



# 20 THINGS TO SAY & DO TO FIGHT THE CANCEL CULTURE

HOW TO BE AN EVERYDAY CHAMPION FOR FREE SPEECH

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In his tongue-in-cheek poem “The World State,” G.K. Chesterton mused about learning “to love my fellow-man and to hate my next-door neighbour.”<sup>1</sup>

The so-called “cancel culture” is the ultimate love-humankind-but-hate-people strategy. Jesus said it is morally upright to love your neighbor and turn the other cheek. “Cancellers” believe it is morally upright to despise your neighbor and slap the snot out of those whose viewpoints differ from your own. All in the name of social justice, of course.

Dictionary.com defines the concept of cancel culture as “the practice of withdrawing support for (or canceling) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, it is much bigger than that. Canceling has become a new form of online bullying aimed at far more than public figures and large corporations. Anyone who dissents from the mob mentality could be a target.

So, assuming that you will be targeted by cancellers at some point, what should you do? Let’s take a look at what the cancel culture is and the threat it represents, analyze a devastating “cancel event” from the inside, and discuss some surprising things you can do and say to become a free-speech champion in times like these.

# CANCEL CULTURE IS BIG & GROWING

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*“Is cancel culture a real thing?”*

Contrary to the dismissive claims of mainstream media outlets, the cancel culture is real. Ryan Lizza of Politico says that 40% of voters claim to have engaged in a form of cancel culture. Ten percent say they participate “often.”<sup>3</sup> Since the average person has eight friends, one of your friends is probably a die-hard canceller, and three of them are ready to pile on when they have the chance.

Who are the cancellers? Mostly young Democrats. The Politico poll reviewed by Lizza found that half of Democrats have admitted to being involved in the cancel culture, and more than half of voters ages 18-34 say they have participated. Yet canceling is not exclusively the domain of the left. A third of Republicans say they have been involved as well.<sup>4</sup>

Cancellers seem to be motivated by a set of virtuous traits that, when stirred together in today’s toxic social media atmosphere, become vices. The line between a sense of justice and self-righteous indignation is easily crossed on Facebook. The need to “do something” can spur people to thoughtlessly sign petitions that organizers adroitly manipulate to create the impression of godlike force. Skill at social media communication quickly whips the easily offended into a frenzied mob bent on revenge.

However, it is not unheard of for high-level leaders to use cancel culture tools to further their political ambitions. As a recent example, vice-presidential candidate Kamala Harris has publicly—and repeatedly—lobbied to have President Donald Trump’s Twitter account suspended.<sup>5</sup>

Hardly a day goes by without a new cancel culture story. A well-known example, because it happened at the *New York Times*, occurred in June 2020, when the paper pushed out editorial page editor James Bennet—a diehard liberal Democrat—because he published an op-ed by a conservative United States senator, the decorated war veteran, Tom Cotton.

That incident—and many other lesser-known cases that preceded it—compelled a group of prominent journalists and artists to pen a “Letter on Open Justice and Debate,” published by the reliably liberal *Harper’s Magazine*. The letter warned against the “vogue for public shaming and ostracism” and “the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty.”<sup>6</sup>

And yet, the canceling continues. In July 2020, liberal atheist Harvard professor Steven Pinker found himself the object of a petition to demand that the Linguistic Society of America strip him of his status as a fellow.<sup>7</sup> Why? Because five years ago he re-tweeted a news report about data on police shootings and race that contradicted current popular opinion.

A few weeks later, communications executive Niel Golightly was run out of Boeing because *thirty-three years ago* he had written an article arguing against women in combat (a viewpoint he no longer holds, by the way). The company’s CEO added insult to injury with a statement promising to drive such “bigotry” out of the company.<sup>8</sup> Golightly apologized, but his career—and his reputation as a brilliant executive and former naval aviator—is wrecked.

Another recent cancel culture controversy has arisen in my normally “chill” home state of Colorado. John Eastman, a University of Colorado professor appointed to a one-year position as a token conservative professor (paid for with private donations), has been threatened with cancellation because of an August 12th *Newsweek* editorial. In the offending piece, Eastman points out that the courts have never ruled on whether a person like Kamala Harris, who was born in the United States to parents on temporary visas, legally qualifies to be president.

