

Disagreement Without Division

A Workshop on Christian Conflict

The Importance of Disagreement

“When Christians avoid principled conflict on things that matter because they fear disunity or division, they cripple the church in three ways. **First**, Scripture commands that we guard the truth within our ranks. But where arguments are few, error abounds. **Second**, believers are denied the opportunity to learn how to argue among themselves in a fair, reasonable, and gracious way. **Third**, the outcome for fight-phobic churches is often not genuine oneness but a contrived unanimity, a shallow and artificial peace.” — Greg Koukl (*Tactics*, 41–43)

God’s Call For Unity

“I give you a new command: **Love one another**. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” - John 13:34–35

Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always **be humble and gentle**. Be **patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love**. ³ Make **every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace**. ⁴ For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. - Ephesians 4:1–4 NLT

The Big Questions

How do we maintain sincere, Christian **unity** amid
sincere, Christian **disagreement**??

How do we **disagree** without **dividing**?

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A. Ranking the Issues¹

1. **Primary** Issues

- Issues that are **fundamental** to the faith
- Different opinion means a different **religion** altogether
- Define the **boundaries** of the Christian Faith

For I passed on to you as **most important** what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. — 1 Corinthians 15:3–4

He said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is **the greatest and most important command**. ³⁹ The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.” — Matthew 22:37–40

Examples: The Authority of the Bible, Creation, The Trinity, The Deity of Jesus, The Holiness of God, Salvation by Grace through Faith, The Virgin Birth, The Second-Coming of Jesus, the Substitutionary Death of Jesus, etc.

A Common Danger: Doctrinal **Indifference**

- “Who am I to judge?” (Matthew 7:1–5)
- “I’m not perfect, so I can’t say what someone should believe / do”
- “Doctrine is so divisive.”

A Biblical Response

- Jesus *commands* us to judge (John 7:24), but not to judge **hypocritically**
- We are not the standard, but **Scripture Is** (2 Timothy 3:14–17)
- Doctrine is divisive—it divides **truth** from **error** (2 Peter 3:16–18)
- Division on these points is the **right kind of division**.

¹ Much of what follows is adapted from Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*.

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2. Secondary Issues

- Issues that are **serious**, but not *central* to the faith.
- Difference of opinion doesn't mean a different *religion*, but sometimes indicate a different **denomination**.
- *Do not* define the boundaries of the Christian faith
- Determine the distinct **beliefs** & **practices** of a local church.

Examples: Speaking in Tongues, Predestination, Gender Roles in Ministry, The Days of Creation, The Return of Christ, Baptism., Worship Style, etc.

Important Point

When we make these issues (and others like them) essential boundary markers (“You can't be a Christian unless...”), then we **seriously misrepresent** the Christian faith and the message of Jesus.

Common Danger #2: Doctrinal **Obsession**

- Views all doctrines / beliefs as **equally** important
- Willing to fight / divide over every issue — even secondary ones.
- Tends to view everything in terms of either **faithfulness** or **compromise**.

A Biblical Response

- Everything in Scripture is equally **inspired**, but it is not equally **important** (1 Corinthians 15:3–4; Matthew 22:34–40)
- Scripture condemns a **quarrelsome spirit** (2 Timothy 2:14; Titus 3:9–11)
- A difference of **conviction**, doesn't always mean the presence of **compromise** (Romans 14).

A Critical Distinction: A Critical **Mind** vs. A Critical **Spirit**²

A Critical Mind

- Grace + Truth Together
- Disagrees, but pursues *unity*.
- Tone is characterized by gentleness, understanding, and wisdom (Proverbs 15:1–2; 18:2)

A Critical Spirit

- Heavy on truth; empty on grace.
- Disagrees, but pursues *self-justification*.
- Tone is characterized by harshness, sarcasm, and/or insult.

