

Intro

In the local church you'll find different convictions. Some of us are more conservative. Some of us see more freedoms in Scripture. Say you're in a local church and two believers have different convictions about appropriate attire on Sunday morning. One person thinks men are required to wear suits and women need to wear dresses that go down to the ankles. Another person thinks everyone can wear shorts, t-shirts, and sandals.

Both individuals subscribe to our church's doctrinal statement and church covenant. Both are firmly convinced and they're not backing down. The matter is getting contentious. The conservative believer is passing judgment their looser brother's conduct. How could they be so disrespectful to God? The looser believer is mocking their conservative brother's convictions. What a legalist. How do we handle this? This morning Paul tells us:

BIG IDEA: Love your brothers and sisters with different convictions

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Passage Focus

- 1) Weak in faith is the believer with misinformed convictions
- 2) Strong in faith is the believer with accurate convictions (14:14, 20)
- 3) How should they relate to one another?

Point 1: Welcome each other (14:1-12)

Explanation

Quarrels existed between the strong and the weak (14:1). The strong ("We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves." – **Rom 15:1**) have an obligation to welcome the "weak in faith." The strong knew they had freedom to eat anything. The weak thought they could only eat vegetables (14:2). The issue is likely Jewish laws relating to the Old Covenant. Under the Old Covenant, Israel was restricted by dietary laws (e.g., no eating pigs; Lev 11:7-8). Some thought the dietary laws were still binding. When Christ came, he ratified the New Covenant with his shed blood on the cross. The New Covenant replaced the Old Covenant, making it obsolete (Heb 8:6-7, 13). The strong knew dietary laws were no longer binding and they had freedom to eat anything. But how should they relate to the weak brother who thought they could only eat vegetables?

Since God has welcomed both, they should welcome each other. The strong cannot despise (attitude or treatment that communicates someone is worthless) the one who won't eat meat, and the weak can't judge (evaluate negatively = e.g., that they're rejected by God) the one who eats meat (14:3). The weak were rebuked for passing judgment because judgment belongs to God (14:4).

In verse five, Paul shifts to another debate: days. The question Jewish believers faced was, what should we do with the Sabbath? What should we do with the feasts? Some thought these days still had special significance. Others thought all days were the same. And both groups had honorable intentions. The one who continued to observe the Sabbath and dietary laws, did it to honor God. And those who ate meat did it with thanksgiving

(14:6). To live for God's honor is fitting since we exist for God, we belong to him (14:7-8), and Christ died to be our Lord (14:9).

The problem was believers were passing judgment on one another instead of welcoming one another (14:10). This sort of judgment is inappropriate because God is our judge (14:11-12). We can't usurp God's role as judge by rejecting those people God has accepted.

Application

How should we welcome one another at Palermo Christian Church?

1. Paul isn't saying accept sin

He's saying accept ignorance. He isn't saying don't challenge your brothers and sisters when they're sinning. The issue is wrong convictions, not disobeying God. Both groups have the right motive. No one's breaking God's law. It's just that one side is placing restrictions on themselves that aren't necessary. The issue is unnecessary restrictions, not rejecting God's Word.

2. Paul isn't saying we can't discuss these matters

Don't quarrel, not don't discuss with civility. He's saying don't despise as worthless those believers with mistaken convictions. And he's saying don't pass negative judgment on believers who don't subscribe to your restrictive convictions. Both responses ironically end conversation.

Examples: alcohol; gender roles; dress; entertainment

3. Motives matter even when someone's misinformed

Even though they were wrong, the weak refused to eat meat and observed the Sabbath for the right reason: to honor God. If someone has a mistaken conviction, be charitable when their motive is honoring God. We can have the right convictions, yet sin by despising people with mistaken convictions. Two of us can see things from a different perspective and yet both can have good motives. In our present distress, one motivated by love is concerned for the safety of their brothers and sisters and insists on restrictive safety measures. Another might see things a little differently and, motivated by concern for another's spiritual good, insists on reestablishing fellowship in our body without being as restrictive on safety measures. Both have this in common: their motive is godly. Love sees the good motives in their brother, even when our convictions differ.

4. We can't be more restrictive than God

We need to welcome those God welcomes as his children, even if their convictions are different than ours. Some convictions are correct. Others are unnecessary, but the issue for Paul is welcoming each other. Even when we know they're convictions are wrong. Even when we think someone isn't conservative enough. We should ask ourselves: would someone from a different Christian background, say charismatic convictions, be welcomed at Palermo Christian Church? I would suspect the answer is yes. A word of caution. I'm not saying welcome everyone as a believer regardless of their beliefs and conduct. I'm saying welcome genuine believers who can subscribe to our doctrinal statement and church covenant into our fellowship, even if some of their convictions are different than yours.

