

When Christians Disagree (Romans 14:1-15:7)

Big Idea: When you disagree with Christians, welcome them, calibrate your conscience, aim to please, and follow Jesus.

You know what it's like to be in the middle of a conflict. It's exhausting. No matter how hard you try, disagreements can generate a little bit of heat. It can feel like you're going over the same issues over and over again, and it can feel frustrating that the person with whom you are disagreeing can't seem to see your logic.

And so you keep trying. But at some point it gets hard. If the issue's not important, you drop it. But what if it's an issue that's really important? And what if, when you see the other person, that issue is always in your face, always a source of tension, and it really seems like it could break your relationship? This usually happens when you they're making a seriously wrong moral choice, or that they're infringing on your freedom. What do you do then?

We don't have to imagine examples today.

- Some of you may believe that the pandemic is a serious health concern, and we need to be cautious. Others of you may believe that the whole thing has been a massive overreaction, no worse than the seasonal flu, and that it's high time that we all got back to work.

- Some of you may not be huge fans of the President's personal life south of the border, but you like a lot of what he's done. Others of you still can't believe he got elected, and you can't imagine how anyone could support him.

I could go on and on and give you more illustrations about Black Lives Matter, about when and how we should regather as a church, about Justin Trudeau, Doug Ford, any number of social issues, and more.

I could give you more examples, but I don't want to instigate a fight. Let's just say it can be hard, and I expect it's going to get harder. I could be wrong, but when you layer a pandemic, financial crisis, racial tensions, an American election, and social media on top of each other, you've got one of the most fraught periods in recent memory. It's like a pile of dry kindling just waiting to get torched.

We're not the first to face this, of course. We just read from a letter written to a church in Rome that faced some serious tensions around race and morality.

The good thing about Christianity is that it brought former enemies together as part of one church. Their agreement in Jesus Christ was enough to overcome so many of the barriers that would have kept them apart. But when you put two very different groups of people together, with very different convictions, those issues still lurk underneath the surface.

Jewish Christians had learned to follow strict dietary guidelines. This kept them apart from non-Jewish people who didn't follow the same guidelines. Even as Christians, some of them still held to these same guidelines. They didn't necessarily expect others to follow their convictions. In fact, it probably took a lot of work to start eating with non-Jewish people who didn't follow the same rules, especially when you're eating together and the food you prefer isn't there. Some of them even decided to go

vegetarian because it was the easiest way to avoid a lot of food that would have been unclean to you.

Some of the non-Jewish people struggled too. They hadn't come from a strict background; quite the opposite. Sometimes it felt like they were being judged, and when you feel judged, it's easy to get defensive. Many of them would have come from a background that ridiculed the Jewish people for their peculiarity around food. They also had this habit of taking a strict day off every week. Maybe you used to find that lazy, but you'd gotten over that. Maybe you'd even decided it was fine for your Jewish believer friend to do this, but not everyone has that option. Not every slave, for instance, is going to have a master who's excited about giving them a day off every week.

Maybe they tried to navigate these tensions. But maybe these tensions boiled over. Sometimes they managed to grit their teeth. But other times you could feel the tension in the room.

Are you feeling this? Imagine the thing that drives you crazy about other Christians. You can't even believe that they disagree with you on such a clear issue. And then imagine running into this issue every single time you gathered as a church.

That's the situation. I've always struggled to find similar tensions that we face today to match their situation, but not anymore. I can think of many similar tensions. So how do we handle these differences, especially when our convictions run deep and could lead to relationships breaking in the church? The easiest thing to do would be to separate to avoid these tensions, but that's not what the Bible says we should do.

We're not talking about theological issues in which Christians must agree; we're talking about third-level issues which can still be strong enough to pull us apart. These are non-essentials which still can cause a lot of hard feelings if we're not careful.

Here is what Paul in Holy Scripture says we should do. There's a lot here, but let's hit three highlights with a bonus (which really means four).

One: Don't Judge Those Whom God Has Accepted

What do we do with people who disagree with us? "Welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions" (14:1). Why? The end of verse 3 says, "God has welcomed him." Verse 4 says, "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?"

