

Living With Differences

Recommended for Common Lesson Three Year D

People are different in fundamental ways. They want different things, they have different motives, purposes, aims, values, needs, drives, impulses, urges. Nothing is more fundamental than that. They believe differently: they think, recognize, conceptualize, perceive, understand, comprehend, and cogitate differently. And of course, manners of acting and emoting, governed as they are by wants and beliefs, follow suit and differ radically among people.

(Keirsey & Bates, p. 2)

How many times have I been perplexed, even angered, by the shortcomings of others? It seems that my boss is too emotional, my mother is too rigid, my friend lacks ambition, my neighbors do not spend enough time with their children, and don't even get me started on the political issues of our country! What is wrong with everybody? Why do I bear the burden of knowing how we should be?

It is sad to say that, despite the facetious tone, such judgments haunt me daily. I encounter profound differences within my family, my church, my circle of friends, my professional peers, and even within seminar groups. Either I am misunderstood, or I cannot for the life of me understand why another person would think or behave as he or she does.

Consider if this phenomenon is true for you, especially in relation to the members of your seminar group. Are there times in your group when the opinions or behavior of another person bewilder you? Is the source of your bewilderment the fact that their opinions or behavior are so very different from your own?

Also bewildering is *how* people think. It is not enough that we have differing opinions; we also have different approaches to arriving at our opinions. Some of us like to ponder what could be, while others want to know about what is. Some of us depend upon our rationale and logic to show us the truth, and others employ their imagination and inspiration to lead the way to the truth.

The same discrepancies occur over priorities and expectations. For example, within most working groups, some members place more emphasis on closeness, relationship, and personal support, while others devote most of their energies to the task and the outcome of the work. Some members wish to develop and change the purpose of the group, while other members wish to preserve what is already in place. The differences go on and on.

The purpose of this common lesson is to provide some insight into the meaning of a life in Christ. One description of a life in Christ is belonging

to a community which attempts to reflect the principles given to us through Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Your seminar group provides a particular opportunity for a life in Christ, as do your family, your church, and any other community that seeks to function in the name of Christ.

You see the glass as half full, and I see it as half empty. The truth is that we are different. Your seminar group is an ongoing example of this truth, and that's why a perspective question during a theological reflection gets so many answers or why there are so many interpretations of the same biblical passage. It is likely that by now in the life of your seminar group the differences between each member have surfaced, perhaps even causing some conflict or discomfort.

Perhaps this is so because we mistakenly equate a life in Christ with unanimity or homogeneity. We think that to be members of the same community we must function in the same fashion, and that to love and care for one another we must not disagree. We therefore feel uncomfortable in encounters involving disagreement.

Because we each stand in a particular pair of shoes, with a particular past, a particular situation, and a unique personality, we are fundamentally and unavoidably different from one another. This is an interesting twist given our desire for homogeneity and agreement. How can I be the person I am and simultaneously agree with and be like those around me?

An example of this tension to be ourselves, but also to be acceptable members of the group, was put this way by an EFM colleague: "We are individually very different, and within our jobs we have different responsibilities, different priorities, and different relationships to the program. We also seek to work together. From my observation, without the sum total of the different contributions, our mission would not be accomplished. I also am learning that it is important for me to contribute what I can bring to the sum total: my priorities, my perspectives, and my opinions. The tension in carrying out our individual functions is not detrimental to our work; it is rather the glue which holds this program together."

Exercise One

Go back to your spiritual autobiography and turn to the current fifteen-year segment of your life. Reread what you have written about this time, paying close attention to the things and people who have been your top priorities during this time. What activities have you pursued to carry out these priorities? Now try to recall what the members of your seminar group said about their own current fifteen-year segments. What are the life situations of each member, as you can recall? What are some significant pieces of their experiences? What are the similarities to and differences from your own autobiography? Make notes for discussion with your seminar group.

We are created as unique individuals in God’s image. That is a baffling piece of theology until we consider the many faces and characteristics of God. We encounter God as creator, guardian, nurturer, judge, companion, sovereign, the one who angers, the one who shepherds us, the very three in one. Separately these functions do not describe sufficiently the nature of God, but together they point to the full and perfect manifestation of God in human life.

St. Paul’s metaphorical explanation of our created differences is that: “For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:4-5).

A life in Christ therefore is the sum total of the different members. It is a life that not only allows, but expects us to be the individuals that we are. Within the body of Christ, the church, our living community, are many functions. Each of us participates according to our abilities. The reality of many functions cannot mean homogeneity—everyone doing the same thing—but is rather a symphony of activity. The adage “It takes all kinds . . .” has a new ring of truth to it.

The body of your seminar group includes many functions. Each member who chooses to participate, to bring his or her own special qualities to the group, is contributing what no other member can contribute. These contributions are different, at times even contradictory to one another, but through a life in Christ we can utilize these contradictions to benefit the mission of the group.

Exercise Two

Imagine yourself outside a “typical” seminar meeting and observe the activity (i.e., like a fly on the wall). Make notes about who seems to take responsibility for what. Is there one member who keeps an eye on the time? One who wants to hear from everyone? One who speaks little, but seems to clarify the discussion with a single statement? One who challenges positions and pushes for deeper meaning? One who sees to it that everyone is comfortable? One who calls the group back to the subject at hand?

As you observe your group in action, be sure that you watch your own behavior as well. After you have considered the functions of the different group members, ask yourself these two questions:

What function do I serve in this group?

What are the functions of the other group members?

Record your answers in the “Reflections” section of your journal. Decide what you would like to say to each member of your seminar group about his or her function, as you see it and how it is different from your own.

When we realize that we are created as unique and different from one another, that we walk through life in different shoes and under very different circumstances, that our unfolding relationship with God does not occur simultaneously with others, then we are free to function and belong in our differences.

Knowing this is what God intends for us, then we as God’s people are called upon to stretch our understanding of these differences. It is within the seminar group that the stretching can take place. We are not looking to change our differences, but to learn how to appreciate that which is different from our own selves, and ultimately how these differences work to serve a life in Christ.

Spend at least the next seminar session on this common lesson, taking time to share your insights and learnings about how you encounter human differences. Allow an appropriate amount of time to discuss the different functions of the members of your group. It is an opportunity to honor your life together in Christ.

As your group finishes its work with Common Lesson Three, end your meeting by reading together Ephesians 4, verses 11-16. Open your heart and mind to the possibilities of “speaking the truth in love” as you grow and work together in your common life in Christ.