Entertainment Illustration

I'm generally conservative on entertainment. Perhaps you're more conservative? Before watching a movie, I go on pluggedin.com to find out what kind of sexual content is present (humor and visible) as well as what foul language is present. I might also consider if the movie is about rooting for the bad guys to succeed (like a movie about a heist that inspires you to root for the criminals to pull it off). I'm not so much concerned about violence.

I use a DVD player called Clearplay that you can customize to cut out immodest dress and curse words. I won't get a DVD with nudity. This reflects my convictions about entertainment. To some of you I'm wise and faithful to Scripture. To others I'm a legalist or weaker brother. We all have our unique convictions. Do you have any convictions that others in the church would think are crazy? Yet we're called to love one another and unite for gospel advance. Different convictions doesn't mean we can't talk about entertainment. We should ponder how what we're taking in is shaping us. But it does mean we can't mock each other for conservative values, and we can't judge as ungodly those who don't have as stringent guidelines with entertainment. We need to be convinced in our own minds and we need to welcome each other. We can't become quarrelsome.

Theological triage

1. First-level doctrines

Doctrines that are essential to the Christian faith: Trinity, deity of Christ, authority of Scripture, justification by faith alone, substitutionary atonement, etc. Beliefs that are found in our doctrinal statement. Denying first-level doctrines = denying Christianity. The disagreement in the Roman church wasn't over first-level doctrines. If it was, Paul would have reacted strongly like he did in Galatians 1.

2. Second-level doctrines

Second-order issues require agreement in order to function well in a local church: baptism, how the church is led, etc. Some of these are found in our church doctrinal statement. Disagreement in these matters hinders a local church's ability to function. While Baptists and Presbyterians agree on first-level doctrines and recognize each other as Christians, their disagreement on second-level doctrines usually prevents fellowship in the same local church.

3. Third-level doctrines

Third-level doctrines are matters where we can disagree with one another, yet maintain fellowship in the same local church: end times, age of the earth, use of alcohol, etc. These are not found in our church doctrinal statement. We can fellowship and function together despite these differences.

To the unbeliever

Maybe you're visiting with us and wouldn't identify as a Christian. Maybe you're wondering, "what is going on here?" This morning we're thinking through how Christians who are united together by their love for Jesus, yet have different convictions about certain issues, navigate life together.

Point 2: Build each other up (14:13-21)

Explanation

Paul appeals to the strong brother. Instead of passing judgment, we must resolve to never put a stumbling block in another believer's way (14:13). Don't use your freedom to cause a fellow believer to sin. Paul is in total agreement with the strong:

Romans 14:14 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.

But just because they're understanding is accurate, it doesn't mean they're always free to eat meat. If they grieve and destroy a weak believer by eating meat, they're not walking in love (14:15). Since the weak believer is convinced certain foods are unclean (14:14), if the strong believer were to eat meat in their presence, they could encourage the weak to violate their conscience. Encouraging our brothers and sisters to violate their conscience is not loving. Love says, "I'll give up my freedoms so that I don't encourage my weaker brother to

violate their conscience, because I don't want to do anything that would harm their spiritual well-being and cause them to sin." This would make eating meat evil (14:16).

Since there are greater priorities in the kingdom of God than eating and drinking (e.g., righteousness, peace, and joy), Paul concludes:

So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. (14:19)

Instead of exercising our freedoms, Paul says pursue unity (peace) in the local church. And pursue the edification (strengthen, build up, make more able) of each other. Don't unnecessarily cause division by exercising your freedoms. Instead, seek your brother's good.

Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. (14:20)

Something as simple as food can destroy a local church. Something as simple as a mask can destroy God's work here at Palermo Christian Church. We have freedoms ("everything indeed is clean" = Paul sides with the strong), but don't use your freedoms if they'll cause a fellow believer to violate their conscience. Paul sums it up:

It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. (14:21)

Application

Paul agrees with the strong. Biblically, they are within their rights to eat meat or drink wine. But our brother's edification is more important than our freedoms. So Paul counsels the strong on their responsibility: edify because of love. Don't flaunt your freedoms. Instead, exercise restraint. The strong don't abstain because the weak are right. The strong abstain because they love their weaker brother. They don't want to train their weaker brothers to violate their conscience.

