

PEACEBUILDING WHEN WE'RE SO DIVIDED

This study guide is designed to provide questions that incite discussion, invite reflection, and inspire action. It was written to accompany The Moderator's Town Hall conversation with Dr. William H. Willimon, Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry at Duke Divinity School.

Timestamps linked to the Town Hall recording are included in this guide, should a discussion leader choose a "pause and talk" approach rather than asking participants to watch the Town Hall in its entirety prior to meeting. This guide can also be utilized across multiple meetings, given that some questions might spark heartier conversation than one meeting will allow.

The video of this Town Hall can be accessed by using the following link: <https://vimeo.com/537287374>

@7:00 Read 1 Corinthians 1

In **the first 9 verses**, what radiates with **encouragement** for you?

If you were writing **verse 12** in the style of Paul, how might you label/name the factions in the church today? What topics or questions cause quarrels amongst brothers and sisters in the Church of the Brethren – or the denomination that you belong to? Make a list.

How might **verse 13** empower peacebuilding today and how might it frustrate peacebuilders?

As you read **verses 18-25**, which of the quarrels on your list align with one of the following labels: "wisdom of the world", "wisdom of God", "stumbling block", "foolishness", "humans' weakness", "God's strength"?

Consider **verse 26**. Would you say this is true of the majority of people in your congregation? Why or why not?

In closing out the introduction to this letter (**verses 27-31**), Paul aims to squash the possible presence of arrogance and pride, unless such boasting is "in the Lord".

- How have you seen arrogance and pride feed quarrels in your life, whether in the church or not?
- How might arrogance and pride disrupt peacebuilding?
- What steps could the church take to follow Paul's example, squashing the presence of arrogance and pride?



@7:55 Dr. Willimon wonders aloud if unity and division are both vital for the cause of Christ by saying: (**@8:35**) *“Jesus Christ draws to Him diverse kinds of people and He makes us – those of us who had nothing in common with another except Christ – He brings us together in unity. And at the same time, Jesus Christ and His mission produces difference. Differences of opinion about how best we ought to be faithful.”* **@9:52** *“Because of Jesus Christ there's the possibility of peaceful union and because of Jesus Christ there is inevitably a division and a difference of how we serve Jesus Christ.”*

- **As diverse members of the body of Christ, we often serve the Lord differently. Where do you view difference as a benefit and not a detriment or deficiency?**
- **How might differences strengthen or enhance unity?**

@10:50 Read John 17:13-25

In **verse 13**, how is peacebuilding a part of Jesus' hope that all of His followers have *“the full measure of (His) joy within them”*?

Considering **verse 14**, what peacebuilding skills are especially important as we 'live and move' in a world that tends to be hostile to those who follow Jesus?

As you read **verses 15-19**, what are some examples of how sanctification by the Holy Spirit protects us from “the evil one”? (*Galatians 5:22-23 might be a helpful cross reference to consider*)

Consider **verses 20-23**.

- How do you explain to someone what it means that Jesus and His Father are one?
- As you think of that explanation, what does it mean, then, for all believers to “be one”, just like Jesus is with God, the Father?

Consider the finish of Jesus' prayer; what must the world experience from us for them to know Jesus and His love?

@11:40 Dr. Willimon closes this piece of reflection by saying, *“Maybe we can take some heart that there has been division in the Church from day one. And there have been struggles for*

how to form the body of Christ from day one. And, yet, we're also under a mandate from Christ: 'be reconciled, come together'."

**Do you find Dr. Willimon's words 'on target' with scripture – or – 'at odds' with scripture?
Why? (Cite scripture to bolster your opinion.)**

@13:24 "Unity can be ugly. It depends on how it's achieved and for what purposes." Dr. Willimon then shares a historical perspective and says, "Sometimes unity is achieved by saying, 'We're going to oppress dissident voices. We're only going to listen to one group.' ...Unity can be a way of exercising power to suppress certain things."

As you think through American history and world history, when have non-peaceful methods been used to "create peace" and/or give the impression of unity / one voice?

**Think about your community. Who's voices are not appreciated? Who's not being heard? Who's not represented in places where decisions are being made?
(places of power)**

Where in scripture do we see Jesus give voice to the voiceless or see Jesus empowering someone who was powerless?

How can these examples in scripture serve as blueprints for authentic peacebuilding in our own community and world?

@15:20 "But maybe unity in Christ is always an aspiration for God's people. (Perhaps we should just freely say,) 'look, we've all got our differences, we'll always have our differences, but, hey, that's how we are. It's called the human race.'"

Where do you agree or disagree with Dr. Willimon's musing?

Are Christ followers not free to give up on being one?

Is unity only an aspiration, and not truly achievable in Christ?

Name a scenario(s) within the body of Christ where you believe unity is indeed possible?

Where today, in the body of Christ, is upholding unity naïve and unrealistic?



@16:40 *"It's the nature of the modern world to applaud unity... and, yet, maybe we're learning, sometimes a lot is lost when unity is your only value."* Dr. Willimon then makes the case that it's not just unity that's important, it's "unity in Christ". *(emphasis added)*

What's lost if we don't prioritize unity in Christ as the primary value through which decisions are made?

What other values should be prioritized in decision-making when leading a body of believers in Christ?

