “Concept” section of this lesson plan so participants might understand the purpose of the day’s lesson.
2. Explore – Ask participants to share their initial thoughts about the lead article, making a list of their one- or two-word reactions.
3. Encounter –
 - a. Assign one of each of the four traits in Davis’ essay to smaller groups from the larger class. Instruct each group to read more closely the section related to their particular trait, and then mine the Bible for passages that might have something to say regarding that particular trait.
 - i. Humility
 - ii. Patience
 - iii. Integrity
 - iv. RespectAfter sufficient time for discovery, re-convene and allow one person from each smaller group to share his or her group’s findings. Write the passages on the board or poster for all to see and reference over the next few weeks. Allow time for sharing reactions, thoughts, questions, as needed.
 - b. Invite participants to return to small groups to share ways that their own lives may or may not reflect these Christian character traits when faced with disagreement. Assure them that they will not be asked to share anything they are not comfortable sharing.
 - c. Reconvene and return to a brief discussion of the opening Niebuhr quote. Say something like, “With the upcoming political election, we are reminded just how

divided we, as a nation, are over some issues. Niebuhr penned these words in 1954, and it seems as if we have reached this point now, almost 60 years later. How do his words ring with eerie truth when examined through the lens of today's political scenario?" Allow participants to discuss, taking care to insure THEY model the four character traits as they share with each other.

- d. After 5 to 7 minutes of discussion, wind down the discussion by asking participants to wonder together what it is that raises our individual and corporate ire when our conversation turns to politics. Acknowledge that the goal is not to seek answers or find agreement, but rather merely to share and wonder together.
4. Respond – Return to the list of key traits / Bible passages created earlier in the lesson. Encourage each participant to write down, confidentially, one or two traits on which s/he will commit to work over the next few weeks. Agree to pray for one another throughout the week as everyone works on his or her particular growing edge.
5. Closing – End with prayer, using the following words, or relevant words of your own choosing: “Gracious and merciful God, thank you for the minds that you have given us, and the freedom to use those minds to best discern the way that you would have us live. Thank you for the communities in which we live—for our families, our church families, our city / town, our state, and our nation. As we continue to strive to be good stewards of the many gifts which you have given us, keep us ever mindful of your call to humility, patience, integrity, and respect as we go about our daily lives, encountering those with whom we might fully agree as well as those with whom we might vehemently disagree. Help us to be open to ways we might improve our own character by working more diligently towards reaching these goals for healthy conversation. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Session Two

Concept

The purpose of the study is to consider Jeffery Tribble’s claim that **respect** is the most fundamental of the four virtues Davis lifts up in his lead essay. The lesson will challenge participants to narrow their own understanding of civil discourse down to merely one of Davis’ four virtues, if possible, and make a case for why that one is most important. Participants will continue thinking about what the best of our theological traditions might add to the tone and tenor of this season’s political discourse.

Timeframe

The lesson is written for a 45-minute class period. However, adjustments can be made to accommodate particular situations as needed.

Goal

The goal of this session is a) enable participants to make a case for ONE singular Christian trait that is most important to civil discourse, b) to identify the difficulty in considering the differing opinions of others through ONLY that one lens, c) identify which of Tribble's four responses to pluralism (see p.4) most clearly resonates with him / her, and d) compare and contrast "tolerance for ambiguity" with "moral relativism / cultural accommodations."

Objectives

Participants will:

1. Summarize why Tribble maintains that "respect" is the most fundamental of Davis' highlighted healthy traits for civil discourse.
2. List at least one argument as to why each of the other traits might be considered The Most Important.
3. List at least one argument as to why each trait CANNOT be ignored when engaging in civil discourse.
4. Identify Linda Vogel's four responses to pluralism, and begin to consider which response is most reflective of him / her.
5. Describe the difference between or defend the similarity of "tolerance for ambiguity" and "moral relativism / cultural accommodations."

