

Welcoming the Weak

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[0 : 00] There's a Roman Catholic, and there's about 38,000 mostly Protestant groups like us. And it's more than embarrassing.

It's an absolute tragedy. I think it is fair to say that God loves different expressions of church, and that some denominations should exist.

That's great. But the level, I mean, these groups didn't sort of just shake hands always and part really nicely, going, hey, we're thinking about just setting up another donation because, you know, just cause.

You know, a lot of these groups, a lot of these times it's schismatic. It's they disagree over stupid things, form whole new denominations. It's an embarrassment. And it's certainly embarrassing when you think about God's great plan for the world.

And so this is actually like, I know when we read this passage you probably thought, oh yeah, I could probably take or leave this passage. This is kind of a bit of a slightly interesting kind of thing that Paul is talking about.

[1 : 14] But actually considering the dilemma of the Protestant church, this is essential we get our heads around this stuff. How do we love each other without being divisive?

So let's have a look at what God has to say through the Apostle Paul. Now Paul packs a whole lot into this first sentence here, verse 1.

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. These three big things here. Who is the weak? What does welcome him mean?

And what is that quarreling over opinions thing all about? Okay, so who is the weak? Well, the weak are not the morally weak. It's not people who are a little bit dodgy. It says they're weak in faith.

So what does this mean? In this context, this is what it's talking about. It's talking about people who haven't fully worked out the implications of believing in Jesus. Haven't fully worked out the consequences of believing in Christ.

[2 : 19] And it relates to my introduction here. Back in the days, in the Old Testament, there were these external things that distinguished God's people. They had special days.

They had special diets. And it was really important that those things existed because they often lived in captive situations where they're surrounded by pagans and other religions.

And so God gave them these things which made them stand out, made them a people, gave them some sense of identity. Now, of course, our distinguishing feature as God's people is our faith in Christ.

However, however, if you'd spent your whole life establishing these external things, these external markers, special days, special diets, that's going to be some tough stuff to give up.

And this is what Paul is talking about here. There are folks coming into the early church still really attached to these things. So who exactly are these guys?

[3 : 29] Well, I'm pretty sure, it doesn't say it, it doesn't say it in the passage, but I'm pretty sure it's Jewish Christians. And I think it's Jewish Christians because the two examples they talk about in terms of external markers are regulated diet and special holy days.

But why didn't Paul just name them? I mean, this passage could have been a lot shorter if Paul had just said, okay team, we've got some new guys coming into the church because the church in Rome was pretty Gentile, right?

Gentile in the sense of non-Jewish. Okay team, we've got some guys coming in, they're Jewish, you know what that means, so they're going to have some ideas, so let's just try and get on with them, right?

I think, purely speculation, I think Paul does not mention them specifically because one of the big aims of the passage is to build unity. And I suspect he doesn't name them specifically because marking people out along ethnic lines might have worked against what he was trying to accomplish. Okay, summary so far. The passage says, there are these folks coming into the church, in the early church, that haven't really grown into their faith to the point where they see all its implications.

[4 : 48] Those guys, probably Jewish, we should what? We should welcome them. That's the second part of that first verse. Welcome them. What does this mean?

To welcome them. The Jewish word is more than just accept them. There is a sense of warmth and kindness about this word.

Welcome. It's welcome them into your hearts. Do you know Philemon, the book of the Bible, Philemon? It's really, really small. The basic story, it's a beautiful story.

You can easily skip past it in the Bible. It's a New Testament story. It's basically this slave, Onesimus, he runs away. Anyway, he finds himself connected with Paul somehow, and Paul sends him back to Philemon, his master.

But he sends him back with his letter, right? And the letter is beautiful. It says, hey, when this runaway slave comes back, remember that you're both Christians, and so you should welcome him.

[5 : 54] It's this real beautiful sense of welcoming a runaway person into your heart. When Christ in John 14 talks about welcoming his people into heaven, it's that same word.

It's that kind of welcome. So it's not like, okay, you guys come in, yeah, you can come on in, but don't do any weird stuff, you know, and sit at the back. No, it's welcome them into your homes, welcome them into your hearts.

