43: Ethics and Perspectives Activity

# Purpose: Participate in a discussion and debate on the ethics of historical figures.

History presents us with many diverse characters. Some individuals stand out as great men and women who elevated their communities and nations. Others very obviously were gravely foolish, greedy, or even wicked. Some are more complex and it is difficult to assess whether they are heroes or villains. This should not surprise us since they were real humans- with both good and bad sides.

A society’s values also change over time; what is considered unacceptable today may have been entirely normal a century ago. What we embrace today may have been shunned yesterday. This makes it even more tricky to evaluate the reputation of people from the past.

What should we do when we see complex characters like this? Examples from the Bible include Solomon and Samson.

1. Both were significant characters with some major flaws. Pick either Solomon or Samson to discuss in the following exercises:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you consider him a hero or villain? Do you value him? Why or why not?
3. Now look take the opposite perspective of the same character. If at #1 you counted him a hero, then now acknowledge his flaws and why others may disagree with your assessment. If at #1 you said he was a villain, then now point out his strengths and his good side.
4. How can you learn from the side of your character you described at #1 as well as at #2?

Outside of biblical history, we have many more complex characters. The USA has men like Thomas Jefferson who wrote the Declaration of Independence and was a strong President, but at the same time he was a slaveowner. We have the complicated legacies of Christopher Columbus and Jacques Cartier. Let’s turn our attention now to icons of Canadian history who also had significant shortcomings, like John A Macdonald.

1. To start, consider different situations where we have encountered Macdonald in history class this year. Using the T-chart, sort each situation to indicate whether you feel he was a hero or villain in that story. Put another way- did it bring out his good side or his bad side?
   1. Great Coalition
   2. Confederation
   3. Red River & Northwest Rebellions
   4. Louis Riel
   5. Vision for the Canadian Pacific Railway
   6. The Pacific Scandal
   7. Popularity with Voters
   8. Indian Residential Schools

Recently across Canada, there has been much discussion and controversy surrounding the legacy of historical figures like Macdonald, especially as it relates to their treatment of Indigenous Peoples. Some cities, including Charlottetown, PEI and Macdonald’s hometown of Kingston, ON, have taken down statues of him because they do not consider him worthy of such honour. Other communities have renamed schools that were named after him; they feel that his racial discrimination outweighs the value of having him exalted.

On the other hand, some people are opposed to removing the statues because Macdonald was Canada’s first Prime Minister and accomplished much good. They also acknowledge that we can not change the past, and that public displays like statues or names on buildings can help us remember and learn from the individual’s positives and negatives.

1. What do you think? Should Canadians honour the memory of men like John A Macdonald?
2. People of what types of backgrounds might have a different opinion than you?

Let’s imagine for a moment that Winnipeg has a large, well-known statue of Macdonald and its city council is having the discussion about whether it should remain. We will have a debate in class, where half of the groups will argue for keeping it up and the other half will argue that it is time to take the statue down.

1. Your group will argue for \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ the statue. (ask Mr Dueck for which position to take)
2. Prepare a clear, persuasive argument for your position. Use sentence/ paragraph form.

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1. Think about what the other side might say in response, and jot additional notes of what you might reply to further defend your position.
2. As you listen to the debate, make note of a few valid points that your opposition makes.

One helpful metric in determining whether a historical character is worthy of recognition is to ask, “What is he most known for? What was their most significant achievement? Is that worth honouring them for?”

Ultimately, as Christians, we have other heroes than political figures and do not need to be too concerned about society’s criteria for who deserves a stature. We understand that the guide to live by is the Bible. But it is worth our while to consider even how our descendants will evaluate us. They will probably also find us to be complex and difficult to understand.

Even in our everyday lives, we have godly people who nevertheless have shortcomings. We also have people that we strongly disagree with that we could learn something from.

May we have the wisdom to learn from the good example of almost anyone, and reject wrong values even if held by our heroes. May we have grace to acknowledge no one is perfect, while not carelessly overlooking the hurt that may have been caused.