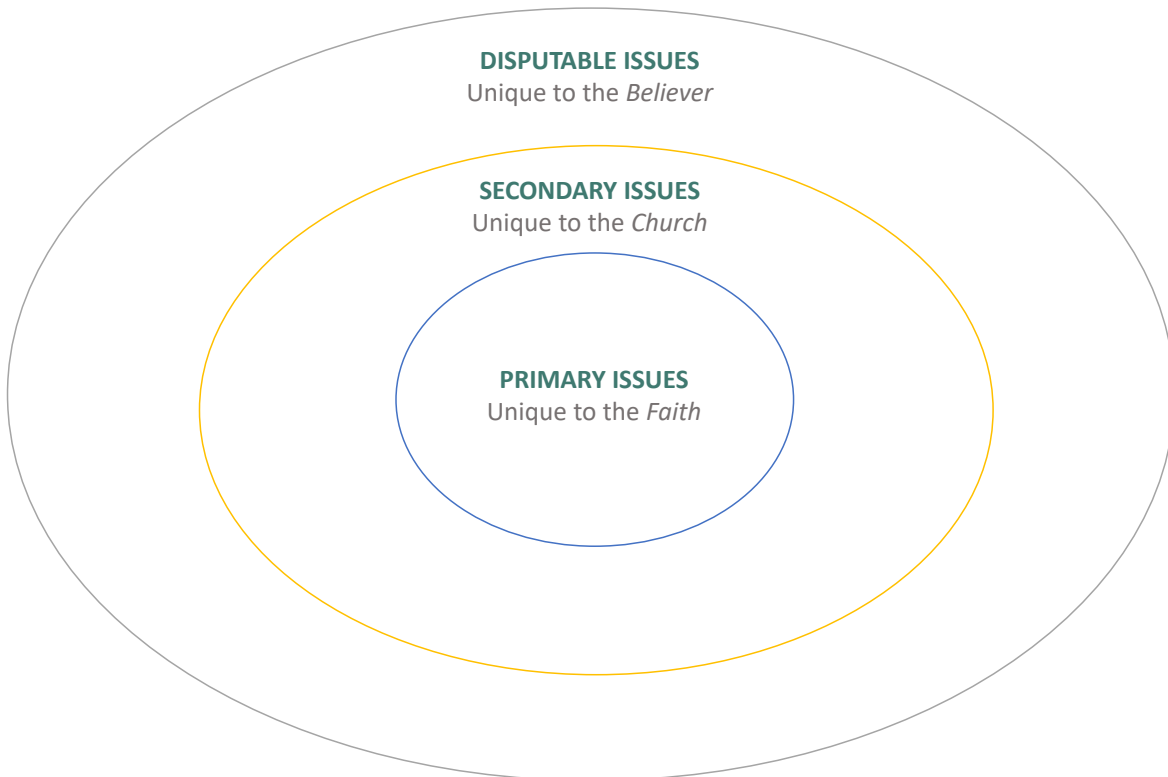
² See the great articles online by Trevin Wax, “A Critical Mind vs. A Critical Spirit” and Eric Geiger, “5 Differences Between a Critical Mind and a Critical Spirit.”

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3. Disputable issues

- Issues that are important, but not as *serious* or *central* to the faith
- Difference of opinion means a matter of conscience.
- Have *no bearing* on the nature of Christianity
- Often determines the beliefs and behavior of an individual Christian.



Examples: Listening to secular music, watching secular movies, drinking alcohol, celebrating Christmas, celebrating Halloween, Celebrating Easter, Homeschool vs. Public School, Watching / Reading *Harry Potter*, Watching / Reading *Twilight*, Vaccinations, Natural Birth vs. Medical Birth, Breastfeeding vs. Bottle Feeding, Wearing makeup, Going into debt / tithing, dating vs. courtship, tattoos & body piercings, smoking cigars, small churches vs. mega churches, the number of children you have, watching martial arts on tv., etc. etc. etc.

Can you think of any more examples?

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Common Danger #3: Doctrinal ***Distraction***. A.K.A. — “Misplaced Evangelism”

- Becoming more ***vocal*** and ***insistent*** about these beliefs than about the gospel
- More burdened for people to embrace our ***preferences*** than for them to embrace Jesus
- We misrepresent Jesus

A Biblical Response

- Check your heart: why does this matter ***so much*** to you?
- Check your heart: does this matter ***more than it should?***
- We have no Biblical right to ***bind the conscience*** of others to our preferences on these matters.

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B. What Does Scripture Say? | Digging Deep on *Disputable* Issues³

- 1 Corinthians 8–10 & Romans 14–15:13
- **Two Major Issues**
 1. Jews eating meat *previously sacrificed to idols* (1 Corinthians 8–10)
 2. Jews eating meat *period* (Romans 14–15:13)

Some Important Observations

- God doesn't *rebuke* the presence of this disagreement
- Instead, God provides principles to *regulate* it.
- Apparently God doesn't want *uniformity of opinion* as much as *unity of relationship*
- God wants our love for each other to grow in the context of *diversity* and *uniqueness*.

Navigating Disputable Issues

1. Distinguish between matters of *command* and matters of *conscience*

- Matters of *command* require *universal* obedience
- Matters of *conscience* require *individual* obedience
- Matters of *command* are matters of *submission* for all believers
- Matters of *conscience* are matters of *freedom* for all believers

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. Still, *to someone who considers a thing to be unclean, to that one it is unclean*...Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. **23** But *whoever doubts stands condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith, and everything that is not from faith is sin*. — Romans 14:14, 22b–23

³ Much of what follows is adapted from Andrew David Naselli and J.D. Crowley, *Conscience: What it Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* and Garry Friessen with J. Robin Maxson, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, 374–419.