Two days after the publication of Eastman’s article, *Newsweek* added a rare ex post facto preface saying that the piece conveyed an “ugly message” that “gave rise to a wave of vile Birtherism directed at Senator Harris.”<sup>9</sup> The University of Colorado chancellor, Phil DiStefano, piled on, criticizing Eastman for having “marginalized” the community and “sown doubts in our commitment to anti-racism, diversity, equality and inclusion.”<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the chancellor wrote that he would not rescind Eastman’s appointment, because to do so would “falsely feed a narrative that our university suppresses speech.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, we’re going to refrain from hurting you not because we believe you have free speech, but because we don’t want to be perceived as the kind of people who believe that you shouldn’t have it.

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*“... the walls protecting free speech  
are rapidly crumbling ...”*

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The attack on Professor Eastman is especially worrisome because it signals that higher education—once considered a bastion of free speech and “academic freedom,” is forfeiting this time-honored tradition. In the old days, professors would say, “I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” Now, the walls protecting free speech are rapidly crumbling and it is not just conservatives who are under attack. A gay, atheist, Hispanic professor named Charles Negy at the University of Central Florida has drawn fire for social media messages his detractors say are racist. Negy lays the blame at the feet of Democrats: “They scare the hell out of me. Because they’re so anti-freedom. I’m concerned. I’m very concerned.”<sup>12</sup>

The personal consequences of the cancel culture can be disastrous, as we will see in the case of University of North Carolina at Wilmington professor, Dr. Mike Adams.

# INSIDE LOOK AT A DEVASTATING CAMPUS CANCEL

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In the spring of 2020, my friend, and distinguished criminal justice professor, Dr. Mike Adams was forced out of his professorship at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

The campaign to get Mike fired was orchestrated by a prominent Wilmington attorney and former trustee of the university who called Adams a “racist, bigoted and misogynistic piece of nothingness” and said, “Mike, the time has come for you to find the hole you crawled out of. . .You disgust me.”<sup>13</sup>

In the weird way that George Orwell’s characters speak in the dystopian novel *1984*, this former trustee claimed that Adams, a well-known free speech champion, should be fired because he had “substantially interfered with the protected free expression rights of others.” A Facebook group called “Justice for UNCW” and a related Change.Org petition gained tens of thousands of followers.

As Mike’s friend, I acknowledge that he often exercised his free speech with a devastating wit that rattled friends as well as foes. He was bullish for what he believed in, certainly, but no bully.

Yet, in the end, even Mike’s status as a tenured professor who had successfully beaten the university in an epic free speech court case could not save him. The university forced a severance. At first, Mike was relieved to have the episode behind him and looking forward to the future. But within days, he began to spiral into despair. “My career is over,” he repeatedly emphasized.

I, and many others of his friends, tried to convince Mike that the best was yet to come. With his payout, possible speaking fees, and writing opportunities, he could live comfortably while making a significant difference.

But Mike could not see it. Being a criminal justice professor at UNCW is all he had ever known. The humiliation—perhaps exacerbated by the loneliness of the COVID-19 lockdown—proved too much. In late July, Mike ended his own life.

The accusations that led to Mike’s dismissal have proven untrue. The furor has died down and the Facebook page dedicated to his destruction has been removed, but the loss of Mike is forever. His family and fiancée and friends are overcome with grief. And the sad irony is that Mike’s enemies never seemed to grasp that, in him, they had a friend who had dedicated his life to protecting the very right to free speech that they used to ruin him.

At some point, if you take a stand for anything at all, the cancellers will come. What should you say and do? Here are ten things to do and ten things to say to become free speech champions.

# TEN THINGS TO DO TO FIGHT THE CANCEL CULTURE

1

**Remember that the cancel culture comes from erroneous worldviews.** Being ignorant of opposing worldviews is like entering battle without any understanding of what your enemy looks like or is capable of doing. To fight the cancel culture, we must clearly understand the secular and Marxist worldviews. Secularists see free speech as a bad thing. They believe that “the only way to reconstruct reality in a just way is to subvert dominant discourses—and this requires control of speech,” says Timothy Keller in a recent essay critiquing a secular view of justice.<sup>14</sup> Dr. Ted Baehr, founder of MovieGuide, traces cancel culture back to the revolutionary language of *The Communist Manifesto*.<sup>15</sup> I am inclined to agree. Karl Marx did not want debate—he wanted overthrow by any means necessary. The word “abolish” is used thirty times in the manifesto, as Marx demands the abolition of countries and nations, eternal truths, religion, morality, private property, competition, and the traditional family.<sup>16</sup>

*“... those who exercise free speech should also defend it — even when it is offensive ...”*

