

Black and White and Shades of Gray

by Alan Gunderman

Overview, Goals and Assumptions

1. Because we desire the simplicity of being able to view life's issues as black and white, shades of gray make us uncomfortable and create tension for us. But God is faithful. He remains with His people—loving, forgiving and empowering us in the attitudes we form and the decisions we make.
2. Teenagers are moving from their childhood to adulthood—from a time when most things are black or white, yes or no, with very few gray areas, to a time when few things seem to be clearly black or white and most all issues seem to have shades of gray.
3. Teenagers, in their attempt to become independent thinkers, may trade old black and white beliefs (at least for a while) rather than accept and work through shades of gray (e.g. Mom and Dad who were the smartest parents on earth become, in the minds of teenagers, the dumbest parents on earth, rather than smart people who often show they don't know everything).
Adolescents typically question ideas learned in childhood as part of the search for their own individual identities. Many adults become concerned at these expressions of doubt, wondering if their young people are falling away from the true faith. However, by the working of the Holy Spirit, adolescents' doubts and searchings can lead them to a stronger faith and a deeper understanding and appreciation of who they are in Christ.
4. Christian youth leaders and counselors need to be careful that in their attempt to emphasize the black and white nature of God's Holy Word, they don't go beyond the direction and comfort He clearly gives us.
5. It may be appropriate and necessary for teenagers to hold gray positions that we "older and wiser" adults know to be black and white, for the sake of their own growth and development. It may be more helpful for teenagers to claim their own black and white areas rather than having adults insist on them.
6. In order to challenge the religious leaders of His day, Jesus told stories (parables) that forced those leaders to take another look at issues they saw as clearly black and white. Jesus' famous "You have heard that it was said... but I tell you..." statements from Matthew 5 do the same thing.
7. By God's grace, the four sessions of this retreat will help teenagers to:
 - recognize that the teenage years are important years for questioning and developing personal values;
 - acknowledge that listening to a variety of positions helps clarify personal positions;
 - demonstrate an understanding that people do not always have to view things the same way and that God can and does use differences of opinion to help all of His people grow in the Christian faith;
 - affirm God's freely-given, undeserved love and forgiveness through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a black and white issue;
 - explore issues and areas in their lives that may once have been black or white, but now seem to have a lot of gray, and begin to understand why that happens;
 - investigate a number of specific issues that cause teenagers to struggle;
 - recognize that not being sure may be the best alternative for the moment, and that to change one's mind is okay;
 - explore Holy Scripture in order to discover how Jesus used shades of gray to help people grow in their faith.
8. To expect teenagers to come away from this retreat with more clearly defined black and white areas in their lives would run counter to the purpose of this retreat. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is clear (black and white). He came to save us from sin and to give us life. He never leaves us. He often works in gray areas of our lives and by the Spirit's power leads us to depend on Him rather than on ourselves.

Retreat Schedule

Friday

- 7:00 p.m. Arrive, register, settle in, explore the area
8:00 p.m. Session 1: What is Black? What is White? What is Gray?

Saturday

- 8:00 a.m. Breakfast
9:00 a.m. Session 2: What are Shades of Gray for Me?
10:30 a.m. Break
11:00 a.m. Sunday Worship Preparation
12:00 p.m. Lunch
1:00 p.m. Planned Recreation
3:30 p.m. Break
4:00 p.m. Sunday Worship Preparation
5:00 p.m. Dinner
6:00 p.m. Session 3: Struggling Together with Shades of Gray
7:30 p.m. Break
8:00 p.m. Session 4: How Jesus Used Black and White and Shades of Gray
9:30 p.m. Snacks
10:30 p.m. Recreation
11:30 p.m. Vespers
12:30 p.m. Lights Out

Sunday

- 8:00 a.m. Breakfast
9:00 a.m. Worship Preparation
9:30 a.m. Worship
10:30 a.m. Break
11:00 a.m. Clean up, pack and load up
12:00 p.m. Lunch and head home

Games and Recreation

No games or recreational activities are suggested on these pages. A special committee consisting of adults and youth should plan for the recreation, keeping in mind the nature of the facilities at the retreat site.

Vespers

The vespers for Friday and Saturday night could be assigned to youth or other adult volunteers. These should be short and include a Scripture reading, singing and prayer.