What Paul says here is important. Accept those who disagree. Accepting means, as John Murray says, "There is to be no discrimination in respect of confidence, esteem, and affection." Furthermore, according to verse 4, don't pass judgment on them, even if you think they're wrong! The reason why: because God has accepted us. Verse 7 of the next chapter puts it well: "Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

God has much more reason to reject us than we have to reject each other. It would be crazy for us to be more particular than God over who we accept. If God has accepted people who hold very different views from us, it would be crazy for us not to accept them too. They are accepted in Jesus Christ, just as you are, not because they are right, but because of Christ's death on his or her behalf. If Jesus has accepted them, and accepted you, despite all your wrong views, we should accept each other too.

Accept each other, not with the agenda of straightening each other out. Accept them wholeheartedly with no agenda, because God has already done so.

Two: Calibrate Your Conscience and Follow It

We should accept those who disagree, but this doesn't mean we just ignore the issue. Verse 5 says, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind."

It's very interesting that Paul is clear who is right and who's wrong in the Roman church. According to verse 14, Paul believes that no food is unclean in itself. But Paul doesn't just lay down the law. He tells the believers to wrestle with these matters ourselves. Wrestle with the Scriptures, and live consistently with your decision until God leads you to adjust your conscience. We all have to give account before God, he says.

He actually gives us an important point here: if we violate our conscience, we sin. If we think food is unclean, even if it's not, then it becomes unclean for us (14:14). If we get in the habit of violating our consciences, we set ourselves on a dangerous path. When you start to ignore your conscience on debatable matters, it will become easier for you to ignore your conscience at other times too.

This gives us an important insight into our consciences. Take your conscience seriously. It's a gift from God. Treat it carefully. Inform it. Listen to it. But realize that your conscience is imperfect. It needs to be calibrated. Take it seriously. Never ignore it. But work to calibrate it continually by the Word of God. The flip side: we should never cause another believer to violate their conscience. Calibrate, yes; violate, no.

One last principle before the bonus:

Three: Aim to Please Your Neighbor

In the first couple of verses of chapter 15, Paul says, “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”

Our goal, Paul says, is not to get our own way. Our goal is to build each other up. My goal isn’t that you come to see things my way. My goal, your goal, should be to build each other up, not to tear them down.

It’s a beautiful thing to show love to others when we disagree. Anyone can be friends with someone who agrees with them. But to show up with someone who disagrees with you, and to decide to serve them rather than yourself, to put aside your rights for their good – that is a beautiful thing.

During the war, when vessels had to be moved across the Atlantic because of the U-boats, all ships had to proceed at the speed of the slowest. That’s kind of what Paul is talking about here. Kent Hughes says, “The Christian must regulate his freedom to take into account the feeble conscience of a weaker brother or sister. We must actively pursue those things that make for peace and mutual building up of one another. This is never easy, but it is the way of love.”

Okay. I promised you a bonus highlight. Here it is.

Bonus: In All of This, Follow Jesus

Have you noticed how like Jesus this is? Jesus accepted us even when we were wrong. Jesus made it his aim to please his Father, and unlike the rest of us, he did it perfectly. Jesus made it his aim to please his neighbor. He didn’t come to be served,

but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Paul says, "For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me'" (Romans 15:3). Jesus didn't despise his enemies; he died for his enemies.

When you disagree with Christians, welcome them, calibrate your conscience, aim to please, and follow Jesus.

We can only live the way that Paul commands when we're captured by this great love of Jesus. And so Paul concludes:

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15:5-7)

Lord, we'll have lots of opportunity to practice this. Keep us from rejecting those whom you have welcomed. Help us to calibrate our consciences and follow them. Help us to please our neighbor. Thank you for Jesus who has welcomed us. May we live for his glory and please him in how we love those who see things differently. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

1. What are some examples of issues that may cause us division within our church? Politics, theology, social issues, etc.?

2. Jewish believers tended to be narrower, and looked down on Gentiles for being lax. Gentiles were more open, and looked on Jewish believers for being too strict. Which side do you tend to lean in?
3. What are some challenges in accepting and not quarreling (14:1)?
4. Paul thought one side was right, but he didn't impose this on the church. Instead, he encouraged the church to live with their differences. Why?
5. What are some ways we can become convinced in our own minds (14:5)?
6. Why is it wrong to violate our conscience, even if your conscience could be wrong (14:5)?
7. Paul says our focus should be pleasing those who disagree (15:1). How can we do this?
8. How does Jesus set an example for us in how to do this?
9. What are some practical lessons we can apply from this passage?