

## **Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church**

By James Calvin Davis

**Background:** In 2010, James Calvin Davis published a book, "In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues that Divide Us", in which he argues that religion can (and should) shape both the content and the quality of the great public debates of our time. As he talked about this book, he often heard church members say that it is hard to imagine that the church could be a unifying voice in divisive public debates when we "can't get our own houses in order".

In response, Davis began to consider what "civility" looks like within Christian communities. He was drawn to Ephesians 4:1-3 where Paul talks about "bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." He chose the word "forbearance" as a way to discuss a distinctive Christian practice in the face of conflict. He defines "forbearance" as "the active commitment to maintain Christian community through disagreement, as an extension of virtue and as a reflection of the unity in Christ that binds the church together."

Davis is aware that "forbearance" sounds initially like a conservative value--a call to slow down the pace of change in the hopes that all parties will, in time, cool off and come together. He wants to argue against this sense of the term: "Forbearance is more than a *modus vivendi*, an ideological cease-fire. It is instead a positive commitment to living with the productive discomfort of difference as a reflection of the grace of God" (p. 17). Forbearance does not mean we must squelch our disagreements--it is about the character we bring to the debate about those disagreements.

**Structure:** After introducing his understanding of forbearance, Davis offers a series of chapters highlighting the biblically-rooted virtues that shape Christian character in ways that then shape our interactions with those whom we disagree: humility, patience and hope, wisdom, faithfulness and friendship. The last three chapters in the book speak directly to current divisions within the church. Chapter 7, "Truth", addresses the concerns of Christian conservatives that forbearance might "undermine the church's commitment to the preservation of God's truth" (p. 133). Chapter 8, "Justice", addresses the concerns of Liberal and Progressive Christians that forbearance asks "women, persons of color, LGBTQ persons, and other oppressed groups to slow down the pace of justice,...to retreat from the struggle for what is right" (p. 156). The final chapter, "Forbearance as Social Witness" is Davis' call to the church to "contribute to the recovery of American public life, from a contest of division and disdain to an exercise in conversation, cooperation, and the common good (p. 178).

## Questions for Discussion

1. **Are Christians just as mean to each other as everyone else is?** Davis writes: "...it is no longer a given that Christians will know how to engage hard conversations in a healthy way. In fact, evidence suggests that the pollution of incivility from our political culture has infiltrated ecclesial discourse, to the point that many of our church debates resemble what we see from politicians more than the virtues commended to us by Scripture." (p. 104) Would you agree? In your experience, is there any difference between how people discuss disagreements within the church and how people discuss political disagreements outside of the church?
2. **Is the unity of the church important to you?** Davis writes: "What we say in our commitment to staying together in disagreement is that we will not sabotage the unity of Christ's church in our pursuit of our vision of the right, as compelling as our vision might be. For we understand that an important part of what is right and good in the eyes of God is the unit of God's church" (p. 106). Do you agree?
3. **Is it possible to both defend truth and stay in community with people with whom you disagree?** Davis writes: "The secret to maintaining a commitment to truth while practicing forbearance is to allow the latter to shape the former" (p. 147). While we should "defend our sense of orthodoxy with energy", we do so remembering that "one defining commitment of the church is the character with which we pursue, preserve, protect, and promote our conception of truth" (p. 147). Do you agree? Can you think of a time when you stood firm in your convictions while maintaining forbearance for those who disagree with you?
4. **Are there some things that are just out of bounds?** Davis writes: "There are bounds to the inclusivity that the Body of Christ is obligated to exhibit, and ideas that are obviously dehumanizing ought to be disqualified as such in Christian discourse. In other words, from time to time Christians are justified in being exclusionist in the name of the inclusive love of God" (p. 172). Do you agree? Have you ever cut yourself off from another church member because you judged their words or their behavior to be out of bounds? How did you make that call?
5. **Have you seen examples of how the church can model civility to the wider world?** Davis argues that "being church is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, for in being church we are the 'provisional representation' of God's intentions for all people (Barth again). What we know, experience, and live out imperfectly in the church is the gospel God wishes for the world" (p. 189). Davis goes on to give some examples (pp. 192-194). Do you know of some other examples to add to this list?