Sunday Morning Worship

The first preparation time scheduled for Saturday morning should begin with dividing the group into four smaller groups. Each of the four groups will have a part in the Sunday morning worship. There are many ways to divide the worship service. The group may want to spend some time processing the different parts of the worship and assigning parts. Feel free to be creative. Here is one way to divide the tasks for worship:

Group 1 - decides where the worship will be held; prepares the worship site (elaborate decorations are encouraged); decides the nature of the offering.

Group 2 - chooses the Scripture that will be read; plans ways to share the meaning of the passages (through personal sharing, drama, a sermon, etc.)

Group 3 - plans ways to thank and give praise to God through songs, litanies, action and psalms.

Group 4 - plans the confession of sins and absolution; the confession of faith; and the general prayer

Snacks

This part of the retreat is probably more important than most adults would like to admit. Consider organizing a special committee to take charge of this.

Session 1: What is Black? What is White? What is Gray?

Purpose: That teens will:

- share black and white or shades of gray opinions with each other for mutual understanding and growth;
 - investigate the development of black and white and shades of gray areas in their own lives;
 - acknowledge the grace through Jesus Christ, abundantly available to them as they struggle with black and white and shades of gray.
1. Arrange the meeting room so that the youth can sit in a circle either on chairs or on the floor. In each of four corners in the room put one of the following signs: black, white, shades of gray, no opinion.
 2. Gather the group into a circle.
 - Have everyone share their name (skip this if they know each other) and one issue or value in their lives that they feel is clearly right or wrong.
 - Define each of the signs. Black means you mainly agree. White means that you mainly disagree. Shades of gray means that you waiver back and forth, that you are not sure. No opinion means exactly that: you have no opinion.
 3. Some of the teens may wonder and ask why white doesn't stand for "agree" and black doesn't stand for "disagree," which is often the way they are viewed. This may be an opportunity for a brief discussion of racism. A simple response might be, "Always having white represent good and right, and having black represent evil is wrong and racist. Because of this, we are reversing them for this exercise."
 4. Read the following statements. Ask the teens to think about them for a moment and choose a corner that corresponds to their feelings. Ask them not to move to the corner of their choosing until you tell them to move.

After giving them a few moments to think, ask them to move. (Waiting and having them move together makes it less likely that they will be influenced by others in the group. It might be helpful to say, "I want you to make up your own mind before anyone moves, and not change once people start moving.")

When everyone has had a chance to see the split of the group, call them together to the center of the room to share reasons for their choice. (If the room and groups are small you may want to have the brief discussion while they are standing in their respective corners.)

There are no "right" answers in the statements. It is hoped that the teens (and adult leaders) will learn from each other by sharing with and challenging each other.

Statements:

- Adults tend to be more black and white in their opinions and values and teens tend to be more shades of gray.
 - It is easier to deal with an issue if it is clearly a black and white issue than if it has shades of gray.
 - One's life is better if it has more black and white and fewer shades of gray in it.
 - One of the purposes of becoming a mature adult is to increase the number of black and white areas in our lives and to diminish the shades of gray areas in our lives.
 - I find I have more shades of gray in my life now than I did a few years ago.
5. Read Romans 8:31-39 and discuss the following questions:
 - How could a black and white issue separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus?
 - How could a shades of gray issue separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus?
 - What does it mean to you that nothing can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord?
 6. Close this session with prayer, thanking God for remaining with and continuing to love, guide and support us through the black and white and shades of gray in our lives. Ask God to send a special measure of the Holy Spirit as we struggle with black and white and shades of gray.

Session 2: What are Shades of Gray for Me?

Purpose: That the teens will come to more fully understand that:

