

Holy Manners

Learning to be civil,
compassionate, and
Christ-honoring in
the church

Richard Lucco

Scene 1: I am driving seventy-five miles per hour (five miles over the speed limit) in the passing lane on I-94. The driver behind me flashes his lights, honks his horn, and drives up so close to my rear bumper I think he is going to hit me. I change lanes and he roars past, saluting me with his middle finger.

Scene 2: I am at a high-school soccer game. The man beside me continually berates players on the other team and complains about every referee's call in a loud voice. The referee finally ejects him from the stadium and he leaves swearing. There's that salute again.

Scene 3: I am in the parking lot of the local Target store. The car in front of me is waiting for a car to pull out so she can pull into the parking space. The car backs out and another comes roaring down the lane from the wrong direction and takes the space. The woman in front of me honks and throws up her hands. He salutes.

Scene 4: I am at a church council meeting. The discussion gets more and more heated. Folks stop listening, continually interrupt one another, and accuse one another of lying. Finally one man accuses the "opposition" of being evil and un-Christian, gets up, and stamps out, slamming the door behind him.

Do you get the picture? Behavior in the church is often no different and no better than behavior on the highway, the soccer field, or the parking lot. It can be exactly the same, minus the salute.

I could describe other church scenes, and so could you. Two men refuse to talk to one another because they disagree on politics. A mother berates a nursery worker in front of children and other parents. A pastor screams at a leader in a meeting because they disagree. A parishioner says of a pastor in a congregational meeting that he is not fit to be in ministry. A pastor reveals information shared in confidence in a public setting. Gossip and critical comments of others is the norm rather than the exception. Folks talk continually during worship and go out and come in several times. A pastor criticizes the congregation on Facebook or in a blog. An individual gets up and leaves each Sunday when the pastor begins to preach.

Should we expect more from the church? Should we expect better behavior?

Jesus thinks so. He says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35, TNIV).

He also says, "My command is this:



Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12, TNIV).

The Apostle Paul thinks so too. He says, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:29-32, TNIV).

He says, “in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” (Philippians 2:3-4, TNIV).

Yes, we are called to be different in the church, to engage in what John Wenrich, director of church vitality, calls “civil, compassionate, and Christ-honoring conversations.” In *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations* Gilbert Rendle calls us to practice “holy manners” in the church. We are called to behave like Christians, not to default to the behaviors of our culture.

The question is, how do we get there from here? The answer is by intention, commitment, and practice. We must

intend to be civil, compassionate, and Christ-honoring. We must be committed to loving one another, valuing others above ourselves, and forgiving one another. And we must practice holy manners in all of our relationships.

There have been many good suggestions in previous articles in this series. I would like to add four suggestions.

First, be faithful in small things. Look for every opportunity to care for one another and build one another up.

Don’t participate in spreading gossip. Find ways to help and serve one another. Assume the best motives in others, not the worst. Be quick to say, “I am sorry,”

and quicker to forgive. Be polite, practice holy manners.

Second, develop a behavioral covenant that will help you behave like Christians. A behavioral covenant is simply a set of promises, based on Scripture, that folks make to one another about how they will treat one another. Rendle’s book *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations* is a great resource in this area.

Normally a behavioral covenant is developed by a small group that includes the church leadership or an ad hoc committee and the pastoral staff. The process is sometimes

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led by a superintendent or other conference personnel. When the covenant is finished the church leadership and congregation make a commitment to each other to live by the covenant. Many churches post their behavioral covenant in a prominent place, talk about it regularly, and evaluate how they are doing in living up to it. As one man said to me, “So, we are promising to act like Christians. Right?” Right.

A behavioral covenant might include the following kinds of commitments:

We promise to build each other up and not tear each other down.

We promise to honor and respect one another.

We promise to focus on issues and behavior, not motives.

We promise to listen carefully and to seek to understand before being understood.

We promise to offer our opinions with charity and humility.

We promise to speak the truth in love.

We promise to ask for and offer forgiveness when appropriate.

Third, develop healthy conflict norms. Every congregation develops habits of behavior—some good, some not so good. The process of developing conflict norms is simply an attempt to normalize good habits and a healthy way of thinking about conflict. A church might engage in a process similar to the one outlined above to develop these norms. A congregation could offer a Sunday-school class or workshop on dealing with conflict and work on healthy norms in that context.

The Lombard Mennonite Peace Center (www.LMPeaceCenter.org) is a good resource in this area. They suggest that members of the congregation share a commitment to follow certain key guidelines when conflict arises. For example:

As we consider areas of disagreement, everyone will remain mindful of those commonalities of faith that bind us together within the body of believers.

We will avoid speaking negatively of others when they are not present.

We will work to separate issues from people, being hard on issues, while simultaneously being soft on people.

We will approach conflict in a win-win manner, in a creative effort to address the genuine interests of all parties involved rather than debating positions.

We will approach conflict in a way that allows for open communication and listening so that there is free expression of beliefs and ideas.

Fourth, prepare in advance for difficult conversations. In the summer 2006 issue of *Congregations*, a magazine published by the Alban Institute, Jean Greenwood suggests a series of questions to consider before a challenging conversation.

In reflecting about others, consider:

How do you think others see the situation and issues?

What may have led them to this perspective? What needs, concerns, feelings, values, desires, and personal experiences may have shaped their views?

How would it feel to walk in their shoes?

Why might this situation be important to them? What may be at stake?

In reflecting about yourself, consider:

How do you see the situation, the issues?

What has led you to this perspective? What needs, concerns, feelings, values, desires, and personal experiences have shaped your views?

Why is this issue important to you? What is at stake?

Do you share any common values, concerns, needs, or experiences with those who see things differently?

In reflecting about the conversation, consider:

How can you help create a safe, respectful space for conversation, building on a common faith and a desire for God’s guiding presence?

What would you like to see happen in this conversation? What outcome?

How can you bring your own best self, nurtured and centered in your spiritual journey?

How can you prepare to truly listen to others, and to your own deepest truth?

How can you prepare to tell your story, expressing what is important to you in a way others can hear and understand you, and not feel attacked?

What questions would you like to ask, in order to dig underneath the issues, and better understand the other’s feeling and perspectives?

Scene 5: I am in a congregational meeting. The congregation is discussing a very difficult issue that has caused much conflict in the church. They have developed a behavioral covenant and they are committed to it. They have worked on healthy conflict norms. And they have prepared for the conversation.

It isn’t easy. There is strong disagreement. But together they work on hearing one another, respecting one another, caring for one another, and “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

Everyone does not walk away happy. But everyone walks away feeling good about their church and feeling good that they can have such a difficult conversation in a civil, compassionate, Christ-honoring way.

As I am leaving, a young couple stops me at the door. They tell me they are new to the church—they have been there less than a month. And they say, “We weren’t sure we were going to stay here. But tonight helped us decide. We want to be part of a church that can talk about hard things in such a Christlike way.” ■