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2. Cultivate your own convictions & let your brother / sister cultivate theirs

- Don't turn your preferences / convictions into commands
- Be strict with yourself and generous with others
- Remember: not every "can" is an "ought"

Welcome anyone who is weak in faith, but don't argue about disputed matters. **2** One person believes he may eat anything, while one who is weak eats only vegetables. **3** *One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat must not judge one who does, because God has accepted him....Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind.* — Romans 14:1–3, 6

3. When Necessary, Lay Aside your Freedoms to Love Your Brother / Sister

- When your choices would lead a brother / sister to *sin against their conscience*.
- This = what it means to be a "stumbling block" to a brother / sister.
- Doesn't mean: "I can't do anything that *upsets* or *offends* them."

13 Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead *decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister.* **14** I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that *nothing is unclean in itself.* Still, *to someone who considers a thing to be unclean, to that one it is unclean.* **15** For *if your brother or sister is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy, by what you eat, someone for whom Christ died.* — Romans 14:13–15 (cf. 1 Timothy 4:1–5)

7 However, not everyone has this knowledge. Some have been so used to idolatry up until now that when they eat food sacrificed to an idol, their conscience, being weak, is defiled. **8** Food will not bring us close to God. We are not worse off if we don't eat, and we are not better if we do eat. **9** But *be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak.* **10** For if someone sees you, the one who has knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, *won't his weak conscience be encouraged to eat food offered to idols?* **11** So *the weak person, the brother or sister for whom Christ died, is ruined by your knowledge.* **12** Now *when you sin like this against brothers and sisters and wound their weak conscience, you are sinning against Christ.* **13** Therefore, *if food causes my brother or sister to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I won't cause my brother or sister to fall..* — 1 Corinthians 8:7–13

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4. Honor & Accept One Another

- Refuse to **rank** believers in comparison to yourself
- Resist the urge to be **self-righteous** — “How could they do *that*?”
- **Proactively bless** and **build up** your brothers / sisters who differ.

Now we who are strong have an obligation to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and not to please ourselves. **2 Each one of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to build him up...** Therefore **welcome one another**, just as Christ also welcomed you, to the glory of God. — Romans 15:1–2, 7

“Everything is permissible,” but **not everything is beneficial**. “Everything is permissible,” but **not everything builds up**. **24 No one is to seek his own good, but the good of the other person.** — 1 Corinthians 10:23–24

Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters. **Take the lead in honoring one another.** — Romans 12:10

5. Remember: it's about His Kingdom, not Yours

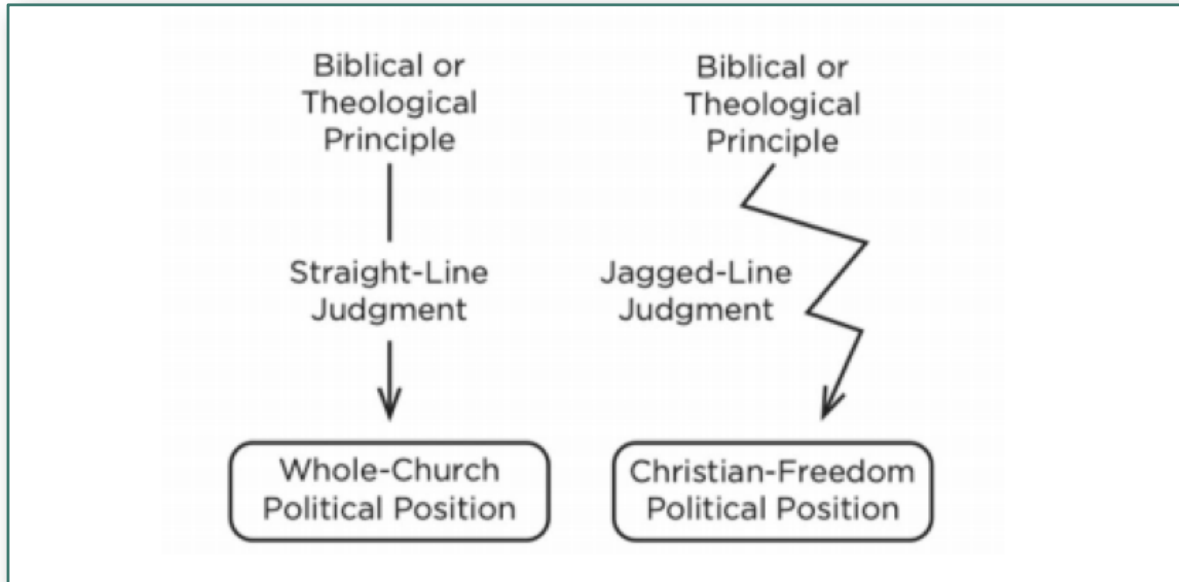
16 Therefore, do not let your good be slandered, **17** for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but **righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.** — Romans 14:16–17

