"The Weak and the Strong"

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Aggressively pursue peace.

Romans 14:1-8

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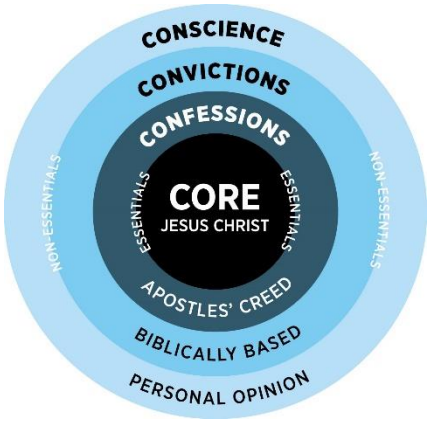
Corinth 101

This is Week 4 of "Corinth 101 for Everyone." We are overviewing who we are and why we do church the way we do. This sermon will tempt some of you to close your heart. I'm not trying to make anyone mad. Open your heart to the Holy Spirit.

Week 1 was about the core. In the words of a song Pastor Paul wrote, it's "ever only always Jesus." Sometimes it's necessary to talk about other matters, but only so we can refocus on Jesus.



In Week 2, we discussed the essential beliefs that are almost universal in the Christian church. We call them the "confessions." The confessions surround and protect the core.

Week 3 covered "convictions." We use this word to refer to matters of Christian belief or practices which the Bible directly addresses, but not all Christians agree on how to apply that teaching. They are "non-essential" because people who love Jesus and follow the Bible can disagree about them. Non-essential does not mean unimportant.

Today, Week 4, we come to the outermost circle, conscience. These issues are even more non-essential because the Bible doesn't address them – or if it does, almost all Christians would say they can "agree to disagree" about these areas.

Ironically, matters of conscience,[1] though not essential to a Christian's identity, tend to make Christians irritated and separated. Why? Because these are the "now issues." Many issues that made Christians of previous generations mad now lie somewhere between horrifying and silly. Can Black and white Christians sit together in church? Should the sanctuary have a PA system? Is it OK to play a guitar in church? Does church attendance require your "Sunday best" clothes?

Paul's issues & ours

In Romans 14, Paul notes three primary divisive issues. First, should Christians eat meat or only vegetables (vv. 2,21)? I do know people still have personal preferences in this area today (did you know there are seven different levels of "vegetarian"?). I don't know many people who get mad about others' food choices.

Second, should Christians drink wine (21)? That issue arises here and there in the Bible and since. It's probably because the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6) in the Old Testament included a vow not to drink wine.

Third, should Christians consider some days more holy than others (5)? Among Paul's readers some Jewish Christians continued to keep the Sabbath law as well as other Jewish festivals. Others did not. In the Christian era, the conversation has more often been whether we should treat Sunday like a Jewish Sabbath.

Paul includes each of these as "disputable matters" (1) on which everyone should make up their own mind (5). If you push me, I'll admit they are actually what I called last week "biblical convictions". I can definitely hear some of Paul's readers saying, "But it's in the Bible to keep the Sabbath and not eat pork." Sometimes we can't even agree whether a specific issue is "conviction" or "conscience."

My question is, "What are the comparables today?" In what areas do Christians strongly disagree – maybe about whether the Bible addresses it, but certainly what to do about it? What makes us mad at each other, even withdraw from each other? I think the number one "now issue" is the pandemic – masks, vaccines, and shutdowns.

Maybe you're thinking, "Pastor Bob, why are you raising these currently volatile questions?" If Romans 14 doesn't apply to the "now issues," it doesn't apply anywhere. I think the Lord has a word for us about how to address matters of conscience.

The strong and the weak

Before I dive deeper into what Paul says, I need to comment about his use of "weak" and "strong" in Romans 14 and 15. In this context, Paul says believers are

[1] I am using the word "conscience" in a popular rather than technical sense. I'm using it to refer to opinions not clearly addressed in the Bible. Historically, "conscience" is a richer, more critical concept. For definition and historical development, read Robert Louis Wilken's *Liberty in the Things of God*.

"weak" if they think faith in Jesus means that all of the rules Moses gave still apply. He doesn't say the "weak" don't have faith or that they're not going to heaven. They're "weak" because they need more boundaries. They need specific rules.

