

Behavioral Covenants in Congregations

Gilbert R. Rendle

Sources of Uncivil Behavior

Rendle's book, *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations*, describes how congregations are plagued by "uncivil behavior."¹ He believes much of the bad behavior originates in a cultural shift, particularly from the "notion that as individuals we do not have to defer to the need of the larger group, be it family, congregation, or community."² He calls it the rise of individualism. Rendle asserts that after World War II the culture shifted from individuals working together for the good of the whole to "Returning soldiers [who] were anxious to defer no longer, but to catch up on life...these soldiers led to a shift in cultural values from deferred pleasure to instant gratification."³ The rise of individualism at this time was observed in the rise of home loans and lines of credit. Robert Putnam, Dillon Professor of International Affairs at Harvard University, also adds "The number of bowling leagues has plummeted in the last decade, just as has the number of people who participate in religious congregations, civic organizations such as the Boy Scouts and Red Cross, and fraternal organizations such as the Lions or Jaycees."⁴

Rendle suggests much of the "uncivil behavior" in society, stemming from cultural shifts, is being played out in our faith communities. Rendle describes it this way: "Remove the bookend prayers – the prayers at the beginning and end of the meetings – and many of our congregational or committee meetings would not look significantly different from meetings of other community groups..."⁵

The Value of Differences and Identifying Contextual Differences

The cultural differences (values, goals, and priorities) that exist among people tend to "disrupt and divide."⁶ He points out one of the biggest problems facing congregations and their leaders is the inability to describe the uncivil behavior and its implications. He says, "We most often have no language for the discomfort that separates us at a time when we wish to be together in community."⁷ Rendle recognizes there is a valuable side to differences. He says, "Creative and innovative solutions or steps are seldom discovered without some uncomfortable rambling about unusual or unorthodox ideas."⁸ Therefore he suggests space has to be created to allow people time to discover creative solutions. In fact, he argues the benefits of differences, saying "It is significant to note that real community is created by working through disagreements, not by going around them and not by denying they are real."⁹

Rendle identifies the importance of understanding contextual variables: that is, what belongs to the larger system? Contextual variables are those things that would occur no matter who the leader is.¹⁰ Rendle asserts, "The challenge for the leaders is to assign what "belongs to" the leader and what

¹ Gilbert R. Rendle, "Behavioral Covenants in Congregations," (The Alban Institute, Inc.), 1999. P. vii.

² Ibid. p. viii.

³ Ibid. p.14.

⁴ Ibid. p. 17.

⁵ Ibid. p. 19.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. p.ix.

⁸ Ibid. p. xiii.

⁹ Ibid. p. xvii.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 3.

belongs to the congregational system.”¹¹ This can be important when in application. All too often, credit is assigned in error during good times and bad times with unhealthy results. The benefit of recognizing contextual variables enables leaders to “differentiate between themselves and the congregations in which they provide leadership;”¹² where one starts and stops.

The Leader’s Response

To assist leaders and congregations in dealing with the shift to individualism, identifying contextual variables, and limiting uncivil behavior, Rendle asserts the need to work for the big picture. He believes one way to “depersonalize” some of the bad behavior is to take the balcony approach. Taking the balcony approach is finding a safe place and asking questions. Rendle recommends leaders get up in the balcony and help their members to do the same. The goal is to not get lost in the uncivil behavior but begin to become aware of it. This is done by asking questions to get people brainstorming.

Rendle doesn’t approach the “conditions” of uncivil behavior and contextual variables as problems to solve. Instead, he says they are too big and out of our control. He cites Ronald Heifetz, Director of the Leadership Education Project at Harvard, who suggests: “leaders need to accept that a problem is not even a problem, that is, that it is not changeable...it instead needs to be understood as a condition with which that person will now continue to live.”¹³ Rendle applies Heifetz’s assertion by suggesting that, rather than trying to fix a problem, “this is a time for the leaders and members of congregations to learn and relearn our own faith commitments and the values of our faith traditions.”¹⁴

Lord Mouton’s Three Domains of Life

Rendle uses the work of Lord Mouton, a noted English judge who spoke on the topic of “Law and Manners.”¹⁵ Basically, Judge Mouton describes three domains of human interaction: (1) the domain of law, (2) the domain of free choice, and (3) the between domain. Mouton defines the between domain as where there is no law, but we are not free to behave as we see fit.¹⁶ He called this domain that of Manners.

Rendle suggests the dominant domains are (1) and (2), while the between domain, the “softer voice of obedience to the unenforceable”¹⁷ is minimized. This is where Rendle suggests the community of faith should and has presided. He says: “It is in the domain of obedience to the unenforceable, the realm of manners, that faith communities can claim a special space to practice behaviors that conform to and evidence their beliefs and values about what is moral.”¹⁸ For Rendle, members of a faith community will submit to certain ways of living and acting “because we hold membership in a faith community...that prescribe such behaviors”.¹⁹ He continues by asserting churches need to reclaim this middle territory.

¹¹ Ibid. p.3.

¹² Ibid. p. 5.

¹³ Ibid. p.24.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 24.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 31.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 32.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.33.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 33.

Rendle observes, “We live our faith in the context of community...”²⁰ The role of the leader, Rendle suggests, is not having the answer but assisting people in living well together in the wilderness.

Rendle encourages leaders to establish healthy norms, rules.²¹ Rendle’s concept of covenant is based on modifying a group of people’s behavior. For Rendle behavior is “negotiable.” The key may be in the idea of negotiating behavior and then entering into an agreeable covenant. He calls these behavioral covenants, which “seek behavioral agreements to be shared and practiced by the whole group.”²² For Rendle the value of a behavioral covenant is not in dictating behavior but “raising the appropriate issues and behaviors to a level of awareness and offering ways to have helpful and safe conversations about them.”²³

Application and Theological Reflection

In my ministry, I have observed faith communities which have become the breeding ground for uncivil behavior. In some cases the bad behavior goes overlooked under the banner of “niceness,” or even worse, Christian love. Steinke refers to such churches as accomplices, I wonder if there are 2nd Commandment issues?²⁴ The idea of developing a negotiable covenant, where parties agree together on acceptable behavior, is one way for me to assist leaders and members to stay connected. I can see the act of developing a covenant as a means to invite differing parties to listen and begin to understand the other.

Interestingly, the third domain described by Mouton seems to echo Jesus’ enactment of a new law: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Lutherans speak of three domains, too: nomianism, anti-nomianism, and the new command Jesus gives “love one another.” Christian liberties...just because you can doesn’t mean you should.

Ronald Heifetz’s assertion, “The problem is not even a problem but a condition in which we will live,” aligns well with our understanding of original sin. It is not as if we are going to solve this problem. Instead, God has provided a covenant to enable us to live in a holy relationship with Him and one another. In this covenant, God agrees to forgive us our sin and we agree to give it to Him. In so doing holy manners are promoted in the community of faith.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 35.

²¹ Ibid. p. 44.

²² Ibid. p. 53.

²³ Ibid. p. 59.

²⁴ Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, (The Alban Institute, Inc.) 2006.