Preparation

1. Participants should have read Davis' lead article as well as Jeffery L. Tribble's response article, "Civility as the Practice of R-E-S-P-E-C-T."
2. Arrange the room in a way that is conducive to both large group discussion and small group sharing, ideally with tables for four to six people that are easily accessible and arranged to face a common space in one area of the room
3. Have Aretha Franklin's 1967 hit and signature song (written by Otis Redding in 1965) playing in the background as people arrive. Consider assembling a power point presentation that shows various images resulting from an internet image search of "respect" to have streaming while the song plays for added visual enhancement.
4. Write the following statement on the board: **"As you gather, listen to the words to this well-known R&B song. Imagine the significance of the lyrics at the time it was written, and consider what an R&B singer / songwriter in 2012 might choose to write for current lyrics to the same song that express a similar desire."**

Materials

- CD player / Computer as a music source (optional)
- Computer / LCD projector with "Respect" image presentation (optional)
- Bible
- White / Chalk board or a sheet of poster board and pens / chalk
- Writing utensils at each table
- Copies of "They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love."

Sequence

1. Opening –
 - a. As participants gather, encourage them to enjoy the music and images, reflecting on what they meant in the 1960's as well as what they might have to say to us today.
 - b. Begin the formal time by imagining together what lyrics with the same general idea and to the same tune, but written with today's context in mind, might be
 - c. Write "RESPECT" on the board, and ask participants to suggest, popcorn-style, ideas of what it might mean, writing them down as they are offered.
2. Explore – Encourage participants to consider why, given his particular context, Tribble might resonate most with the trait of "respect" in civil discourse. Invite them to consider how the RESPECT guidelines he references, suggested by Eric H.F. Law on p. 3, might inherently incorporate the other three of Davis' character traits—patience, integrity, and humility.
3. Encounter –
 - a. Re-visit Davis' four virtues in the "set of virtues that govern our (civil) conversations and interactions with one another,"—that is, patience, integrity, humility, and mutual respect. Divide the group into four or eight smaller groups, and assign each group one of the four character traits. Instruct them to spend a few minutes making a case for why their assigned trait is the most important of the four, even if they don't believe it is.
 - b. Allow the small groups to "make their best case" for their assigned virtue. Encourage others to listen respectfully and challenge / question politely if they wish. Once each group has reported, facilitate a large group discussion around the idea that no ONE of these traits is able to stand along, that all should be incorporated in some way in order to achieve civil discourse.
 - c. Invite them to return to small groups and share, if possible, a personal story or two about a time when they may have had a negative experience with "respectful communication." (Given the current social media access, this is, sadly, easier for most people to have in their experience base.) Consider the following questions related to the incident:
 - i. How did it evolve?
 - ii. Did it resolve or dissolve? How?
 - iii. What could / should you have done differently?
4. Respond – Review Linda Vogel's summary of "four responses" found on p. 4 of Tribble's response article. Invite participants to consider, and share if comfortable, which response best describes their own model.
 - a. Does the group tend to gravitate toward one particular response, or are they evenly distributed?
 - b. Why do you think this is the case?

Wrap up the discussion by saying something like: “As people of faith moving into this upcoming political season, it is important to model Christian practice by engaging in discourse that is civil. However, when we encounter other Christians, our mutual respect for all of God’s creation might be seen as capitulating to the relativism of the culture. Realizing the importance of respectful dialogue when encountering differences of opinion, consider together ways you might support one another in your church family, your community, and your virtual / social media world as you take a stand for the things in which you believe, while at the same time practicing mutual respect, patience, humility, and integrity.”

5. Closing – End by singing the part or all of the song “They’ll Know We Are Christians By Our Love” as the departing prayer, or close in prayer using words of your own choosing.