- a lot of black and white areas of our lives are continually challenged by shades of gray;
 - as they mature in the Christian faith they get better at dealing with black and white and shades of gray in their lives (Hebrews 5:12-14);
 - for a variety of reasons, issues they once considered black and white become shades of gray; our gracious God gives us what we need in order to deal with black and white and shades of gray.
1. Bring the group together in one big circle. Ask the teens to think about issues that used to be clearly black and white for them, but as they have gotten older have become shades of gray. Tell them that they are going to be asked to share with the whole group. They may want to have more than one issue ready just in case someone else in the group shares the same one.
 2. Before they share, ask them also to think about why their views have changed.
 3. Ask them to share one by one with the whole group. Have someone record on newsprint each new issue presented. Make a list of at least 10 issues. If you want the teens to respond honestly, it will be important not to pass judgement on or question (beyond clarification) their responses at this time. The teen's honesty in responding will also depend on the closeness of the relationship the leaders have built with the group and whether or not the teens feel safe.
 4. After everyone has shared, ask the teens to choose three issues from the list on which they think most teens have moved from black and white to shades of gray. Vote to determine the group's top three choices.
 5. Write their first choice at the top of a sheet of newsprint. Have the teens brainstorm reasons why teens moved from black and white to shades of gray on that issue. Vote to determine the group's top three choices.
 6. Make observations and draw out learnings by asking the following questions:
 - What reasons are the same for all three issues, and why is that the case?
 - What can parents, teachers or adult leaders in the church do to help teens work through their struggle with black and white and shades of gray?
 - How do Galatians 5:13, 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 and 1 Peter 2:16 guide the Christian as he or she deals with black and white and shades of gray?
 - What help does God provide for His people as they face the challenging issues of life (Romans 8:15-16)?
 - How do God's people receive the help He freely offers (1 Peter 2:2)?

Close this session in prayer, asking God to continue to give what is appropriate to His people whether it is pure milk or solid food.

Session 3: Struggling with Shades of Gray Together

Purpose: As the youth participate in this session, they will:

- explore a controversial issue from session two;
 - learn from each other as they listen and share individual points of view;
 - recognize the Christian community as a place where struggles and doubts can be shared in an atmosphere of care and forgiveness;
 - acknowledge that they can strongly disagree with someone on an issue but still be accepting of that person;
 - affirm God's desire in Christ to love, forgive, support and encourage them as they struggle with shades of gray issues.
1. The leaders will need to spend some time after session two planning this session. Chances are the issues that surfaced in session two will be controversial ones. The likelihood of the group reaching consensus on any of those issues is quite remote. Your purpose is to develop questions that help the teens share and interact as they struggle with these issues. It may be appropriate for you, the leader, to share a black and white response with the teens after a certain amount of struggle, but do it very carefully. Do not attempt to use

force or unfair power in trying to get the teens to accept your point of view, even if you are convinced it is the Biblical point of view. It won't work. A caring, gentle, understanding and accepting attitude is of greater help to the teens as they wrestle with these important issues.

2. The helps included below are an attempt at guessing what the main issues will be for your group. If these are not appropriate, use a similar style in developing your own session.
3. Make sure the four signs from session one are still in the four corners of the room.

4. Life Issues

After each of the following statements is read, ask the teens to think about it for a moment and then have them move after you say, "Move!" Rather than having a discussion after each statement, discuss together groups of statements that address specific issues.

- Abortion under any circumstance is wrong.
- Abortion when the life of the mother is in danger is okay.
- Abortion when the pregnancy is a result of incest is okay.
- Abortion is a better alternative than giving birth to an unwanted child.
- Regardless of whether abortion is right or wrong, the government (state or federal) should not pass an anti-abortion law.
- A woman has the right to decide what happens to her body and that includes whether or not to have an abortion.
- Life begins at conception; therefore, abortion is always murder.
- It is possible for persons who consider themselves Christian to be in favor of abortion on demand.
- Society has a right to put someone to death (capital punishment) if the person is found guilty of first-degree murder.
- Capital punishment is always wrong.
- To be in favor of capital punishment and opposed to abortion or vice versa is holding inconsistent values.
- When an old person has lived a long and productive life and is seriously ill, it is right for the family to decide that all machines which are keeping this person alive be turned off.
- When an old person has lived a long and productive life, has failing health and finds needed medical care very expensive, it is right for that person to decide to take his or her life in order to save the immediate family the pain and expense of a long and lingering death. (This is sometimes called death with dignity.)
- All suicide is wrong.
- It is not wrong for a person to give up their life in order to save another's life.

5. Sexuality Issues

After each of the following statements is read, ask the teens to think about it for a moment and then have them move after you say, "Move!" Rather than having a discussion after each statement, discuss together each group of statements addressing a particular issue.

