

# Theological Reflection

When faced with a conundrum that feels impossibly nuanced or shrouded in the gray mists of cultural, personal, or political conflict—or even spiritual mystery or uncertainty—theological reflection can help identify the true root of the struggle we’re facing and see opportunities to deepen love for others.

- Respond in curiosity. PROVERBS 20:5 says, *“The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out”* ESV. Pause for a moment before going to Scripture to ask God for wisdom and discernment to ask the right questions as you seek first to understand the situation and the people involved.
  - What else do I need to know?
  - What other surrounding circumstances are important?
  - What other points of view should I consider?
  - What might I be missing?

- Bring those questions and any answers you’ve obtained to the lens of Scripture. Maintain a posture of curiosity.
  - Have any characters in the Bible encountered a similar situation?
  - What wisdom passages might speak meaningfully to this?
  - What other passages come to mind?

- Identify a range of faithful options. This means looking not necessarily for “right” or “wrong” choices, but rather identifying several ways you can move forward that creatively engage the world and the gospel we’re called to advance as we choose to join God in His work.

- Submit these things to God in prayer. Ask Him to align anything in you that might be stuck, and to help you stand firm where conviction is required.

ADAPTED FROM TEACHING BY DR. DON PAYNE, DENVER SEMINARY.

# When Differences Pull Us Apart

DOUG NUENKE  
U.S. President Emeritus



I can’t help but notice that a spirit of argument and polarization seems to have taken over our world. Maybe it feels collectively harder to handle conflict because we’re tired out from the pandemic and wary of political drama, but differences of opinion have existed since the beginning of humankind. It’s important that we learn good ways to live together amidst our differences.

Has shaming and blaming replaced thoughtful dialogue? Has “blessed are the peacemakers” been replaced by “blessed are the mean-spirited objectors”? When we reach an impasse, we’ve got to come back to the truths that inform our response.

Throughout our years of ministry, Pam and I have wrestled—both as leaders and followers—with difficult decisions and differences in opinion. And there have been times we’ve had to live with the consequences of decisions we either didn’t appreciate or felt were unjust.

During my tenure as U.S. Director, I had ample opportunities to lead amidst differences of conviction. I didn’t always get it right. Whether we’re the ones initiating tension or the ones impacted by it, it’s always painful. It takes faith to walk the humble and gentle path of Christ, but the harder way is often the better way. I still remember a time we were planning to make a statement on a social issue, but we decided to first slow down and hear the different opinions. This thoughtful dialogue helped us find a better path.

Disagreement exists in every context of life. The key is learning how to live amidst the tension of disagreement—and ultimately to embody the spirit of Jesus. According to the author of Hebrews, we are called to *“Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord”* (Hebrews 12:14).

Recently, the Lord has given me new insights about how a Topical Memory System verse relates to this concept. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul writes, *“Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?”*

It’s important to note that this passage is *not* about the Holy Spirit indwelling individual believers. Rather, we see from context that it speaks of the Spirit indwelling His *people*—the “temple” and “God’s building” (1 Corinthians 3:9). Paul is speaking to a church embroiled in conflict over secondary matters, people who are choosing their own “clan” leaders. However, it’s the admonishment in the next verse that sends chills up my spine:

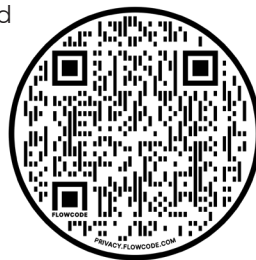
*“If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple.”*  
1 CORINTHIANS 3:17

While Paul was a courageous, apostolic leader, he was also

*continued on page 4*

# In the Gray with Grace

Dizzying polar opposites surround us, muddying our emotions and confusing our convictions politically, theologically, relationally, and culturally. Where do we “draw the line”? How can we possibly coexist with *them*? How on earth do we keep the main thing the main thing and avoid caving to distraction? How do we stand strong in faith while maintaining soft hearts? Seeking to honor and glorify Jesus humbly through our stories as we keep our eyes fixed on Kingdom values is what these *Upfront Online* articles all have in common. Go to [tdc.navigators.org/upfront](https://tdc.navigators.org/upfront) to visit *Upfront Online*, or scan the QR code to the right.



### Shadows and Substance

“The issue is not THE ISSUE,” cautions Larry Bauer. He shares how wrestling defensively with secondary issues he calls “shadows” has caused him to miss the substance, or the root cause, in moments of conflict.

### Upfront Issue: Posture and Position

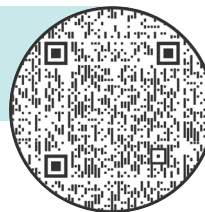
Check out this previous issue of *Upfront*, where we discussed the differences between what we say and do, and how we posture ourselves toward others.

