

CHAPTER 4, SESSION 28: THE CHRIST-CENTERED COMMUNITY

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

This chapter could be the most challenging for your group. It has the potential to stir tension on many different levels. The first level of uneasiness could arise from the idea that there is something more important than the specific way our denomination expresses its faith, and that is Christ. While this idea is difficult to disagree with, the truth is that many Christians want to believe their denomination is better than other denominations, not just different. Therefore, some individuals in your group may be very uncomfortable embracing different practices as being legitimate.

A second level of discomfort could arise for those who are the opposite of those in the first group. There are many people who don't see why there is a big deal made about the differences between groups of Christians. These folks would embrace a vision of a happy family, but they may do so at the risk of surrendering the true identity of the denomination they are part of. As the leader, you can challenge these folks to embrace the unique qualities of their own congregation, and yet be respectful and open to the unique characteristics of other faith communities.

A final level of challenge for this chapter comes in knowing what is essential for Christians to agree upon and what is nonessential. You may wish to have copies of the various Creeds available so your group can review them and decide if those statements sufficiently cover the essential beliefs of a Christian. Even within your group there could be particular issues that individuals feel very strongly about and refuse to compromise on. As always, there is no easy way to work through these conversations, however, as the leader you have the responsibility to remind everyone in the group to be respectful of the different viewpoints represented within the group. And while such conversations may feel stressful, remind the group that too often various groups of Christians isolate themselves and never learn the benefit of such dialogue.

SUPPLIES

No special supplies are needed other than copies of the Creeds if you decide to review them.

OPENING TO GOD [5 minutes]

Have the person who volunteered last week offer their reading as a lead-in to 5 minutes of silence.

These 5 minutes of silence allow the members of the group to become fully present to the moment. At the conclusion of the silence someone in the group may offer a brief prayer, ring a meditation chime, or simply say "Amen."

TREASURING YOUR TREASURES FOLLOW-UP

At the conclusion of the previous session the group was invited to explore ways your congregation or group could treasure a hidden treasure in your community. If you developed a plan for doing so, utilize the following questions to process that experience:

1. Was the experience of reaching out what you expected it to be like? How was it different than you expected?
2. What internal reactions did you have as you attempted to treasure this group or these individuals?
3. What might God be teaching your congregation or group through this experience?

SOUL-TRAINING [10-20 minutes]

This chapter's soul-training exercise invited us to love those we disagree with. If you are a group of six or more people, divide into groups of three or four to work through the following questions.

1. What tangible steps were you able to take to express love toward those you disagree with?
2. How did the interaction change your perspective?
3. When interacting with those who are different than you, which of John Wesley's five practices seems most difficult? Why do you think this is so?
4. What did this soul-training exercise teach you about God?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [30-40 minutes]

If you divided into sub-groups for your discussion of the soul-training exercise, you may regroup for your discussion of the chapter. If time is limited, read through the following questions and note which ones you especially want to discuss, and then begin with those questions.

1. The author opens this chapter with a story of being rejected by an audience because of his theological terminology. Discuss a time you have experienced rejection by other Christians because of your beliefs. How did that rejection make you feel?
2. The true narrative of this chapter is: "If you do not look, act, worship or believe as I do, but your heart beats in love for Jesus, then regardless of our differences, we can and must have fellowship with one another" (p. 89). What relationships in your life have illustrated this true narrative?
3. On page 93 the author recounts an experience of serving communion and realizing that many different types of hands were becoming one in the body of Christ. What did you take from this story?
4. Drawing from the wisdom of John Wesley, the author writes, "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 only thing that matters is that our hearts beat in love for Jesus. If we have that, we are united" (p. 96). What practical effect do you think this approach would have on the Church today?
5. Discuss any positive experiences you have had worshipping with people of a different background than your own. How does this affect your openness to future opportunities for such worship?
6. Have a volunteer read aloud the vision written by Richard Foster on page 101-2, then discuss the following questions.
 - ☞ What does this passage say about God's vision for the church?
 - ☞ What does this passage stir within you? How would you like to respond?

ENGAGING THE WORD [10-20 minutes]

Read the following to the group to help prepare them for the Scripture encounter during this session:

In describing the stunning nature of the unified body of Christ in the early church the author writes:

What might this have felt like to the members of the church in Colossae? Imagine you are Jewish, taught from birth that you are chosen by God and that the Gentiles are defiled, and then having to join hands with a Greek for prayer. Or imagine you are a slaveholder, a member of the elite class, reaching out to receive a piece of communion bread from a slave. Imagine you are a first-century man raised with the notion that women are inferior, and then looking across the room at a woman who, by her graciousness, has paid for the home you are meeting in. The cross-centered community discovered a kind of equality unknown in the first century (p. 92).