Session Three

Concept

The purpose of the study is to consider John Senior’s response to James Calvin Davis’ essay, especially in light of his critique that Davis limits “political agency” to discourse only. The lesson will encourage participants to think more critically about Davis’ “alternative” to the rampant political incivility that will likely only get worse as we near the 2012 election. Participants will begin to wrestle with how Christians are to “understand political power in modalities that aren’t cooperative but rather are instrumental and aggressive, and that threaten a compromised or even a zero-sum outcome.”

Timeframe

The lesson is written for a 45-minute class period. However, adjustments can be made to accommodate particular situations as needed.

Goal

The goal of this session is to enable participants to imagine what civility might look like beyond the realm of dialogue and into that of the more culturally acceptable virtues of power, competition, and victory. Participants will be able to verbalize why Davis’ picture of civility in the political realm might not be the only way to model a Christian witness. They will continue their overall assignment of thinking about what the best of our theological traditions might add to the tone and tenor of this season’s political discourse.

Objectives

Participants will:

1. Identify the main idea of John Senior’s response essay.
2. Identify feelings associated with competition, both before and after the competitive event, i.e., game, vote, etc.

3. Identify at least two reasons why political agency in theological circles typically focuses on dialogue.
4. Name at least three reasons, according to Senior, why Christian theologians struggle with coercive political power.
5. Cite at least two Bible passages / verses that deal with competition.
6. Cite at least two Bible passages / verses that deal with siding with those of little or no political power.

Preparation

1. Ideally, participants should have read Davis' lead essay, Tribble's response from the previous session, and John Senior's response. At a minimum for today's lessons, participants should have read Davis' lead article as well as Senior's response article.
2. Arrange the room in a way that is conducive to both large group discussion and small group sharing, ideally with tables for four to six people that are easily accessible and arranged to face a common space in one area of the room
3. Write the following quote from Senior's essay on the board: **“When political engagement moves from talk to action, from cooperative public dialogue to the instrumental use of political power, the virtues of civility take on a different kind of complexity.”**

Materials

- Bible
- Access to a concordance or computers that allow for word / phrase searches.
- White / Chalk board or a sheet of poster board and pens / chalk
- Writing utensils at each table

Sequence

1. Opening –
 - a. As participants gather, encourage them to reflect with others at their table on the quote written on the board. Encourage them to brainstorm / compare and contrast how civility in the arena of political *power* (action) might differ from civility in the arena of political *dialogue* (talk).
 - b. As the lesson begins, invite each group to share the highlights of their musings.
2. Explore –
 - a. Senior writes: “Political civility is indeed a difficult problem when politics means public deliberation. But when the talk is over and the debate ends, and a decision is made for one side and not the other,...civility becomes a much more challenging endeavor.” Ask participants to recall a time when a vote did not go the way they had hoped it would. Invite them to reflect on how it felt, comparing it to the day prior to the vote when there was still hope things would go “their way.” Invite individuals to share and reflect on their stories as they are comfortable.

3. Encounter – (Note: There will not be enough time to complete all five of these activities. Feel free to expand this lesson to two weeks, or to pick and choose the activities below that would most interest / engage your learning context.)

- a. Consider political theorist Michael Walzer’s argument that passion, as well as reason, is a fundamental source of political agency. He further suggests that this leaves room for politics to also be about power, competition, and victory while at the same time honoring human dignity. Is this a statement with which you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
- b. Senior maintains that one of the reasons Christians struggle with the notion of political power is that the Christian call for justice often leads us to side with those who do not have much, if any, political power. This mandate to seek justice is found throughout scripture. Invite those sitting at each table / in each small group to work together to find a verse or verses from the Bible that call for siding with the powerless. Then imagine together how Senior might respond if his understanding of political agency as power, competition, and victory. Reconvene the large group and invite a representative from each table / group to share their chosen verse/s and the highlights of their imagined responses from Senior. Possible passages are:
 - i. Jeremiah 7:5-7
 - ii. Deuteronomy 10:17-18
 - iii. Deuteronomy 27:19
 - iv. Galatians 2:10
- c. Senior makes the case that in times of political disagreement, when the dialogue is over, we must “move to competition to determine whose vision will win out.” Compromise may result, he proposes, as long as each side’s fundamental commitments are recognizable in the compromise. If we understand *compromise* to be “an agreement or a settlement of a dispute that is reached by each side making concessions,” (Oxford online dictionary) is political compromise truly possible? Why or why not?
- d. Assign each small group one of the following verse/s from scripture. Instruct each group to reflect on Senior’s essay through the lens of their assigned text.
 - i. Philippians 2:3-4
 - ii. 1 Corinthians 9:24-25
 - iii. James 4:6
 - iv. Psalm 108:13
 - v. Luke 16:15

