

What Convictions are You Willing to Die For?

To a large extent, our thought processes are shaped when we are young. I grew up in a very religious Christian environment in India, but it wasn't always positive. My parents were convinced their view of God and God's path for our lives was right and they were also sure anyone who disagreed with them was wrong. I bought into their perspective. We saw people as good or bad and teaching as right or wrong—no gray areas, no complexity, no rigorous discussions, just rigid certainty.

Years after I came to America, I became the pastor of a similarly narrow, theologically rigid church. I felt right at home! Through a series of surprising events, I was asked to be the president of a Bible college. Suddenly, I led students who came from over 50 different Christian traditions, most of them unlike mine.

During this time, I read an article that opened new doors to a world of new thinking. It said we need to realize there are three levels of commitment: to essentials, to convictions, and to preferences. I realized I had put virtually everything under the category of essentials and I expected everyone to agree with me. News flash: they didn't.

As the president, I also taught classes. One day after I had been thinking about these levels of commitment, I walked into a class of about fifty students, representing, I assumed, at least 30 traditions. I asked them, "What are the core beliefs of the Christian faith?" As they voiced topics, I wrote them on the board. After only a few minutes, we had about 35 statements.

Then I turned and asked them, "If I put a gun to your head, which of these are you willing to die for?" The room became

very quiet. Soon, a few brave students identified the few truths that were absolutely essential to their faith.

Like them, I realized a lot of the things that had seemed so important before were no longer things I'd die for. Few things are absolutely *essential* and worth our ultimate devotion and sacrifice. Some are *convictions* that we believe but won't die for. Most are simply *preferences*, like music genres, clothing styles, or the proper length of a pastor's sermon. (Well, that may rise to a conviction!)

The identification of essentials, convictions, and preferences is helpful in every aspect of life: at home, in business, in neighborhoods, and with friendships. Many heated conflicts can be avoided (or at least the temperature turned down below the boiling point) by recognizing people have the right to their own preferences.

We also need to give them room for their convictions—and we can even love those who have different essentials, although we're sure ours will never change. This set of categories was very helpful for my students and it has been life-changing for me. I've learned to think differently.

This simple but profound insight about how to think, perceive, and label people and ideas can radically change how we relate to virtually everyone we know. We will be more open to others' ideas, less defensive about at least some of our own, and more willing to appreciate different perspectives. What kind of difference would this make on a staff team or an executive team in goal-setting and planning? In a marriage and our relationships with our children? It makes a world of difference—and it all happens when we learn a different way to think.

The processes and contents of our thoughts determine everything: optimism or pessimism, persistence or apathy, security or uncertainty, care or recklessness—and seeing

people as assets or viewing them as threats. Developmental psychologists tell us our perceptions are formed in the first years of life. Children are sponges, instinctively absorbing the emotions, values, and beliefs of those around them.

These concepts are seldom *taught* by the adults in their lives, but they are *caught* like we catch viruses in the air we breathe or the things we touch. Some of us, to be sure, have caught viruses of racism, pride, shame, and xenophobia. Virtually all of us have absorbed values that are important to our families, but upon closer inspection, aren't really important at all.

For instance, Brenda and I grew up on different continents, but our families seldom, if ever, served fish. To this day, Brenda never eats fish and I eat it only a couple of times a year. We have been married for almost 40 years and we've never cooked a piece of fish in our home. Neither of us read a scholarly article and decided to avoid fish. Our thoughts about it are the product of the (mostly unspoken) messages in our homes when we were children. Those messages still shape our decisions today. Our essentials, convictions, and preferences have been firmly implanted by those who shaped our early environments.

These early perceptions and thinking patterns are deeply ingrained in us, so it requires considerable wisdom and effort to change them. Most of us have never tried to step out of ourselves to analyze how we think; we just use the same old software that was downloaded many years before.

Almost universally, leaders ask the wrong question. They assume their thinking is good, right, and productive, so they jump to, "What am I going to *do* about this?" Instead, perhaps they should start a step earlier and ask, "How should I *think* about this?"

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