Read John 10:14-16

- What **reactions** can you imagine the disciples exhibiting in light of these words from Jesus?
- How do those same reactions continue to appear, today, as leaders aim to unify divided factions in the body of Christ?
- Dr. Willimon says, *"It's Jesus that makes unity complex and challenging."*

If this is true, and Jesus does all things on purpose (intentionally), what do you believe can be learned when endeavors towards unity are fraught with tension?

@20:00 In mentioning Jesus' words in Matthew 10, Dr. Willimon says, *"In following Jesus we find that there is peace in Christ, but it's often different from what the world gives. The world maybe defines peace as the absence of war. ... Christians, because of Jesus, hope for more."*

Read Matthew 10:34-39

- If someone was discovering Jesus for the first time and all they knew of Him was this story – what might they surmise about Him?
- Jesus seems to suggest that true peace is not "keeping the peace" at any cost, but radical surrender to Him. Think of your relational world: where have you 'kept the peace' but denied Jesus and His ultimate way of peace, found in the family (Kingdom) of God?

@22:32 *"Peace is what God is up to. Jesus Christ is working for peace."* Dr. Willimon says when we want to "join Jesus in what He's up to", one thing we can do is pray. Praying for His Kingdom to come and for things to be on earth as they are in Heaven. Later (**@31:40**) he goes



on to say, "If you're really working for peace and praying for unity, the congregation can be your greatest resource."

Does your community see the Kingdom of God reflected in the life and witness of your congregation? What about your life and witness; is the Kingdom evident through your life and witness?

In addition to prayer, what are other ways we can join Christ in the work of peace?

Where do you, personally, find yourself contributing to the work of peacebuilding?

@34:25 *"Many of our churches are in conflict, not over Christian doctrine, not over differing aspects of Biblical interpretation... but we've got a political divide going on. ...And the divisions don't have so much to do with Scripture, but the world. And the way the world has captured our imaginations." Dr. Willimon then poses the question of whether or not God has positioned the church to talk about certain matters "in a way that the world doesn't know how to talk about (them), that God has uniquely suited the church to talk about."*

Do you agree that often church conflict is not over Christian belief or scripture but 'worldly' political ideology?

What topics do you believe are of little importance to Jesus – and yet – the church spends gobs of time talking about (and forming opinions around)?

What topics do you believe are *indeed* vitally important to Jesus?

How do continuing conversations about partisan differences *hinder* the work of peacebuilding?

How does "changing the conversation" *advance* the work of peacebuilding – and what should that conversation be?

@39:05 Dr. Willimon gives permission to churches – frees us – to have difficult conversations, and then come back to the Lord's table. *"Christians actually believe Jesus Christ enables us to tell the truth and to hear the truth. And we've got to demonstrate that in our congregations. It would be a wonderful witness to the world."*

In what ways is this approach to life together different than the worlds?



What is your level of ease in sharing in a Love Feast (or however your church celebrates communion) with someone who you know holds different convictions and/or opinions than you?

If you are uneasy around the communion table with those different from you – how does Jesus, as the host of the “banquet” (e.g., communion) inspire you and put you at ease?

@46:23 Dr. Willimon shares a story about how a unified congregation can be “*a monolithic failure of evangelism.*” A pastor, whose congregation was unified and in agreement about a particular sign being posted on the front of their church building, asked Dr. Willimon the question, “*But who are we excluding from the gospel by having that sign?*”

What aspect(s) of your church life could be altered to reach more people with the Gospel?

Would such change cause discord among your church family?

How might the principles of peacebuilding be employed to “bring your people along”, creating the changes needed to reach more people for the Gospel?

@54:30 In discussing scenarios where individuals have left certain congregations, Dr. Willimon says, “*There are times when a pastor can try too hard to keep everyone on board. ... All pastors, church leaders, have got to be prepared to say, ‘We’re trying to love you, we want you to love us, we want you to stay, however, I cannot keep you from leaving and it might be wrong for me to try and keep you from leaving.’*”

When is it best to “release” an individual or family who wants to leave your congregation, rather than “holding onto them” at any price?

Read Matthew 18:15-18

Does your church actively encourage following Jesus’ step-by-step plan when tensions arise between believers in your congregation?

Name each of the steps in this scripture process. Now, think of a conflict in your congregation. How does each step apply?

How do these biblical steps add to your toolbox for peacebuilding?



@1:00:30 *"How are we appropriately humble? Appropriately truthful about your own fallibility and at the same time not let it rob you of your witness?"* What some in the body of Christ see as non-negotiable, others leave open to interpretation. But, Dr. Willimon reminds us, *"Jesus makes being a Christian as difficult as God means it to be."* So that we are constantly in a state of having to say, *"Lord, I believe. I'm with You. Wherever You go, I will follow."* Mixed with, *"Forgive me, don't turn away from me in my failure to be the kind of disciple you deserve."* Later (**@1:08:40**), Dr. Willimon says, *"Sometimes, churches are kind of a conspiracy of niceness where there's a kind of compact that says, 'I promise to never tell you painful truths if you promise to never tell me painful truth, and we'll call that church.'"*

Have you experienced this to be true in your church?

What are some of the reasons, either in your personal life or in the life of the church, that difficult truths are not talked about?

How does the peace of Christ empower us to run the risk of discussing painful truth?

Think of peacebuilding and its many facets.

What is a small, but vital, step that you can take, today?

*"You've taken quite a role for yourself to be a church of peace in a world at war, a world that is constantly war-like." | **Dr. William H. Willimon**, appreciating the Church of the Brethren **@5:50***