

LESSON 2

Handling Doctrinal Disagreements in the Church

Now may the God who gives endurance and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, according to Christ Jesus, so that you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one mind and one voice.

—Romans 15:5–6

Class Overview: In Lesson 1, we looked at how to spot false teaching in the wild. This lesson moves the question closer to home. The disagreements that do the most damage in congregations are rarely with outsiders—they're with the family. People we worship with, break bread with, serve alongside. The Churches of Christ have a long and honest history with exactly this kind of tension. This lesson is about learning to navigate it without losing either the truth or the relationship.

Introduction

SCENARIO 1: Picture a Sunday bible class. A lively discuss leads to a question about a doctrinal point, and several comments surface from the audience. Two or three people express opinions that surprise and bother you, but you never speak up to disagree or even question how they arrived at those conclusions. You ruminate on those comments for several weeks, but only talk with a friend or your family, never going to the members who originally made the comments, or the elders. Slowly, you and your family begin to withdraw from people at church, eventually leading to you visiting other congregations and finally leaving.

SCENARIO 2: Picture two families driving home from church. They've been attending the same congregation for three years, and they like each other. They fellowship with each other frequently. One Sunday, they end up side by side in the parking lot, and one of them mentions that they've been thinking about the church's position on a fellowship question. Nothing explosive, just a genuine difference of conviction. The other family nods, says something vague, and they go their separate ways. Although bothered by the comments, nothing is ever discussed about the concerns. Six months later, they're not really talking anymore, and one family is considering leaving. It started small... some awkward moments, some comments that didn't land right... and now there's distance. No formal conflict... just drift.

This sort of thing happens all the time. Disagreements don't usually fracture congregations, but frequently cause discontent, disunity, and stifle growth. It's normal to have disagreements, but the frustrating thing is few ever follow up. How do we know the opinions, even of leaders, are solid and biblical? Who is reliable to answer questions and settle problems? How can we prevent this? If you can't tell whether a disagreement matters or not, how can you know how to address it? A clear framework is essential.

Not All Disagreements are Equal

Here's a caveat that has helped the church for a long time, even when it hasn't always been articulated clearly: *not every doctrinal question carries the same weight*. Treating them all as if they do can create one of two problems. The first is *capitulation* - treating everything as negotiable until you've lost your grip on what's actually non-negotiable. The second is *fragmentation* - treating every difference as a breaking point, until the body is divided over questions that never needed to divide it.

The Restoration plea of, "speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent," was proposed to help solve exactly this problem. It was a call to unity built on Scripture, not on tradition or opinion. Despite such good intentions, it has often been twisted and changed and diluted when men have failed to honestly evaluate and consider these principles. Many have lost sight of the framework this plea provides. Can we use it to be more precise in considering our beliefs? *Perhaps we should consider thinking in three layers or tiers:*

Tier One: Gospel Essentials

These are the doctrines where an error doesn't just create a mistake: *it creates a different religion* - The bodily resurrection of Christ; the full deity and humanity of Jesus; the authority and sufficiency of Scripture as our only rule of faith and practice; the necessity of responding to the gospel in faith, repentance, confession, and baptism for the forgiveness of sins; salvation through the grace of God and not our own works. If someone denies these, we're not disagreeing about a secondary matter; we're talking about something that cuts to the heart of what the New Testament teaches. This is where Paul plants his flag in Galatians 1:8:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, a curse be on him!

—Galatians 1:8

No negotiating there. These aren't positions we can hold loosely. They're the core. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul calls the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ matters he passed on "as most important" (v. 3–4). Everything else gets built on that foundation—not underneath it.

In the early New Testament church, the only other bedrock issue (which we no longer have to face) was the insistence by some Jewish Christians that gentile converts had to be circumcised as a prerequisite for inclusion in the church. The force by which Paul fought these Judaizing Christians shows how serious this heresy was, trying to turn the new covenant of grace into one of works.

Tier Two: Important Convictions

There are other doctrines that are more difficult for Christians to consider, and include our understanding of such matters as church organization/ rule, how to conduct worship, the role of women in the church, fellowship between churches, evangelism, and church discipline. These are matters which also had a significant degree of importance even in the early church, as they are specifically discussed in Acts and various epistles.