After 5-7 minutes of discussion, reconvene as a large group and share the highlights of your reflection time, taking notes as appropriate.

- e. Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, “Competition has been shown to be useful up to a certain point and no further, but cooperation, which is the thing we must strive for today, begins where competition leaves off.” What does this quote have to say to us in light of Senior’s essay? Do you think FDR would agree with Senior’s analysis of political agency and the use of power, competition, and victory?

4. Respond – Invite participants to share how the study of this response paper might enable them to embrace civility more in this upcoming election season. If your audience is active in social media, consider challenging them to share both Davis’ and Senior’s articles via Facebook or Twitter to see what conversation it might spark among their friends / followers. Suggest that they do so with an emphasis on CIVIL discussion since political dialogue on social media can get heated and out of control very rapidly. Invite them to report back on the experience next week if they are comfortable doing so.
5. Closing – Close by reading Walter Brueggemann’s prayer “The Noise of Politics,” taken from his book Prayers for a Privileged People. It can be found online via a Google search. As always, you may also choose to close with or add a prayer of your own.

Session Four

Concept

The purpose of the study is to consider Caroline Kelly’s response to Davis’ lead essay. Participants will continue to wrestle with the nuances of civility as Christian witness in light of scriptural teachings, the Imago Dei in each of us, and the competing cultural realities of the present day.

Timeframe

The lesson is written for a 45-minute class period. However, adjustments can be made to accommodate particular situations as needed.

Goal

The goal of this session is to enable participants to imagine what the notion of friendship might add to our political discourse and Christian witness in times of disagreement. Participants will be able to verbalize what they look for in their own friends, and to consider what type of friends might enhance or challenge their current ideology or worldview in positive ways. Finally, they will continue their overall assignment of thinking about what the best of our theological traditions might add to the tone and tenor of this season’s political discourse.

Objectives

Participants will:

1. Summarize Kelly’s response to Davis’ lead article.
2. List at least five characteristics of a true friend.
3. List at least three bits of wisdom from Proverbs regarding friends / friendship.

Preparation

1. Ideally, participants should have read all four essays and Davis' reply. At the minimum for this lesson, they should have read Davis' lead article, Caroline Kelly's response article, and Davis' subsequent reply to his three responders.
2. Arrange the room in a way that is conducive to both large group discussion and small group sharing, ideally with tables for four to six people that are easily accessible and arranged to face a common space in one area of the room
3. Write the following question on the board: **"What does it mean to be a friend? What characteristics do you look for in a true friend?"**

Materials

- Bible
- Access to a concordance or computers that allow for word / phrase searches.
- White / Chalk board or a sheet of poster board and pens / chalk
- Writing utensils at each table