# Overflow

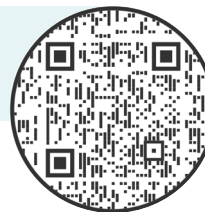
As we pursue health and sustainable rhythms for our souls, we can’t say enough about the power of pausing to just be. It battles insecurities and anxieties, and builds a sweet space to interact with Jesus. Here are some spaces where we’re providing a pause for you.

- **Powerful Practices on The Ripple Effect podcast:** Navigator spiritual directors and soul care practitioners facilitate practices (examen, lectio divina, just stopping) in a miniature retreat that fits right into your day. Scan the left bottom QR code to check it out.
- **Text OVERFLOW to (719) 652-1955** for occasional text-message reminders to pause and links to resources that might help you abide in Christ more deeply.
- We’d love to bring a **soul care retreat** to you! If you’re Navigator staff, you can find out more about hosting or attending by scanning the QR code on the bottom right or visit [tdc.navigators.org/events/soul-care-retreats](https://tdc.navigators.org/events/soul-care-retreats).

RIPPLE EFFECT PODCAST



SOUL CARE RETREATS



*Upfront* is the newsletter ministry of The Navigators Train – Develop – Care Team.  
©2024 The Navigators | P.O. Box 6000, Colorado Springs, CO 80934 | (719) 594-2555

Lyndi Markus, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF  
Cynthia Hagen, FOUNDING EDITOR  
Jill Brown, EDITOR  
Amanda Torres, GRAPHIC DESIGNER  
McKayla Siegel, UPFRONT ONLINE DESIGNER

All Scripture quotations from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise indicated.

Questions or comments? Contact us: [TDC@Navigators.org](mailto:TDC@Navigators.org) | [tdc.navigators.org](https://tdc.navigators.org)

# upfront

Real-Life Stories and Tools for Wholehearted Growth and Discipleship

# Embracing Gray Spaces

LYNDI LEE MARKUS  
Train – Develop – Care



“Did you know you have permission to be wrong?” my friend asked me gently. I was in the middle of a discernment process, and heaven seemed silent while anxiety tightened its viselike grip around my stomach, propelling me into a constant and gut-wrenching cycle of second-guessing.

I grew up cultivating a very black-and-white faith. This ideology a) guaranteed a happy future if only I followed the rules perfectly, and b) paralyzed me with fear. If doing things right assured my safety, I was certain that being wrong meant risking a hard life. As a result, I learned to move toward things that were certain, absolute. I thought that God must deal in absolutes, too, so surely ticking the boxes and being a perfect believer would get me where I needed to go! (Jesus did say to be perfect, after all [Matthew 5:48, eisegesis mine].)

By trying to be right and certain and faithful, however, I’ve been proven so wrong. For one thing, it turns out God is not a vending machine for desired futures. Rather, disappointing situations have taught me to open my hands and embrace the gray areas as a form of consolation that God wants to offer me. For instance, I’ve learned that:

- Being right is not the same as being obedient.
- Being wrong is not always the same as being unfaithful.
- Hard and uncertain situations can be worth walking into on purpose.
- God values the humble honesty of my journey toward Him more than my performance.
- My faithfulness isn’t contingent on having the only right approach to solving a certain problem.

*continued on page 2*



“ By trying to be right and certain and faithful, I’ve been proven so wrong. ”

The better I come to know God, the less He looks like what I expected. God is unchanging, and He is undeniably Godself (Hebrews 13:8, Isaiah 40:8, Numbers 23:19). He defies the human spectrum of understanding (Isaiah 55:8-9). We see how Jesus consistently turned the religious understandings of His day upside down as He revealed the creative, unexpected ways of the Kingdom. The Pharisees struggled, holding tight to black-and-white beliefs, because Jesus didn’t fit inside their neat parameters. If I allow my understanding of God to become static in the same way, I too run the risk of creating God in my own image and fitting Him into a box of my own liking. Our God, the absolute epitome of all that is perfect, love, life, and light, seems to show Himself to His people in shades of gray. As Mr. Beaver said of Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, “Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.”

Amid our current cultural melee, we must all hold fast to Scripture. But in humility, we might also benefit from examining our long-held convictions (and even scriptural interpretations) to determine whether God is still using them to transform our lives, or if they have become lifeless graven images that only substitute themselves for His living and active Spirit. Looking back, I realize that I formed my black-and-white lenses of right and wrong as a child who hadn’t yet experienced God’s grace or

the goodness of diversity in Kingdom life. Now, I must allow God to redefine my lenses so that I can continue to grow as an adult. None of us does this perfectly, and in faithfulness and discernment, we may even come to different conclusions.

