

Icebreaker: Personality Roots

Where was your personality shaped the most?

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Have your small group answer the following question and share the reason for their answers: Outside your family, where was your personality primarily shaped?

—Junior high school

—High school

—Church

—Club or Organization

—College

—First Job

Article: Loving Those You Disagree With

A helpful reminder from the practices of John Wesley and the early Methodists

Augustine is given credit for the quote: "In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity." If in fact it came from Augustine, it was his way of dealing with the difficult matter of disagreement in the church. It is a helpful principle that offers us a way to think about how we can stay unified even when we disagree. John Wesley liked this aphorism and modified it slightly in his preaching to the early Methodists.

Essentials and Nonessentials

The early Methodist societies consisted of people from different classes and backgrounds. Wesley quickly saw the problem of division on the basis of class, and he solved it (somewhat) by asking those who were wealthy not to dress in clothing that would set them apart from those who were poor.

In the matter of division on the basis of doctrine, Wesley found a solution, as explained in his famous sermon "The Catholic Spirit." (The word *catholic* here does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church, but rather means "universal.") Wesley believed that the only way for the church to be unified was to learn how to distinguish between essentials and nonessentials, discover how to accept our differences in the nonessentials, and then decide not to let the differences overshadow our common faith. He believed love and commitment to Jesus were essential. Everything else was simply nonessential. He did not mean unimportant; he meant that those things should not divide us.

Wesley allowed differences of opinion but, like Paul, he appealed to the Methodists not to let their differences keep them from loving each other. In "The Catholic Spirit" Wesley states it very clearly: "Although differences of opinion or modes of worship may prevent an external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt we may."

Later in the sermon, Wesley gets more specific: I ask not therefore of him with whom I would unite in love, "Are you of my congregation?" ...I inquire not, "Do you receive the Lord's Supper in the same manner that I do?" ...Nay, I ask not of you whether you allow baptism and the Lord's Supper at all. Let all these things stand by: we will talk of them, if need be, at a more convenient season. My only question at present is this: "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?"

We can, and will, differ in how we think, which style of worship we prefer, which method of baptism we affirm—but these are not essential. The thing that matters is that our hearts beat in love for Jesus. If we have that, we are united. Then we can say once again, *Jesus is Lord!* If your heart beats in love for Jesus, then take my hand and we will walk together in fellowship.

How to Practice Love

John Wesley not only gave us a helpful way to stay unified. In that same sermon he also offered five ways we can show love to those with whom we differ or disagree in the non-essentials:

1. Treat them as companions.
2. Do not think or speak evil of them.
3. Pray for them.
4. Encourage them to do good.
5. Collaborate with them in ministry

These excellent suggestions will go a long way toward helping us not only to get along, but also to love fellow Christians we have differences with. This week, think about a friend or fellow Christian whose opinions and practices are different than yours. See if you can implement some or all of Wesley's ideas. What might this look like?

- **Treat them as companions.** Ask the person to lunch.
- **Do not speak or think evil of them.** Be sure to refrain from pointing out your differences, either to the person or to others. Focus on what you have in common.
- **Pray for them.** Make that person the special object of your prayers this week.
- **Encourage them to do good.** During lunch or whenever you connect, be sure to encourage the person in the good work he or she is already doing. Ask questions and find out what the person is doing in ministry, and be affirming.
- **Collaborate with them.** If at all possible, see if you can work alongside the person, either in something he or she is doing or in some ministry in which you are engaged. Working alongside someone creates a bond of unity that overcomes differences.

Other Exercises

In addition, find time this week to pray not only for those who differ, but for the body of Christ and its leaders. The following are two ways we can do this:

1. **Pray for the unity of the church.** As you pray for the unity of the church you will find yourself shifting the focus from how we differ in ideas or practices, and onto the One who holds us all together.
2. **Pray for pastors and leaders.** If the church is to unite in new ways, it will likely come from the leaders. Pray for pastors and other church leaders to catch the same vision that captured the mind of Richard Foster. If you want, use Richard's vision as a guide for your prayers.

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