

Membership Matters: Session 8

Freedom of Conscience and Disagreement

"I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe." – Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms, 1521

Division in the Church

- *I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.* (1 Cor 1:10)
 - o Of all the problems the Corinthian church was facing, it is notable that “division” is the first issue on Paul’s mind that needs to be addressed. (see also Eph 4:1-6; 4:13)
- But what does it mean to be “united in the same mind and the same judgment”? Christians disagree about *a lot* of things!
- Two common approaches to unity in the church:
 - o Conformity (fundamentalism)
 - o Liberty (lowest-common denominator)

How to Disagree Like a Christian Over Disputable Matters:

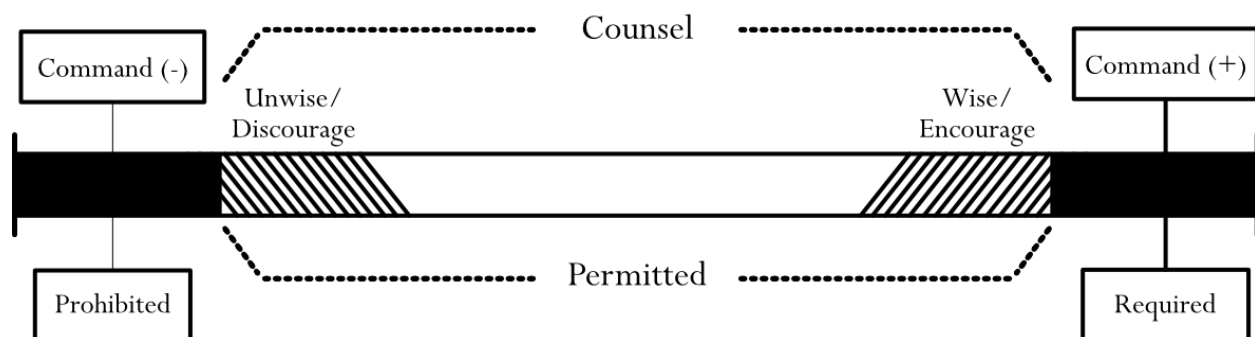
- What is my motive for disagreement?
 - o *“1 Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. 2 If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. 3 But if anyone loves God, he is known by God,”* (1 Cor 8:1-3)
 - o *“And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge...but have not love, I am nothing,”* (1 Cor 13:2)
 - o **My Motive: Love, not Pride**
- Who am I disagreeing with?
 - o *“...And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, **the brother for whom Christ died.**”* (1 Cor 8:11)
 - o *“Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, **for God has welcomed him.** 4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand,”* (Rom 14:3-4).
 - o **If I am disagreeing with another Christian, my tone and posture to them should be one of warm welcome—there is more that unites than divides.**
- What are we disagreeing over?

- *“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions,”* (Rom 14:1).
- *“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. **Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind,**”* (Rom 14:5).
- *“However, not all possess this knowledge...”* (1 Cor 8:7)
- **We are not disagreeing over first or second matter issues, but “opinions”— issues that we can disagree on and remain in happy fellowship together.**
- What is our obligation to the one we disagree with?
 - Avoid stumbling blocks by curtailing your freedom
 - *“But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?... Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”* (1 Cor 8:9-10, 13)
 - Do not judge them
 - *“One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. 4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?”* (Rom 14:2-4)
 - Assume the best
 - *The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God,”* (Rom 14:6)
 - Welcome them
 - *“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 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,”* (Rom 15:5-7)
 - Use wisdom in enjoying your liberty
 - *So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.* (Rom 14:16)
 - *“Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. 21 It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. 22 The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.”* (Rom 14:20-22)
 - *“...I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else’s conscience? 30 If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?”* (1 Cor 10:29-30)

- Carefully and patiently help one another grow
 - *“All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. (1 Cor 10:23)*
 - *So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. (Rom 14:19)*
 - *We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. (Rom 15:1-2)*
 - Paul’s example of helping the weak grow: by focusing on the strong.
 - *Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” (1 Cor 8:4)*
 - *Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. 26 For “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.” (1 Cor 10:25-26)*
 - *I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. (Rom 14:14)*

“Christian freedom is not “I always do what I want.” Nor is it “I always do whatever the other person wants.” It is “I do what brings glory to God. I do what brings others under the influence of the gospel. I do what leads to peace in the church.” – Andy Naselli and J.D. Crowley, Conscience

Conscience Spectrum



(Source: Bobby Jamieson, “Your Conscience on a Spectrum (and a Flowchart)” article from *The Gospel Coalition*, April 20, 2023)

This makes “theological triage” critically important. What happens when it isn’t a disputable matter? Or, what happens on when we disagree over what is or isn’t disputable?