2

**Support the bi-partisan rejection of cancel culture.** Both conservatives and liberals are sounding the alarm, and it’s a good thing. A CATO Institute poll found that only 27% of Americans think that cancel culture is a good thing. The survey found that “52% of Democrats, 59% of Independents, and 77% of Republicans agree they have political opinions they are afraid to share.”<sup>17</sup> The *Harper’s Magazine* letter I mentioned earlier is a good example of a bi-partisan effort. It is signed by dozens of public figures, mostly liberal progressives. Progressive writer and human rights activist Suzanne Nossel rightly points out that “those who exercise free speech should also defend it—even when it is offensive.”<sup>18</sup> Former president Barack Obama has said of the cancel culture, “That’s not activism. That’s not bringing about change. If all you’re doing is casting stones, you’re probably not going to get that far. That’s easy to do.”

3

**Uphold the dignity of all people.** Always remember that every person is made in God’s image. All of us—despite our disagreements—have that in common. Megan Almon of the Life Training Institute says that the pro-life advocates she trains increasingly face cancellation because, presumably, “they only care about unborn babies and not other ‘more pressing,’ ‘pro-life’ issues, like women’s ‘equality,’ children in cages, racial injustice,

or the environment.” What is being lost in the argument, Almon says, is that “dignity that isn’t based on functions, attributes, or traits at all, but on their shared human nature.”<sup>19</sup> That’s a point worth bearing in mind for all of us, not just for pro-life activists.

## 4

**Decide that hurting people is not the goal of public discourse.** The cancel culture encourages people to stop making arguments against *viewpoints* they do not agree with, and instead to silence *people* with those viewpoints, destroying the reputation and careers of those who dissent. Stop doing this. Do not use name-calling. Do not use hasty generalizations. The goal of public discourse is *discourse*, not verbal body-slammings.

## 5

**See the pain inside.** Often, those who participate in the cancel culture do so through social media tools that enable ordinary citizens to amass the appearance of overwhelming momentum. In a way, it is good that citizens have gained the ability to “speak truth to power.” But when you look at individual cancel campaigns, it seems to be less about being a good citizen and more about saying, “Look at me! I am righteous! I am unstoppable. Resistance is futile!” But to Megan Almon, the person who is saying “Look at me!” is really saying “‘Look into me’ and see the emptiness inside.”<sup>20</sup> Almon sees it as “more like false bravado and a plea for attention from a soul searching for meaning.”

## 6

**Stop using your faith to justify a “righteous” kind of cancel culture.** Self-proclaimed Christians of both the conservative and liberal variety can be mighty mean cancellers. In a study jointly conducted by Summit Ministries and the Barna Group, 62% of church-going Christians under 45 strongly agreed or agreed somewhat “If your belief offends someone or hurts their feelings, it is wrong.” Apparently, many believers think that controversy itself is bad, and cancellation is a kind of bloodletting that will rid the body of Christ of disease. Not a week goes by when

I do not receive communication demanding that I fire one of my Summit Ministries speakers or sever a membership in some organization because of its nefarious connection to someone who is connected to someone who the author of the letter doesn’t like. Stop it. Just stop.

## 7

**Go to the source.** In the last two weeks, I have been dialoguing with someone demanding that our organization sever ties with an association of like-minded organizations because it is presumably involved in a secret plot to subvert Christianity. I asked this person if he had talked to anyone in the organization. Of course, he had not. So, I did. I called the director and learned that the organization is clearly and transparently *opposed* to the things they were being accused of. Even if we end up having disagreements, the director of this organization and I now have a relationship through which I can bring up my concerns personally and in a forthright way.

*“In every culture there exists opposing opinions ...”*

## 8

**Make your case.** Pastor Jack Hibbs of Calvary Chapel Chino Hills, California, told me, “In every culture there exists opposing opinions; only those who advance their opinions eventually win the day.”<sup>21</sup> We need to become adept at making persuasive arguments. This is what the Apostle Paul did in Acts 17 and 18 when he reasoned with the Jews and Greeks. In 2 Corinthians 5:11 Paul said, “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.” The New Testament word for “persuade” comes from the Greek word “peitho.” Peitho was the goddess of persuasion. Her counterpart was the goddess Bia, “one who binds.” Peitho moved people to arrive at true conclusions. Bia uses violence and force to get her way.<sup>22</sup> Persuasion is always superior to force, but it takes more work. Be the one willing to do the work.

