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Still a Jerk by Benjamin Alan Zentner

“When it comes down to it, no matter how pious or like-minded he might be, a Christian jerk is still a jerk.” A Democrat jerk is still a jerk. A feminist jerk is still a jerk. A gay jerk is still a jerk. A middle class jerk is still a jerk. Kevin Roose’s The Unlikely Disciple had lists of possible jerks scrolling through the blank space in front of my eyes as I set down the book to think about the implications of what I had just read. For the students of Liberty University, being Christian is a commonality that brings everyone together, an ideological tie that is the foundation of their community. And yet, Roose’s roommate Henry alienated his fellow believers with his actions. His philosophy could not save his relationships with others like him from the toxicity of his own character.

Personality trumps ideology. Whatever side of the scale you fall on, be it liberal or conservative, atheistic or faithful, inspired or apathetic, there will be people who agree with you. However, a trap that I and many others have fallen into in the past is the assumption that because someone supports your beliefs, she or he is a good person. Like any demographic, ideologies that we identify with will have their Zipper’s and their Henry’s, their pure of heart and their jerks. The Unlikely Disciple points out that even if someone shares the same values or opinions as another, that doesn’t give that person a pass to treat the other badly. Even if we’re similar, we may not be compatible.

Personality over ideology goes farther than simply acknowledging the potentially venomous natures of people with whom you originally identify. It also forces us to do the opposite and recognize that there are people worthy of our friendship and compassion that agree with a viewpoint different than our own. A Republican saint is still a saint. An Islamic angel is

still an angel. A rich role model is still a role model. People don't have to be like you to be liked by you. And yet we find ourselves surrounded by people who are the same as us because we think that they're what our friends should be like. Maybe that says something about how we view ourselves, as if our philosophies and lifestyles are the only right ones. It's that way of thinking—assuming that the only good or worthwhile people to interact with are the ones who have the same ideology or life experiences as us, using stereotypes and labels—that keeps us from appreciating our peers for who they are as people.

In order to empathetically embrace another, we must see that person as a person, a personality, before we see him or her as a label, one created by ideology or otherwise. Call it like you see it. Is he a liberal democrat who cheats on tests and partners alike? Best avoid him. Is she a Tea Party Republican who goes out of her way to help you when you're from Texas and don't know how to walk on ice and inevitably fall on your butt at least once this winter? Give her a chance. Don't give people a pass because they're like you, and don't pass people by because they're different from you. How natural is it to carry on a conversation? How much do you make each other laugh? How much can you count on each other? How much do you care about each other? Those are the important questions in a friendship, not what someone's political views, religious affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, race, disabilities, or financial status are. Those things are surface level. Friendships shouldn't be.

I learned from Kevin Roose's [The Unlikely Disciple](#) that character should come before personal values when deciding who your friends will be. That's not to say there won't be people with whom you connect both emotionally and ideologically. But when we allow ourselves to form emotional connections with people unlike us, it makes reconciling our differences much easier than if we had refused to see them as anything more than an "other." Our shared identity

as students, faculty, and staff at Illinois Wesleyan brings us together physically, but in order to be an interconnected community, we must connect emotionally, as well. Ultimately, it is our responsibility to treat everyone compassionately or risk alienating ourselves. A Titan jerk is still a jerk.