Understanding them depends on getting our chosen paradigms and hermeneutics in line with scripture, which is difficult but critical. In the Churches of Christ, we try to follow a strict and literal biblical framework, based on the closest we can come to the original message and intention of the biblical writings. This is not always so, however, in much of the remainder of the modern Christian world. Personal preferences, current cultural standards, and contemporary spiritual mores have great influence in the paradigms many use to evaluate and frame these issues.

A few examples include:

- Does the church have primacy over the word, or vice versa?
- Is man free to add or detract from New Testament practices (as long as the change or addition is not directly forbidden)?
- Is the silence of the scriptures a real consideration?
- Is worship primarily for God or man?
- Should modern cultural thinking and practices have control or sway in today's church?
- Can the current church accommodate and incorporate cultural practices that formerly were considered sinful (such as sex and gender issues) due to a new understanding of grace?

These and several other such ideas have caused confusion, creating situations and issues which divide and separate us. Framing our understandings on human reasoning helps explain why we have so many major denominational institutions today. The positions many Christians arrive at are often driven by emotions and grounded in pride, envy, tolerance, and (selfish) preferences – we may be sincere, but we may not really be in focus with God. Interestingly, given enough time and faithful study, most Christians eventually arrive at similar final understandings of these Tier Two convictions. Our feelings and reason can only get us so far trying to “figure out” the truth. Just remember the old rule: “closeness to God is not a matter of feelings but a matter of obedience.”

Unfortunately, many Christians don't look at these issues as questions that should be resolved to preserve fellowship. Many believe they are issues we can overlook, or over which we can “agree to disagree” and still live in perfect harmony. For some, they become weapons by which they can condemn others and judge their standing before God. These situations are centuries old. The early church certainly had factions (see 1 Corinthians 3:4-6 for a significant example), but Paul condemns them and calls for all of them to be abandoned and issues *resolved*. There was **never** talk of allowing different churches or denominations that were “separate but equal.”

Tier Three: Matters of Preference and Conscience

Romans 14 is the biblical playbook for Tier Three. These are questions and issues which are primarily faced inside the church itself, with those already in fellowship. These are mostly matters of tradition, custom, conscience, and opinion. They are *not* issues of salvation, and really not even major issues of disagreement between “mainstream” denominations (although all denominations have their own lists). Paul wasn’t naive about this, and he still took these matters seriously, knowing they could easily tear the body apart as well. His letters are full of real friction: food sacrificed to idols, feasts, and personal holy days. He didn’t pretend those disagreements didn’t matter. But he also knew that a community able to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) has to be able to do something most of us were never really taught: tell the difference between a hill worth dying on and a genuinely secondary matter.

We have our own modern list of such issues in the Church of Christ: Institutional vs Non-Institutional, financial or spiritual cooperation between churches, sponsoring para-church organizations (such as children’s homes and care facilities), supporting independent benevolent organizations, using one cup versus multiple cups in communion, head coverings for women in worship, eating in the church building, recreation or kitchen facilities in the building, celebrating (or not) secular religious holidays – just to name a few.

They are issues about which people feel very strongly sometimes, but one would have great difficulty proving their essential nature by scripture. Paul’s answer to such considerations is basically: *stop judging each other over this. Whoever eats, eats for the Lord* (Romans 14:6), and *why do you judge your brother or sister?* (v. 10). Consider what Paul says in Romans 14:5: *Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind.* Conscience is important, and we should never violate our consciences or force others to do so in non-essential matters. Paul does not dismiss the question - he's saying a person's conviction on genuinely disputed but non-essential issues needs to be their own, worked out before God, and not just inherited. Such beliefs should never be used as a lever to exclude or judge people Christ has welcomed.

Disagreement is Inevitable – It can Drive a Wedge – Or Create Unity

Let’s go back to the very beginning again. When someone walks through our doors and sits down to worship, we do not first ask them about their salvation or doctrinal positions. All are welcome to worship, whether a baptized believer (saved by grace), a stranger, a denominational friend or family member, or even an atheist (although unlikely). At some point, however, the desire and responsibility to identify as a member with full fellowship surfaces, and the situation changes greatly. There is a problem when one enters the assembly and insists that we consider them a brother or sister when their obedience to the gospel is in question. Similarly, brothers and sisters who enter our doors for fellowship and insist on clinging to sinful practices or promote universally false doctrinal beliefs and perceptions (and imposing them on others) would not be acceptable. These things create spiritual barriers that must be resolved before being crossed. Even our denominational friends would agree there are limits.