## 9

**Go for change, not cancellation.** One of our Summit Ministries graduates works for the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, an organization opposed to pornography. Rather than merely organizing petition drives to force change, NCOSE meets with executives, shows them how pornography is part of a web of activities that result in the exploitation of women and children, and asks them to take responsibility. It is working. Hundreds of thousands of hotel rooms are now free from on-demand pornography, Google has removed pornographic apps from GooglePlay and ceased pornographic GoogleAds. Walmart has removed the disgusting Cosmo magazine from its checkout counters.

*“Only a culture that allows for redemption and open discourse can encourage the moral progress we all want.”*

## 10

**Extend forgiveness.** By operating based on shame and fear, the cancel culture encourages people to hide their wrongdoings rather than admit them and find healing. As pastor and author Troy Dobbs puts it, “Activism isn’t hunting down people who’ve made mistakes while sitting on your phone pretending *you* haven’t.”<sup>23</sup> Shame and fear impede the kind of moral growth that happens when people have the freedom to consider their actions and willingly adjust. We can do this because God doesn’t cancel *us*—he cancels our *sin*. Colossians 2:14 says that God “canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross” (NLT). Having been extended forgiveness, we gain the power to forgive others. This notion of forgiveness was even worked into the American Constitution. Alexander Hamilton, in Federalist No. 74, made the case for presidential pardons, because there are cases of “unfortunate guilt” and because the justice system must be kept from becoming “too sanguinary and cruel.” A *Wall Street Journal* discussion of the cancel culture written by college student Joseph Murante of Seton Hall University said that, “Only a culture that allows for redemption and open discourse can encourage the moral progress we all want.”<sup>24</sup> Wise beyond his years.





# TEN THINGS TO SAY TO FIGHT THE CANCEL CULTURE

1

**“What do you mean and how do you know that?”**

One of the first lessons aspiring debaters learn is to define their terms. It may seem patronizing to take this simple step, but try phrasing it like this: “Before we go any further, I just want to be sure we’re both talking about the same thing. When you use the term (fill in the blank—racism, sexism, homophobia), what do you mean by that? What is that definition based on?” Defining terms shows that you are serious about having a discussion rather than just emoting.

2

**“Tell me more about that.”** Encourage feedback.

Show your value of others by caring about their opinions. “What do you hope to accomplish through this strategy?” “Why is that important to you?” If cancel culture tries to shut down the debate, we should be willing to open it up.

*“Certainty is elusive, but it is at least possible to reduce uncertainty.”*

3

**“How did you arrive at that conclusion?”** The goal

of communication is not to arrive at agreement, but at clarity. Certainty is elusive, but it is at least possible to reduce uncertainty. Do this by expressing interest in the other person’s beliefs and insisting that you have a fair opportunity to share your own. Find out what the story is. Say things like, “How did you get there?” and “Where do we factually agree and where do we factually disagree?”

4

**“Here is another viewpoint. Why don’t you take it to your friends and get their feedback?”** Years

of studies in persuasion have shown that asking others for feedback is more likely to turn the person’s thinking in your direction than even them believing that you are right.

5

**“Thinking this through with you makes both of us stronger.”** Resistance is not necessarily bad. What

people fear is not change as much as it is a loss of control. Emphasize that we become more powerful through engaging with each other’s ideas, rather than through avoiding conflict.

## 6

**“Could we go to coffee and talk about it?”** As attorney and professor Jeffery Ventrella says, “Always be willing to buy the first cup of coffee.”<sup>25</sup> It’s a lot harder to dedicate yourself to someone’s destruction if you know them personally and have been able to honestly dialogue together.

*“People who are subject to overwhelming pressure and made to feel ashamed do not really change; they just go quiet.”*

## 7

**“What is more important to you, to be right or to bring about change?”** There is an old saying: “A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.” People who are subject to overwhelming pressure and made to feel ashamed do not really change; they just go quiet. Research shows that people are most likely to be convinced if they believe they are persuading themselves rather than feeling as if they are being compelled to admit they’re wrong.<sup>26</sup>

Anything short of self-persuasion is called *peripheral persuasion*. It is shallow and easily won, but rarely secured.<sup>27</sup> It is the kind of persuasion described in Proverbs 18:17, where the first to make his case seems right until another comes forward to challenge him.