As 1 Corinthians 13:9-10,12 says, *“For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears... For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.”* God is still at work.

When we desire God’s will and seek alignment with Scripture, we will find ourselves on a path of humble faithfulness and love that leads our community to unity—unity that’s not dependent on complete agreement—as we grow toward transformation in Christ. It doesn’t have to be perfect. We have permission to be wrong—to seek God in the gray both-ands as He works out His perfection in us.

*“My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered from time to time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence?”* —C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* ◀

## Don’t Question the Expert

**JO NEWELL**  
*Train – Develop – Care*



For as far back as I can recall, being right has been important to me. You might say it has formed a significant part of my identity. I can remember being 10 or 11 and showing a friend how to pop popcorn (in those long-ago days before air poppers and microwaves). While the kernels burst in the sizzling oil and pinged against the lid of the pot, I told her I was going to write a book called *Don’t Question the Expert*, in which I planned to share all the things I was an expert at. (I may have been young, but apparently my self-concept was fully intact!) In any case, I’ve always wanted to be right, and most of the time I’ve thought I was. By default, I assumed that anyone who saw things differently than I did had to be wrong.

But thankfully, God is committed to (and is a true expert at!) setting me free from the lies that prevent me from living like Him. A number of years ago, I was reading the Amplified Bible and 1 Corinthians 8:1 jumped right off the page at

me. It said, *“Now about food sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge [concerning this]. Knowledge [alone] makes [people self-righteously] arrogant, but love [that unselfishly seeks the best for others] builds up and encourages others to grow [in wisdom].”* In that moment, the Spirit whispered to my heart that, in my need to be right, I was putting myself and my opinions before His highest priority: loving others.

So, I’m on the long journey to learning how to love like Jesus does. Honestly, my first (usually internal) response is to evaluate the thoughts and beliefs of others, and often to land in a critical space. But more and more, I’m able to move beyond my insistence on being the “all-knowing expert” into caring more about the person than I do their opinions. Does this mean that I never disagree with others or that I never speak truths that aren’t popular? Not at all. But it does mean that I am much more likely to approach each conversation with humility, and an eagerness to understand rather than to judge.

As it turns out, loving others is so much more satisfying than being an expert. ◀

## Am I Practicing an Integrated Faith?

**FELTON WOODSON**  
*Train – Develop – Care | Director of Cultural Journey*



After the George Floyd video hit the internet, racial tensions in the U.S. began to rise—and the Body of Christ was not excluded from this tension. People from all sides voiced their opinions, and as a Christian Black man, I found myself in many conversations about race and racism within the Church. My opinions on issues that I’d previously kept to myself in white spaces were suddenly being discussed openly and daily.

As I engaged in these conversations, some of my white Christian friends misunderstood my feelings altogether on the issues that we discussed. Other friends were angry or even rude as they shared their point of view. A few of my Black friends asked how I could worship and serve a “white Jesus,” or practice “the white man’s religion.”

I began to question my own beliefs. Had I been deceived by Christianity?

Issues like Black Lives Matter and Critical Race Theory seem to be separating the races—and the Body of Christ—a little more each day. It feels like we are reverting back to the Jim Crow era, when Black and white people had to be separate and drink from different water fountains. I can’t help but wonder: Why are the white and Black churches divided on all these disputable matters? Are we supposed to be divided? And, am I practicing a Jim Crow faith?

These questions have caused me to search the Scriptures—the same Scriptures that have been my foundation since I was 12 years old. One day, after a time of lament, I found myself reading 1 Corinthians 12:12-13. It said, *“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts*

*form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”*

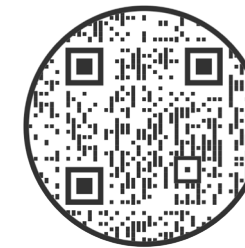
As I read these verses, it was like I was experiencing a spiritual awakening. “We were all given the one Spirit to drink!” God’s voice seemed to drown out the other voices, telling me that as believers, we all drink from the same spiritual water fountain, no matter what our race or culture is. That means that this is not, in fact, a Jim Crow faith! God has given all of us the same Spirit: His Spirit. Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection was for all nations, and it gives all us the opportunity to be reconciled to God and to each other.

Soon after my spiritual awakening, my wife Denise and I received an invitation to visit a white couple that were friends of ours. We discussed some difficult issues that day, and it was not an easy conversation. Though it seemed as though we were disagreeing on every point in the discussion, in the end we were able to agree on one thing: that we are all members of Christ’s Body, and that one day He will return for us all.