Now, what do we do when all the *other* doctrinal positions, traditions, and personal opinions walk through our doors? What should the church accept and not accept? We must first remember the church does not belong to us, but to the Lord. He is the one who adds to the membership (Acts 2:47), not us.

Reading Acts 2:38-47 makes it clear that those who accept the Lord in faith, confess His Lordship, and are baptized for the forgiveness of sins are considered part of the body, the church. God chose baptism to be our point of contact with Jesus' blood and with His saving grace. We see *no other actions of faith or tests of doctrinal purity* first placed on new converts to become part of the church, the kingdom on earth.

Don't panic! Of course, spiritual responsibility and growth don't end at baptism. Remember Matthew 7:21: *Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father in heaven.* Most new members have little scriptural knowledge. Some bring understandings that are not really based on the bible, but more on culture and traditions and family opinions. Some may even have selfish or harmful agendas. *It was no different in the First Century church!*

Let's consider some examples of how the early church dealt with issues. When Aquila and Pricilla heard the incorrect preaching of Apollos (Acts 18:24-28), they did not reject him or attack him for his incomplete understanding of baptism (teaching only the baptism of John). Rather, they taught him the true understanding of baptism in Christ. They did not take him aside and force him to first undergo an intense course of indoctrination into scripture and the subtle nuances of Paul's teaching before speaking another word. Along with others, they *encouraged him to join with and start teaching* the saints in Achaia, and he immediately became a powerful and effective preacher of the word throughout the brotherhood.

When the entire Jerusalem church assembled in Acts 15, James and the apostles encouraged the full congregation to fully accept the newly baptized gentile Christians (*despite* all their superstitions and pagan understandings), with only **four** mentioned abstentions placed on them so they could enjoy full fellowship. The apostles, James, Paul, and the entire assembly were all in agreement. Continued fellowship was understood, and all misconceptions and false beliefs did not *first* have to be resolved. Talk about a complicated "doctrinal" mess!!

We would be ignorant to assume that Acts 15 was the end of all confusion and doctrinal conflict in the Jerusalem church. The epistles of Paul, Peter, and John testify to the ongoing need for doctrinal instruction. Over time and through earnest prayer and teaching, the church slowly resolved these difficulties and immature understandings with the apostle's teaching through love and persistence, to preserve their "*unity in the bond of peace.*" (Ephesians 4:3)." Growing in understanding of God's will was a daily labor of love for the early Christian converts.

In Jerusalem after Pentecost, we see, "...*they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer... with one accord they continued to meet daily in the temple courts and to break bread from house to house...*" (Acts 2:42-46). They were not just socializing with new friends, but absorbing the words of the apostles and discussing it with one another every day, as well as putting it into practice. They learned to understand one another, discuss and ask questions, and resolve problems.

We also see the same example and spirit in the Berean Christians (Acts 17:11), who daily examined the scriptures to verify the gospel and Paul's teachings. Even with all their efforts, doctrinal issues continued to surface and required ongoing teaching and instruction in the early church – at least according to several NT epistles.

So, what *can* the early church teach us about doctrine and unity?

1. It is *possible* to discuss controversial doctrines and ideas and reach real conclusions
2. Not only is it possible, but it is *necessary* to do so.
3. We can successfully discuss beliefs/ doctrines and do so in a spirit of love, preserving unity.
4. Such discussions should be an *ongoing* process.

Today, Romans 12:2 still encourages us to be transformed from worldly thinking by renewing our minds in daily prayer and bible study. 2 Timothy 2:15 reminds us: *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.* In James 1:5, we find: *If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault (judging or blaming one another), and it will be given to you.* Ephesians 4:13-14 states: *...until we attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to-and-fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.*

If we believe 2 Peter 1:3 (*His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.*), then it seems we also have the ability to study scripture and successfully answer even difficult questions about life and doctrinal issues. If we flounder (see Ephesians 4:14), it's usually because we have not fully used these resources to reach appropriate conclusions. We have not prayed for wisdom and understanding and have not emptied our hearts of pride.