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe so that you may overflow with hope **by the power of the Holy Spirit.** — Romans 15:13

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C. What About Politics?⁴

- How a believer **votes** falls in the domain of disputable issues.
- The **issues themselves** may fall under one of two categories
 1. **Straight** Line: there is a straight-line from *biblical principle* to *political policy*.
 2. **Lagged** Line: there is a jagged-line from *biblical principle* to *political policy*.



Straight-Line Issues

1. Sanctity of Human Life (abortion, voting rights for women, voting rights for minorities, etc.)
2. Sanctity of Marriage
3. Religious Liberty

Jagged-Line Issues

- Taxation
- Immigration
- Healthcare
- Gun Laws
- Economic Development
- Education Reform
- Civil Liberties
- Foreign Policy
- Homeland Security
- Military Funding
- Energy Issues
- Environmental Issues
- Police Reform
- The Size of Government

⁴ Much of this is adapted from Jonathan Leeman and Andy Naselli, *How Can I Love Church Members With Different Politics?*

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A Big Issue in 2020: Racial Justice

- Straight-line or Jagged-line??
- The Bible is clear:
 - Racism is a **sin** (Matthew 22:39; Acts 10:34; James 2:1–9)
 - **All** people are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27; Acts 17:26)
 - God’s people should work toward **justice** (Micah 6:8; Matthew 23:23)
 - The gospel powerfully creates **racial-unity** in the church (Ephesians 2:11–3:6; Revelation 7:9)

Here’s the Question: Which **policies** best promote racial justice in America today?

- The Republican party believes **theirs** does
- The Democratic party believes **theirs** does
- What’s the straight line between **biblical principle** and **political policy**?
- Racial justice is a **jagged** line issue—there’s simply no straight line from these biblical principles to the political policies that would honor and apply them.

What this Does NOT Mean

- It doesn’t mean churches can neglect our **call** to pursue racial unity in Christ (Ephesians 2:11–3:6)
- It doesn’t mean churches can be **passive** about any racial injustice that emerge in a local congregation.
- It doesn’t mean we should be **silent** on social issues that we perceive to be racial injustices

What this Does Mean

- How we pursue racial justice in the **public square** is a matter of **individual conscience** and **freedom**, not a matter of **Biblical doctrine** or **command**—it’s **a disputable issue**.
- We must “**accept** one another” in Christ, regardless of disagreement (Romans 15:7)
- Our **love for each other** in Christ must be **stronger than our political convictions**.
- We must refrain from declaring “**The** Christian Position / Policy” on jagged-line political issues.

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How Should you Vote Next Week?

1. **Prayerfully** - Seek *His* face
2. **Fearfully** - Vote for *His* approval and no one else's
3. **Thoughtfully** - Do your *own* research; research *both* sides
4. **Hopefully** - Remember who your *King* is
5. **Peacefully** - Commit to love & honor your brother / sister *who votes differently*.

Recommended Resources

Books on Unity in the Church

- *Beautiful Resistance* by Jon Tyson
- *Conscience* by Andy Naselli & JD. Crowley
- *Finding the Right Hills to Die on* by Gavin Ortlund
- *Pursuing Peace* by Robert Jones
- *A Gentle Answer* by Scott Sauls

Book on Christian Theology & Ethics

- *Christian Beliefs* by Wayne Grudem
- *Introducing Christian Ethics* by Scott B. Rae
- *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem
- *Moral Choices* by Scott B. Rae

Books on a Christian Approach to Politics

- *How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?* By Jonathan Leeman and Andy Naselli
- *Letters to an American Christian* by Bruce Ashford
- *Before You Vote* by David Platt
- *How the Nations Rage* by Jonathan Leeman

Books on Racial Justice

- *Bloodlines: Race, Cross, and the Christian* by John Piper
- *Beyond Racial Gridlock* by George Yancey
- *Generous Justice* by Timothy Keller

Websites & Ministries

- The Gospel Coalition (www.tgc.org)
- Desiring God (www.desiringgod.org)