To help us relate the power of the experiences of the early Christians with our own lives, we will be using a Scripture reading practice that is very similar to lectio divina, but it is called Breaking Open the Word. This practice has been developed by the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and is modeled after small Christian communities in Central America.

The Scripture will be read three times. Before each reading a question will be shared for us to consider as we listen to the Scripture. After a few minutes of silence our insights to the questions will be discussed. Unlike lectio divina, this practice invites a higher level of

conversation between readings, so feel free to add your own insights to the sharing of others or to ask others to say more based on what they share.

Here are the three questions:

☞ Question 1: *What word or phrase particularly speaks to you?*

☞ Question 2: *What in today's world does this passage of Scripture address?*

☞ Question 3: *To what does this passage call me? To what does it call the groups to which I belong?*

I will read the correlating question before each Scripture reading. After the discussion of the third question, there will be a brief time of silence.

The Scripture we will be using today is Colossians 3:11 from the New Revised Standard Version. Are there any questions?

Once all questions have been answered, invite the group into a few minutes of silence. Then read the following:

For the first reading the question is: What word or phrase particularly speaks to you? Here is our passage:

There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Give the group a few minutes of silence to consider and reflect on the word or phrase that spoke to them. Then say:

Now that you've had a few minutes to chew on this passage, what word or phrase spoke to you? Feel free to contribute even if your word or phrase has been spoken.

Once everyone has had a chance to say their word or phrase, invite the group back into a time of silence. After a moment of silence read the following:

For the second time through the passage the question is: What in today's world does this passage of Scripture address? Here is our passage:

There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Give the group 3 to 5 minutes of silence to consider their answer to the question, then invite everyone to share. Again, encourage the group to add their thoughts and insights to the ideas of others, and let people know that their questions can be just as valuable as their answers even though there may not be immediate answers.

Once everyone has had an opportunity to contribute their thoughts, invite the group back into a time of silence. After a moment of silence read the following:

For our final reading the question for reflection is: To what does this passage call me? To what does it call the groups to which I belong? Here is our passage:

There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Again, give the group 3 to 5 minutes of silence to consider their own answers to these questions, then invite everyone to discuss their thoughts. Once everyone has had a chance to contribute, invite the group back into a moment of silence and end that time with either a prayer for courage to be responsive to God's invitation or simply say "Amen."

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [20 minutes]

The time of "Experiencing Transformation" may or may not serve as a continuation of the practice of Breaking Open the Word. Either way, it is an invitation to participate in worship and conversation with a group that is different than your own. Begin by reading the following:

It is tempting to discuss the ideas of this chapter and then never take any practical steps to live out our unity in Christ. If you are willing, as a group, we are going to spend a few minutes developing a plan to interact with a group of Christians who are different than we are. First, let's hear some of the experiences you have had in worshipping with different communities. What have been some of the different styles of worship you have participated in?

Has there ever been a time when you attended a church and you were the racial minority? Describe that experience.

Is there a congregation in your area that is racially or culturally different than your own group that no one in the group has

worshipped with?

Is everyone willing to attend worship with this congregation and perhaps learn a little about their history, their beliefs, their practices and how you are united in Christ?

As the leader you can either recruit someone to work out the details for this trip or work them out yourself. Set a date when the entire group will attend worship at the identified church. It would be beneficial to coordinate with the leadership of the congregation you visit and to spend time talking with a few members of the congregation before and after worship to learn more of their history and understanding of God. Be clear with these leaders about your desire to see the unity of the church revealed without removing differences.

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Have a volunteer read aloud the following quote from the book to conclude your time together:

How can we agree with people who refuse to agree with us? How can we be “united in mind and thought” when clearly we do not agree on every point? Should we simply let go of our ideas, opinions or doctrines? We will never agree on all things, but we can and must agree on one thing: Jesus is Lord (p. 94).

Amen!

FOR THE COMING WEEK

The next chapter explores reconciliation and forgiveness within the Christian community. The soul-training exercise gives three options for practicing forgiveness. As a group look at the “Three Exercises” listed on pages 122-24. Say:

Is there anyone who would like to practice option 1, “Allowing others to forgive for you”? If so, is there a volunteer in the group who would be willing to take on the burden of unforgiveness and begin holding the situation in prayer? When the group comes together next week you will be able to share your experiences with this practice. The other options can be practiced individually.

Finally, recruit a volunteer who will bring a Scripture, prayer, poem or song for the next class as a lead-in to the opening silence.