When we don't regularly study and discuss these questions in a loving spirit, as the early church did, then we start to use human reasoning to argue about correctness, start judge one another, and divide the church. It's easy to hide in the 'safety' of our previous comfortable teachings and traditions... just like the Pharisees of Jesus' time, and the denominational world and Roman Catholic church today.

We know each other socially but often fail to get involved in one another's spiritual lives. Many throw up their hands in frustration with doctrinal differences and simply "agree to disagree," without making much effort to examine them in a loving and mature way. Martin Luther King Jr once said, "People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other."

How to Approach Difficult Discussions

1. Always live righteously, so that your words will be considered and not rejected by your questionable behavior.
2. Get your own house in order so that you have nothing to fear when you stand before God.
3. Know where you stand - make up your own mind first, with God's direction and advice.
4. Before you speak, pray for and with all involved in the discussion.
5. Always focus on ways to unite, not divide.
6. Remember to be patient and kind – read passages such as 2 Timothy 2:24, James 3:17, and 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.
7. Listen closely and don't interrupt – don't "talk past" other people.

8. Give others the time to think about what is said, for them to ask questions and form conclusions.
9. Separate the merit of a doctrinal position from the value of the person – “judge righteous judgment,” and not people.
10. Don’t lecture or “talk down to” others.
11. Don’t criticize or demean those who see things differently – hear what Paul said in Romans 15:1: *Now we who are strong have an obligation to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and not to please ourselves. —Romans 15:1.*
12. Even if you disagree about nearly everything, you can still be kind to one another – bringing others to the truth is usually an ongoing process.
13. Show up when opportunities arise... even if things still aren’t settled; how can we learn and discuss if we’re not there? Hebrews 10:25 reminds us: *not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.*

Conclusion

It’s important to realize that a bible discussion is not a contest or a power play. Our goal is not to hammer one another into doctrinal submission. Although the elders are the spiritual leaders of the church and may need to settle disagreements, they are not always the last word on all bible understanding.

We cannot be scholars who always claim to perfectly speak for God, lest we find ourselves in Job’s precarious position before God: *Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now, gird up your loins (brace yourselves, as for a challenge) like a man, and I will ask you, and you will instruct Me! (Job 38:2-3).* Ouch!! We also must remember Romans 12:18: *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.* And don’t forget: *Accept anyone who is weak in faith, but don’t argue about disputed matters.* (Romans 14:1).

Truth without love is a wrecking ball. Love without truth isn’t love, but just niceness in a theological costume. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:6 that love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth. Real love and truth are never in tension. They’re designed to travel together. As we each grow closer to Jesus and to the cross as we mature, shouldn’t we also grow closer to each other and our collective understanding of the word? When we reach a point that we feel we have “everything put together” and have no need to listen to others’ understandings, we close ourselves off from learning about their spiritual journeys. We also prevent others from learning what we may bring to the table. Another really good old adage to remember: “You don’t have to be wrong for me to be right.”

Memory Verse

Accept anyone who is weak in faith, but don’t argue about disputed matters.

— Romans 14:1

For Discussion

1. The Churches of Christ have our own history with internal disagreements — instrumental music, church cooperation, fellowship questions, and more. Without naming individuals or congregations, can you think of one of these disputes? What tier do you think it belongs in? Did the way people handled it match that tier?
2. The Restoration plea said, "Speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent." In practice, how do we decide when the Bible is speaking clearly enough to make something a Tier One conviction? What makes that line hard to draw?
3. Paul tells the Romans not to argue about "disputed matters" (Romans 14:1). But he also tells the Galatians that anyone preaching a false gospel is under a curse. How do you hold those two instructions together?
4. Describe a time when you stayed in a difficult conversation rather than letting the relationship drift. What made it possible to stay? What did it cost you?
5. Is there a doctrinal disagreement you're currently navigating—in your family, your small group, your friendships? How does the Tier framework change how you see it?

6. Lesson 3 takes this conversation home – literally. What’s one thing you hope to pass on to the next generation about how to handle doctrinal disagreements well, rather than just telling them what to believe?