## 8

**“Would you want the strategies you are using to be used against you?”** As pastor and author Mike Sherrard says, “for a society to be truly free, bad ideas must be controlled by good ideas, not muzzles.”<sup>28</sup> Is it right to demand freedom to express your viewpoint while denying that freedom to others? Dr. Paul Copan, a philosophy professor at Palm Beach Atlantic University, reminded me that the cancel culture is cannibalistic—eventually, everyone is found to be “impure.”<sup>29</sup> Never forget that in the French Revolution, Maximilien Robespierre lost his own head through the guillotine culture he created.

## 9

**“I am concerned about what is happening in our country, but we are not helpless.”** Fear of helplessness makes people passive-aggressive. On the one hand, they shut down in a phenomenon psychologists call “psychic numbing.” On the other hand, they lash out in the belief that their status as a “victim” justifies being mean-spirited. Talk directly about the false powerlessness that is behind the cancel culture. Often, it helps people to approach issues more directly and in a more helpful way.

## 10

**“I know we probably could not disagree more, but I have confidence that if we think it through and seek the truth, things will come out better.”** Seek truth and pursue it and encourage others to do so as well.

# IF YOU REMEMBER NOTHING ELSE, REMEMBER THIS

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*“We advocate for the truth ...”*

**M**ost people see public discourse as a conflict. It is you versus me, winner takes all. So, we tend to swing between two poles: being *avoiders* (saying things like “Who am I to judge?”) or being *aggressors* (turning every discussion into a “mic-drop moment” of humiliation for our opponent). In his forthcoming book *Challenging Conversations*, Summit instructor Jason Jimenez says there is a third option: *advocate*. We advocate for the truth and we also advocate for the other person. Picture conflict not as butting heads against one another, but as two people walking side by side to find the truth.

**Most of all, remember this:** Being a Christian means being an ambassador for Christ. It is not about us. We represent him. Is Christ being honored and glorified? We must always heed the advice the Apostle Paul gave his protégé, Timothy, keep your head, endure hardship, and be an evangelist of the good news (2 Timothy 4:5).

## AND FINALLY

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**T**oday's discourse is not rude because people have forgotten their manners. It is rude because those leading the discourse have intentionally chosen to communicate in a destructive way.

This mean-spirited approach to dialogue has a clear historical source: V.I. Lenin, the founder of the Soviet Union and one of history's most infamous mass murderers.

To Lenin, rational, calm debate was nothing more than a wicked stalling tactic to keep the powerful in control. Biographer Victor Sebestyen notes that Lenin carefully crafted a harsh and abusive way of making his arguments, and as a result "almost single-handedly... changed the language on the revolutionary Left."<sup>30</sup> His opponents weren't just wrong. They were "scoundrels," "philistines," "cretins," "filthy scum," "whores," "class traitors," "windbacks," "sh\*ts" or "cu\*ts."<sup>31</sup>

One of Lenin's close associates Moishe Olgin remarked, "He does not reply to an opponent. He vivisects him.... He ridicules his opponent. He castigates him. He makes you feel that his victim is an ignoramus, a fool, a presumptuous nonentity."<sup>32</sup>

Even after the fall of the Soviet Union, Sebestyen says, Communists everywhere "learned that it made sense to play the man, not the ball—and how to do it with ruthless efficiency." It became "settled Bolshevik practice," Sebestyen quotes one of Lenin's critics as saying.<sup>33</sup>

So, when people make their points through personal insults rather than rational arguments, they're just following the example of a founding father. The founding father of the Soviet Union, that is.

Be American. Make real arguments.



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19. Megan Almon, speaker, Life Training Institute. Personal conversation by email, used by permission, September 1, 2020.
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21. Jack Hibbs, Senior Pastor, Calvary Chapel Chino Hills, California. Personal conversation by email, September 1, 2020.
22. In Greek mythology, the goddess Bia is the companion of the brutal Kratos as he punishes Prometheus for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humanity. Prometheus was sentenced by Zeus to be bound to a rock and have his liver eaten by an eagle, only to have it grow back overnight to be eaten again the next day. Bia, sinister and silent, did the binding. To the Greeks, democracy enabled humanity to rise above the animalistic power of force Kratos and Bia represented. In his Funeral Oration, the famous Greek speech writer Lysias (445-380 BC) said, “Our ancestors were the first...to establish a democracy....For they deemed that it was the way of wild beasts to be held subject to one another by force [bia], but the duty of men to delimit justice by law [and] to convince through persuasion [peisai]”; cited in Megan Foley, “Peitho and Bia: The Force of Language.” *Symploke* 20:1 (2012): 173–81. See also <https://www.ancientjewreview.com/articles/2016/3/8/what-violence-does-representing-bia-in-antiquity>
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