- It is to be expected that kisses will be exchanged on a first date.
- If a man or woman in a relationship is using the other, any sexual activity is wrong even if it is only kissing.
- Sexuality is a gift from God, and is for us to enjoy and celebrate.
- Sexual intercourse between two unmarried people is always wrong.
- Sexual intercourse between two people when one or both is married to someone else is always wrong.
- If sexual intercourse is always wrong outside of marriage, then any other sexual activity except intercourse is okay.
- If a mature unmarried couple are in love and are committed to each other, having sexual intercourse or living together is okay.
- Masturbation is a normal activity and is okay.

- Mutual masturbation between an unmarried couple is wrong.
6. Close this session with prayer, asking God to grant a special measure of His grace and wisdom in dealing with these important issues.

Session 4: How Jesus Used Black and White and Shades of Gray

Purpose: As the youth participate in this session, they will understand that:

- Jesus told stories (parables) and did many other things that challenged the black and white of His day, often creating shades of gray for His hearers;
 - having the black and white in our lives challenged produces growth;
 - shades of gray can often lead us to the gospel of Jesus Christ more effectively than black and white.
1. Gather the participants in a circle. If the group is large, it might be important to divide into smaller groups.
 2. As a group, read Matthew 12:1-14. This is one of the most powerful examples the Holy Scriptures gives of Jesus challenging the black and white attitudes of the religious leaders of His day. It is important to understand that the religious leaders could use the Scriptures to define and justify their position. So could Jesus! It is important to understand that the religious leaders had good intentions and truly thought they were doing what God wanted them to do. Discuss some or all of the following:
 - What black and white issues in your congregation or church body do you think need to be challenged in a way similar to Jesus' challenge of the Pharisees?
 - How did Jesus decide which issues needed to be challenged (note especially verse 7)? Discuss the question, "Which is more important, the spirit of the law or the letter of the law?"
 - Why did the religious leaders feel it so important to hold fast to their black and white views?
 - Jesus points out another problem that people often have when they impose their black and white views on others. What is it (note verses 9-14)?
 3. Jesus found ways to challenge those black and white rules that were nothing more than people's vain attempts to justify themselves before God. As a group read Luke 10:25-37. At first glance this story doesn't seem to have much that challenges the black and white in the lives of people. Few would argue that a person beaten and lying on the side of the road shouldn't be helped. Discuss some or all of the following:
 - What black and white notions are being challenged in this story?
 - The notion that a Samaritan could be a more sensitive caregiver than a priest or Levite was particularly irritating to Jesus' hearers. Who are the Samaritans in our lives?
 - In hearing this story, we have usually been asked to identify with the priest, Levite or Samaritan. What happens to our black and white views if we identify with the beaten person, which then forces us not only to consider accepting help from people we strongly dislike, but also forces us to call them "good"?
 - Who are the people in our lives from whom we find it very difficult to accept help?
 4. As a group read Luke 15:11-32. Discuss some or all of the following:
 - With whom do you identify in this story?
 - The original hearers of the story would have had their black and white views challenged by identifying with either one of the sons. According to their point of view, the "naughty" sons should have been punished and the "good" son rewarded. The story often doesn't challenge our black and white views because we have made the "naughty" son righteous because he was repentant (even though it seems he repented only because he was hungry), and we have made the "good" son bad because he was self-righteous. What happens to our black and white views if we identify with the father? (Note that the father has forgiven and accepted his son before the son had a chance to apologize to him.)
 - Who are the people in your life whom you should forgive and/or accept even though they may not have asked your forgiveness? What keeps you from doing so? (Note to leaders: It is harmful to push forgiveness and acceptance onto people who have been severely physically or sexually abused. Leaders need to be especially careful in those kind of circumstances.)

- Identify the power that enables us to forgive others as we have been forgiven (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).
5. Have individual students read aloud Isaiah 54:10, Deuteronomy 31:6, Joshua 1:5c, James 1:17 and Romans 8:38-39. Ask students to apply these certain words from God about Himself to the uncertainties of life with which we must often contend.
 6. Close this session with prayer thanking God for being a loving Father, who, for Jesus' sake, always forgives us. Ask for the Spirit's power to guide and direct us as we serve and honor God in the attitudes we adopt and the decisions we make.

Note: No retreat can treat every issue in depth. For more information, see the following documents from the Commission on Theology and Church relations:

Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective

Report on Euthanasia with guiding Principles

Abortion in Perspective

Report on Capital Punishment

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