

## Why the Golden Rule Isn't Always Enough

From *Bridges to Consensus—in Congregations*

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Many religious leaders, philosophers and sages have pronounced a Golden Rule of Love—we should treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated.

... Yet people, even people of the same faith, differ about what love looks like in various situations. They differ about how they themselves would like to be treated. Many of these differences pertain to how we speak to one another.

Take Charlie, the chair of a congregational committee on ministering to the homeless. He's a great organizer and works hard but frequently mispronounces words such as "indigent" and "philanthropy." He will soon attend an inter-denominational meeting where he is likely to use these terms in front of people from other congregations.

One member of his committee, Abby, feels it's most loving to ignore the gaffs. Bert favors waiting until Charlie hasn't said "in-DYE-gent" for awhile, then working the word, properly pronounced, into his conversation. Darlene thinks it's more loving to gently call the error to Charlie's attention in a private moment. Ethan feels a private talk would be more embarrassing, making too big a deal of the mistake; he favors correcting Charlie in a matter-of-fact way the next time he mispronounces a word during a meeting. Nell wants to consult with one or two other members before deciding what, if anything, to do. If she talks about Charlie with third parties or if they conclude that it would be better for Charlie's close friend, Hunter, to discuss pronunciation with him, Gary accuses Nell of "triangulation."

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... [E]ach member of Charlie's committee might know and accept the principle of love... but each could accuse others of breaking it when their interpretations differ.



... Why do various well-meaning people, including clergy, see love, respect, compassion and fairness so differently when actually applied to a given situation? In the case of Charlie, our pronunciation-challenged committee chair, different committee members saw the loving, respectful, compassionate way of dealing with his errors through different lenses. Any of them, trying to do unto Charlie as they'd like Charlie to do unto them, might have offended him if he viewed the situation through a different type of lens. And other members might have judged the offender as unkind, as acting outside the group's principles or covenant, as not being "in right relationship," or the like.

Many factors can affect the lenses through which we see love and other worthy principles. A few of the more common factors are:

- Temperament or personality
- Culture, which can include, among other factors
  - Nationality
  - Regionality
  - Ancestral nationality
  - Generation
  - Religion
  - Family life
  - Type of schooling (public, private, home, large school, small school)
  - Types of employment (corporate, military, retail sales, self-employment, administrative, consulting, etc.)
  - Exposure to different types of literature and entertainment
- Gender<sup>1</sup>
- Individual package of life experience
- Learning style

... Compassion in the presence of communication diversity means accepting the mutual difficulty of changing the way we see the world and its effect on the way we speak. It's just as hard for Bert to say, "Hey, Charlie, that's IN-di-jent," as it is for Ethan to bide his time and wait for an opportunity to pronounce the word properly, and vice versa.

... A good practical tool for understanding this type of diversity is to imagine how it would feel to speak like the person



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<sup>1</sup> As explained more fully later in this chapter, gender is, at least in part, a subset of culture.

whose style offends you. Say you're Charlie, and during a meeting, Ethan blurts out, "Hey, that's 'IN-di-jent,' not 'in-DYE-gent.'" You feel highly indignant. *Ethan didn't need to embarrass me in front of everyone*, you think. Visualize yourself saying what Ethan said in the same tone and in a similar setting. Feel the discomfort of behaving in a way that seems disrespectful and unkind by *your* standards. Then tell yourself, that's probably how hard it would be for Ethan to bide his time and look for a natural opportunity to pronounce the word properly.

This doesn't mean Charlie has to adopt Ethan's style. It doesn't mean Charlie can't tell Ethan he felt embarrassed and put down. It doesn't mean he shouldn't ask Ethan to correct him privately if a similar situation should arise in the future. But this imaginary exercise will help Charlie to:

- Let go of assumptions about Ethan's intentions
- Understand how hard it is for Ethan to modify his style, and
- Match his manner of inspiring change to that level of difficulty, as by using the skills presented later in this book

In short, the practice develops the compassion and curiosity that boost consensus skills.

Book details: <https://www.createspace.com/3480463>

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