I’m so glad Christ commanded us to love one another rather than agree with one another. Until Christ’s return, let’s practice loving one another while we look forward to seeing Revelation 7:9-10 fulfilled:

*After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”* ◀

# KINDRED



Interested in exploring gray spaces from a cultural perspective? *Cultural Journey: Kindred* is an interactive Bible study that prompts us to deepen our discovery of ourselves, our relationship with others, and our understanding of God’s heart for justice. A learning posture of humility helps us to see and value our God’s beautiful, diverse people. For more information, please email [demitta.clausell-reese@navigators.org](mailto:demitta.clausell-reese@navigators.org), or scan the QR code to sign up.

*Kindred* is available for disciplenmakers everywhere!

[tdc.navigators.org/kindred](https://tdc.navigators.org/kindred)

## Cheating is Wrong...Isn’t It?

**TAMMY MURDEN**  
*Train – Develop – Care | Director of Leader Development*



### SEEK TO UNDERSTAND BEFORE BEING UNDERSTOOD

The first thing most missionaries learn is the mantra, “Different isn’t wrong, it’s just different.”

In situations where we don’t understand others’ actions, it can be helpful to look at the ways Jesus related to people and the types of questions

He asked them—He was brilliant at determining the motivation behind people’s behavior, rather than focusing on the behavior itself. He didn’t make snap judgments based solely on outward appearances; he sought to understand the deeper things going on inside a person, situation, or culture. Following Jesus’ example, we can grow in our understanding of people and the things that drive them, enabling us to extend grace and compassion without rejecting our own values.

I learned this lesson in real time when I was teaching English at a prestigious university in Central Asia. My students were the cream of the crop—intelligent, self-motivated, ambitious, future leaders. Yet they all shared the same, unfortunate habit: they cheated constantly! Even though it was against school policy to cheat (and punishable by expulsion), they exchanged answers on homework, tests, and term papers. They were incredibly creative in coming up with new ways to cheat, and, as a teacher, it was almost impossible to control it.

My North American mind could NOT comprehend the reason for this behavior. Why would these students not want to learn? And for those who did want to learn, why would they allow their friends to cheat off them? Didn’t they know that they weren’t helping anyone in the long run by sharing answers?

One day in my classroom, I’d had enough. Right in the middle of my lesson, I stopped the class, ditched my plans, and informed the students we were going to have an open debate. I was determined to understand what motivated these bright and gifted students to cheat. I set the stage by telling my students that they could be completely open and honest with me; I wasn’t going to judge them—I just really wanted to understand why they did what they did.

My students tried to explain it to me: “If my friend asks me to let him cheat off my homework paper, I have to help him. I have to let him cheat because he’s my friend.” The North American argument might be that you aren’t really helping your friend when you let him peek at your homework, but in Asian culture, the here-and-now relationship is considered more important than any future outcome. Even if they didn’t really want to cheat, my students all agreed that they would,

because they valued friendship more than they valued following the rules.

After I understood the motivation behind their behavior, it began to make more sense. Cheating might have violated one Kingdom value, but it championed a different one. After all, we are called to love, serve, consider, and submit to one another. Seeking to understand the value (relationship) driving the action (cheating) not only helped lessen my frustration at my students for cheating, but it gave me insight beyond my personal values and beliefs. Even though I still don’t condone cheating, pushing through my perceived “wrongness” of the situation helped free me up to move from critical judgment to grace-filled compassion.

Maybe you’re overseas and thinking about something similar, but maybe this brings to mind questions in your current ministry community, your church, or your Navigator team. How might you seek to understand before you seek to be understood?

### LET’S GET PRACTICAL

What can you do to create an open discussion – like I did in my classroom – that will give you and some local friends an opportunity to discuss issues in the culture (or the differences between your two cultures)? What are the issues you think the group needs to discuss?

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

Do a study on the questions Jesus asked as He interacted with people. You can use Mark 12:13-17 and John 4:1-26 as a starting point. ◀

### WHEN DIFFERENCES PULL US APART

*continued from page 5*

committed to walking the way of Christ (cf. Philippians 2:1-8), with humility and gentleness. He saw divisions and clans as a way the evil one chooses to destroy the people of God—those for whom Christ died.

As an opinionated person with plenty of certainty, I must constantly remind myself of the *Jesus way*—the path of peacemaking and suspending certainty for the sake of our witness before a watching world. And, it was Jesus who prayed that His people (us!) would be *one, just* as He and the Father are one ... that the world would know God loved them! (John 17:21-23).

When we find ourselves in the middle of differences that could divide within our families, relationships, or in our Navigator work, may we embody love and choose to be an answer to His prayer, for His glory. ◀