The specific principle is give up your freedoms when they would cause a fellow believer to violate their conscience. But there's a general principle as well: give up your freedoms in order to build up the faith of your brothers and sisters. For example, masks. We may be free to go without masks. But what about our fellow believers who won't feel safe as we exercise our freedom. Wouldn't it be better for them to feel safe and be present with us? Wouldn't it be better for them to have in-person fellowship? For their edification, we can give up our freedom and put on masks. Scripture has a way of addressing problems we've never encountered!

Illustration: alcohol

Alcohol is permitted. Alcohol is dangerous (Prov 23:29-35). Drunkenness is sin (drunk = legally intoxicated). Don't use alcohol if it will cause your brother to sin.

My personal conviction is I don't drink alcohol. I haven't used alcohol since August, 2000. Yes, I'm keeping track. As a policy, I don't allow alcohol in my home. As an unbeliever, I was drunk routinely. Not wanting to go back to that lifestyle, I cut alcohol out of my life. Kind of like what Jesus says about cutting off your hand if it causes you to sin (Matt 5:29-30).

As a young believer, I had given up alcohol for good about three months after I was saved. Maybe six months later, having moved to Virginia, I went bowling with people from church. That night I witnessed something I'd never seen before: believers drinking alcohol. As an uninformed new believer without any formal discipleship I concluded, "I guess I can drink alcohol again if these guys are doing it. After all, they're Christians." They had

no clue about my previous struggle. I'm sure the principles of Romans 14 were foreign to most of them. I don't know exactly how much my conscience was troubled, but it must have been to some extent since I was now doing what I thought I needed to give up.

My point is that we need to be aware of how exercising our freedoms can affect the spiritual well-being of our fellow believers. We can't do this if we don't know each other. Not causing a brother to stumble requires that we know them well enough to know their convictions. We need to be conscious of how our actions affect our brothers and sisters.

Having matured in the faith, now I know from verse 21 that drinking wine is permissible per Scripture. I'm not really awkward when a fellow believer offers me wine. I politely say no. I'm okay to fellowship with them. And I don't feel the need to convince them they need to give up wine. It's my conviction. I know they're exercising a biblical freedom. I don't need to despise them or pass judgment against them. I am free to pursue their edification.

Point 3: Obey your conscience (14:14, 22-23)

Explanation

Take a look at verse 14.

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. (14:14)

Paul knows eating meat is perfectly acceptable, but if we think it's wrong to eat meat, and then proceed to eat meat we've sinned. Why? Because we've violated our conscience. If we think it's wrong to do something, and willingly choose to do it, we've chosen to violate God's law as we understand it. This is rebellion. This can lead to a hardened heart.

The strong should keep their freedoms before themselves and God so they don't cause a brother to violate conscience (14:22). If they flaunted their freedom and caused their weaker brother to violate conscience, they would have to pass judgment on themselves. Because they failed to exercise love.

In verse 23, Paul addresses the weak brother. If they eat when they think the dietary laws are still binding on them, they are condemned. Because their eating doesn't proceed from faith. They think it's wrong to eat meat and yet they do so. Violating conscience is always sin, even if the action is biblically permissible.

Application

The peril for the weak is violating their conscience. The peril for the strong is choosing freedom over love. Never violate your convictions about what is right and wrong. Never use your freedom to ruin a brother.

Maybe you're on the fence and wondering whether or not something is permissible. Be conservative. Don't do it. Study the matter. Get godly counsel. But never violate conscience.

Maybe you're the stronger brother. What should you do? Don't cause your brother to stumble. For example, if you know a fellow believer who believes drinking alcohol is sinful, or is convinced God wants them to abstain, don't offer them alcohol, don't drink alcohol in front of them, and don't try to convince them to drink alcohol. Feel free to drink alcohol in the privacy of your own home. Feel free to drink alcohol with other believers of the same conviction. But don't ruin your brother by trying to get them to violate their conscience.

Conclusion

We must be convinced in our own mind (14:5), based on Scripture. Inevitably we'll encounter fellow believers with different convictions. This doesn't mean we can't discuss biblical doctrines or think through how to apply biblical principles to modern issues. But it does mean that our conversations need to be in the Spirit: righteous, peaceful, joyful. If we're more conservative, we can't look down on fellow believers and pass judgment that they're unsaved. If we're less conservative, we can't look down on our more restrictive brothers and mock them as uninformed simpletons. We need to see the good in each other. In this morning's example, both sides had godly motives. Love must guide. Not needing to win the argument. Not exercising freedom. Paul tells us **welcome each other. Build each other up. Obey your conscience. Love your brothers and sisters with different convictions.** And we can't do this alone. It's the Holy Spirit that produces righteousness and peace and joy in Palermo Christian Church. So let's continually call on God's help as we continue to navigate COVID-19 together.