

Response to “Radical Peacemaking: Living with our Diversity”

By Brent Warkentin

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Thank you, Tim, for what was clearly a well-thought-out and defended presentation. Your two main points will help us live with diversity. That is: 1) if we always filter our position/behavior through the Lordship of Jesus and 2) continue talking with each other, recognizing that the two “sides” we’re on aren’t as far apart as we might have thought.

There is a quote that has been attributed to any number of people, including St. Augustine, that goes something like this: “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”

We could ask: What makes something an “essential?” What does unity look like? By whose definition is something a nonessential? Does giving liberty mean giving someone freedom to have a different position or giving them the freedom to be wrong?

Whatever was originally meant, I’d summarize it this way: On the most important things, we must be together, on the same page. (“A house divided against itself cannot stand.”) On the less important things we should give room for differences of opinion. But always, we should show love to each other.

You see, it’s not only what we believe, but what level of importance we attach to what we believe. And as soon as we elevate something to the level of “essential,” there is less room for diversity.

In Galatians 1:6-8, Paul writes, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse!”

Because Paul said this was an essential, he wasn’t open to very much compromise, diversity (something about being eternally condemned if you disagree!). There was only one option.

But in Romans 14:5-6, he says, “One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to

God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God." Here, Paul is very open to diversity. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind, but accepting of the other's position.

Why? Because it's a less important issue.

Let's look at this way. I would suggest that there are basically four levels of conviction on theological issues. Level one would be things that you believe are very important and clearly taught in Scripture, things like salvation by grace. Very important and clearly taught. If someone believed differently, you would say to them, "You're wrong!" At level one there's very little room for diversity.

Level two would be things that you might say are very important but not clearly taught in Scripture. Perhaps gambling might fall into this level. You might say that the sin of gambling is really important to you but admit that it might not be clearly or directly taught in Scripture. You would say to someone with a different position on gambling: "I believe you're wrong, even though I can't prove it from Scripture." And because it's important to you, there's less room for diversity. But because it is not clearly taught you open yourself to accepting a bit of diversity.

Level three are things that you or I would say are less important (nonessentials) but clearly taught. An example of this from our Confession of Faith might be, don't swear in a court of law but affirm the truth. You might say that this is less important than believing that Jesus is the only way to heaven. But you believe it's clearly taught. So you would say to someone who had a different position, "I think you're wrong, but because it's not an essential, it's not worth the fight."

Level four are things that you or I might say are less important and not clearly taught in Scripture. You might move the swearing of oaths to this level. It's not very important and not clearly taught. Here, I'll look at someone with a different position and ask, "Hey, you want to go bowling?!"

As you move from level one to two to three to four, it becomes easier to live with diversity. You argue less. As you move up, it becomes harder to live with diversity; there's less wiggle room.

So that leads to a couple of questions: 1) Is "nonresistance" level one, two, three or four? And 2) who decides that? How do we decide that?

If nonresistance falls into level one, then there isn't a lot of room for diversity. In fact, we can't allow for diversity because we believe it is both very important and clearly taught. But if it falls into levels three or four, we can't treat it like it is level one.

When is something closer to Galatians 1, and when is something closer to Romans 14, and who decides that? If this issue is level one, Galatians 1, let's treat it like that. But if it's level two or certainly level three or four—John 14—then let's treat it like that. But we can't treat level one like level four or vice versa. My prayer, as is yours, is that God would give wisdom and grace and discernment and charity in all things.

Brent Warkentin is lead pastor at First MB Church, Wichita, Kan.