Sequence

1. Opening –
 - a. As participants gather, encourage them to reflect with others at their table on the question written on the board.
 - b. As the lesson begins, ask if anyone has any social media experiences to share from the previous week, posting the articles, engaging their cyber-friends. Reflect as appropriate.
 - c. Invite each table / small group to share their definitions of friend, as well as the characteristics they believe make a good friend. Write these on the board in case you want to reference them later in the lesson.
2. Explore – After a brief summary of Kelly's experience with friendship while traveling in the Middle East, invite participants to share any of their own similar experiences with friendship. Encourage them to highlight, if possible, the aspects of their friendship that was unique or counter-cultural.
3. Encounter –
 - a. As we enter this election season, Kelly "articulates a hopeful call for mutual respect based in the idea of friendship." (Davis' reply, p.1) She maintains that "(t)o be a friend means to take seriously what the other takes seriously." How might this guiding principle aid in our exhibition of civility in the coming months? What, if any, might be the shortcomings in the notion of friendship as a guiding principle as we move into a time of heated political disagreement? What might be the advantages?
 - b. Many people active on social media may refrain from posting or allowing any political opinions on their "wall." What does this say about our current

understanding of “friend,” at least relative to social media? How is a “Facebook friend” different from a “RealLife friend?”

- c. In small groups or at tables, spend a few minutes discussion the following quotes on friendship. What might these quotes have to add to Kelly’s call to friendship as a primary means of civility amidst disagreement?
 - i. “Fear makes strangers of people who would be friends.” (Shirley MacLaine, actress and author)
 - ii. “I don’t need a friend who changes when I change and who nods when I nod; my shadow does that much better.” (Plutarch, 1st century philosopher)
 - iii. “Friendship is a single soul dwelling in two bodies.” (Aristotle, 4th c. philosopher)
 - iv. “It is important to our friends to believe that we are unreservedly frank with them, and important to friendship that we are not.” (Mignon McLaughlin, 20th c. American journalist / author)
 - v. “A friend is the one who knows all about you and still likes you.” (Elbert Hubbard, 20th c. American writer / philosopher)
 - vi. “Many a person has held close, throughout their entire lives, two friends that always remained strange to one another, because one of them attracted by virtue of similarity, the other by difference.” (Emil Ludwig, 20th c. German author)
 - d. Spend 5 to 10 minutes mining the book of Proverbs for Biblical wisdom about friendship. How might these verses enhance Kelly’s thesis that if we first learn to be friends with one another, then maybe we can learn to love each other as God has loved us.
4. Respond – Imagine that you were going to place a classified ad for a new friend to engage and be challenged by during the upcoming political season. Work in pairs to compose your ad, and then re-convene to share your results with the larger group. As the ads are read, ask participants how many of their current friends meet most of those desired qualifications?
 5. Closing –
 - a. Invite participants to read Davis’ reply to his responders, found online. You may also wish to have a few printed copies on hand for those who prefer hard copies.
 - b. Close by reading the following blogpost, entitled “Friendship is a Prayer,” by Roman Catholic Deacon Greg Kandra, found online at patheos.com. As always, you may also choose to close with or add a prayer of your own.

“Friendship is, at its best, a prayer. It is, after all, an act of faith. It is sacred. It is an epistle, delivered from one person to another. In its best moments, friendship is a canticle that celebrates, a parable that teaches. In the close proximity of a friend, you find a cathedral where promises are kept, and a chapel where tears are shed.

“Friendship is a responsorial psalm: one heart speaks, another response, and in the silences in between we hear something of God.

“Jesus—no stranger to friendship, or to its swift reversal, betrayal—said that wherever two or more are gathered in his name, there he is, too. Perhaps when we seek a friend, we are seeking God, the God who dwells in all of us, the God in whose image we have all been made. Perhaps in friendship he is there, waiting to be found, the God of laughter and companionship, the God of shared secrets and long stories and strong coffee, the God who is comfortable just kicking back. He is there to listen, because that’s what friends are for. He is there to guide us on the journey, to see that we are not alone and that there is someone with us who can read the map. He is there to help us find faith in one another, at moments when that particular faith may be all that we have. He is there to let us know that someone else understands our pain, shares our joy and, thankfully, gets our jokes. Out of that, we are encouraged and given hope. Out of that, I believe, we are given God.”