Paul identifies himself as one of the "strong" (15:1) who have outgrown those ceremonial laws about what foods are clean and unclean, and about what days are holy and unholy. All food is clean because God made it. Every day is holy to God.

Both sides in Paul's day probably saw themselves as "strong." Paul says, "I'm strong enough in faith not to think God is micromanaging performance." I suspect those Paul called "weak" thought, "I'm strong enough to resist temptation to food or wine or 7-day workaholism." In every "now issue" everyone thinks they're the strong ones.

I want to extrapolate what Paul says in Romans 14 and 15 to the "now issue" that is dividing Christians – the pandemic. Here are the principles I see in this passage, applied to right now.

Disputable matters

1. *Discern what's debatable.* "Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters" (1).

The key words in verse 1 are "accept," "quarreling," and "disputable matters." "Accept" is a compound word that means to aggressively and personally take the initiative to welcome and interact with someone. In other words, the command is not to "tolerate" them. Go after them. It's in the present tense, which means to keep doing it. Pursue them without reservation or condition to make sure they know they belong.

The pursuit must not be for the purpose of argument. This is not a "bait and switch" approach: "I really want a relationship with you so I can change your mind." Paul's saying right up front that the welcome has to be from the heart.

Specifically, he says – and he's setting up the rest of the passage about issues like meat, wine, and holy days – don't quarrel about "disputable matters," literally, "dialogues." Paul's thinking about issues where both sides make valid points. Proverbs 18:17 says, "The first person to testify seems right until cross-examination begins."

Not everything should be disputable within the church. In the previous chapter Paul has given several moral imperatives without implying they're debatable – submit to governing authorities, don't murder, don't covet, love your neighbor, behave decently and don't get caught up in carousing, drunkenness, sexual immorality, dissension, and jealousy. Paul offers no hint those are "debatable matters." Don't debate everything.

In the Corinth 101 class that follows 11:00 worship today, I'll suggest offer some tests for deciding what's debatable and what isn't. We'll also talk about two issues that we consider matters of "conscience." The first is how you relate to God and grow

spiritually. Kevin Watkins is going to talk about a book called *Sacred Pathways* (Gary Thomas). We'll also discuss our denomination.

My only point now is to think before you argue. Is this argument over something is worth losing the fellowship of a brother or sister in Christ? If not, aggressively welcome. Make sure they know you deeply want their friendship in Christ.

2. *Remember who's the final Judge*. "So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God" (12).

"Judging" can be and has been a subject for entire sermons and I suppose always will be. Some people love to say, "The Bible says, 'Do not judge,'" and they're right. Others respond, "The Bible from cover to cover not only makes judgments about right and wrong, but tells us to do the same." And they're right.

Here's what I want you to remember. The New Testament uses the word "judge" in its various forms 145 times in the New International Version, and the overwhelming use of the word is not whether you judge someone else or make judgments on moral issues. The Bible's consistent reminder is that you must never, ever forget that the final Judge is God.

Romans 14:12 doesn't use the word judge, but it's all over this chapter. The word in v. 12 is translated "account." It's literally "word" (*logos*) or "a speech." So here's what I want you to ask yourself when you're talking about matters of conscience where the Bible is not clear – even more so about "now issues" – what Christians are currently debating. Right now, that's things like wearing masks and taking the vaccine. I want you to ask the Holy Spirit to bring this question to your mind: "Would I act this way if I were standing before God's bench and giving a speech?"

3. *Seek first to understand.* "If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ has died" (15).

Paul has listened carefully, and probably long, to both "sides," to both the strong and the weak. He clearly favors the strong, and identifies as one of them. But he has listened to the "distress" in the voice of those who are genuinely hurt when a fellow Christian flaunts a barbecue sandwich in their face. He has even seen some of the "weak" lose faith altogether. For them it's a package deal – trusting Jesus and obeying all his laws. If you diminish any one of God's rules, it's like pulling a string out of a knit sweater. The whole thing's going to unravel.

A key principle for me in matters of conscience is to "seek first to understand." Before I respond and make my own argument, can I just try to understand your point of view? It would be incredibly helpful in personal relationships if we practiced active listening talking about issues of conscience. It's not natural for any of us.

We need to listen before responding. On the one hand, I hear people saying –

- This is not the bubonic plague, which killed a third of Europe. About 1% of the population died from COVID last year. Of those, 80% were over 65 and had multiple risk factors.
- The vaccine is still considered experimental by the CDC. It makes sense to vaccinate those with risk factors, but not force everyone to take the vaccine.
- The government and media have not been consistently truthful about the statistics. Many use these issues for political gain. It's hard to trust *them*.
- I *do* trust God. He's the author of life and death, and he gives us the ability to make wise choices for ourselves and our families.

I hear others saying something quite different –

- I trust God as too, but God calling us to reduce the risk for any preventable death. Some of those who died were our loved ones.
- If it weren't for masks and shutdowns and vaccines and warnings, many more people would have died.
- The vaccine may be emergency and experimental, but the protection for individuals and society is definitely worth any known risk.
- The primary concern is the capacity of our hospitals and healthcare workers. We've seen over and over, and are seeing again, that if Covid is unchecked our hospitals and ICU beds are overwhelmed.

I don't know where you are on that spectrum or whether I expressed your viewpoint. What I do know is that as believers in the body of Christ Paul has modeled for us that when someone is "distressed" we need to listen and understand. Their pain, whatever it is, has to matter. When I'm talking to another believer about something not clearly outlined in Scripture, I need to be sure they first know they are heard.

4. *Never, ever give up on peace*. "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification" (19).

The word translated "make every effort" is quite interesting. In other contexts, it can be translated "persecute." What's the connection? It means to "aggressively pursue." It's not the same word as "aggressively welcome" in verse 1, but the intensity and passion and perseverance are there. It's another present tense – We should keep pursuing the things of peace and the things that build each other up.

It's really interesting to have observed across four decades of ministry which parts of the Bible people are talking about when they say, "I believe the Bible. I follow the Bible. The Bible is my guide." Do you say that? Then I want to ask you, what are you doing right now to "aggressively pursue" what leads to peace in the body of Christ?

We can all aggressively pursue the things the ways in which we can get someone else to take our side. Where are you passionately going after what's going to build somebody up – especially when you differ over matters of conscience?

In the "now issues," whatever they are, we have to zero in on the pursuit of welcome, the pursuit of peace, and the pursuit of building others up.

It's personal for me

This is all personal for me. Is it for you?

It's personal for my family. We spent the weekend two months ago with Linda's extended family at her mother's memorial service, and two weeks ago with my family at my niece's wedding. This next week we'll be with our children and our new grandbaby during the week. In our families we have the range of views about masks, vaccines, shutdowns, the CDC, and the government.

Because we don't to lose touch with any of them, we take Paul's counsel in Romans 14 to heart. We are both fully vaccinated, but we don't preach vaccines. We wear masks if it makes someone more comfortable, and don't if they and we feel safe. We socially distance if we can be spiritually closer. Would Paul lose a brother over a steak? No. Would he lose a sister over a glass of wine? No. Will I lose my relationship with a son or daughter or parent over a mask? Never!

It's personal for me as a pastor. On Friday and Saturday, we had a Corinth staff and lay leadership retreat. Linda and I both appreciated the affirmations that flowed. The one that matters most to me is that our ministry here has enabled and sustained the unity of the body, precisely because we keep the focus on the essentials and urge us not to ignore but to accept one another in disputable matters.

This pandemic has been emotionally hard. On some level I will admit to fear – that after 28 years of building unity it could unravel because of isolation and strong opinions. I pray not, but it's personal for me. And the only way that doesn't happen is if you choose to aggressively pursue peace.

It's personal for my Lord. Hear my heart. Hear his heart. He's trying to teach you something. I don't mean that God sits in heaven thinking, "Those people need to learn some lessons. So I'm going to send a pandemic." I mean that in the midst of this, Jesus is calling to you. He is speaking to you. He doesn't want you to waste this trial.

There are lessons to be learned – lessons in the church, lessons in your family, but most importantly lessons in you, because that's where you have the greatest responsibility for response to his Holy Spirit. He's not trying to make you mad. He wants to draw you into himself, humble you, teach you to trust, teach you to care, teach you to listen, teach you how much you need the Body of Christ. Hear his voice. Amen.