The last part of this first verse here, it says, welcome them in, but not quarrel over opinions. So don't just welcome them in to argue with, argue with them about doctrine.

The NLV translate the passage this, accept the one whose faith is weak without quarreling over disputable matters. So this is the qualification of this passage here, okay?

It's not talking about really big stuff. It's not saying somebody comes into the church, claims to be a Christian, and says, you know, Jesus is just one of many gods.

[7 : 04] Let's just all cuddle each other and it's going to be great and, you know. No, you should, you should confront that person. It's actually, it says there disputable matters, opinions.

It's talking about the non-essential stuff, not the big fundamental faith stuff, the non-essential things, not the biggies.

And us Anglicans, we have a lot of non-essentials. The non-essentials that Paul gives us here are the food laws and observing religious days, but today it would be easy to write a list and I have of things which we might say, oh no, no, this is really important that you believe this.

In fact, this is a bit of a deal breaker that you can't be part of the team unless you actually think this.

These would be things like baptism, our view on baptism, our view of communion, you know, are we, are we, you know, Zwingli guy, are we, are we transubstantiation, the place of signs and wonders, are they infrequent or should they be happening all the time?

Predestination, that was a good one, you guys enjoyed that, didn't you, when you preached on that? Woman, priests, the nature of hell. I really want to say to you here that these are really important issues.

[8 : 43] but we can disagree about these things and it's actually okay. That's actually alright.

Like, if you disagree with me, you're wrong, you know. But it's not, but, I'm not going to like jump on your back about it a whole lot, you know.

You can come to the service, you can be a adult, baptizing, transubstantiating, Pentecostal, woman, bishoping, annihilationist, mate.

You know what I mean? And that is not, none of those things should be relational deal breakers here. Did I just get my first amen?

That is awesome. It's just like back in the days, which I'll talk about shortly. Yeah. Now again, we should be able to dialogue about these things, we should be able to talk about them.

[9 : 57] I may try and convince you of my opinion. But they're not relational deal breakers. You're part of the family. Let me articulate all this into a principle, okay?

We should not elevate non-essentials and make them the test of orthodoxy. make them a barrier to fellowship.

But nor should we marginalize the fundamental things and say they're just cultural idiosyncrasies or that they don't matter.

Which is the case, which is the reason why we're in the courts. Here's the really cool part about what Paul does here in this passage.

He says all this. He says, you know, people are going to come in, they haven't fully worked out their theology, so they're going to have, maybe have some wacky ideas which you'll disagree with, but you should welcome them into your hearts.

[10:58] And here's why you should welcome them in. Here's a really cool thing. He doesn't just say, you should welcome them in because, you know, that's a nice thing to do. Do unto others.

It's nice to be nice and it's good to be good. No, he brings some really high theology to this stuff. He brings some really heavy-hitting doctrines to support his position.

He talks about judgment, crucifixion, resurrection, the lordship of Christ, all to make his case that welcome these people in. Welcome these people in.

Let's have a look. He's got three or four arguments, three or four reasons why we should welcome people in who have different but non-essential ideas. The first one here is kind of around verse, they kind of blend into each other, but verse two and three approximately, I'll read it to you.

One person believes he might eat anything while the weak eats only vegetables. That was about, it's not about, this is not supporting vegetarianism. It is, Jewish folks back in the days were really particular about the meats they ate and so they couldn't be sure whether a meat had been, you know, sacrificed to an idol or something so some people just went, okay, no meat whatsoever.

[12:22] If I just have vegetables, I know I'm going to be okay. That's a side, side note. All right? Okay, let no one who eats despise the one who abstains. Let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats for God has welcomed them.

His first argument is really, really simple. We welcome because God has welcomed them. Who are we to jump on somebody's back?

Who are we to reject somebody that God has welcomed? I mean, if you were to make a sort of a maxim out of this, it would be like, you know, the best way to work out what our attitude towards other people should be is what's God's attitude towards them.

God has welcomed them. We should welcome them. the second argument Paul uses, kind of four to nine-ish around there. Let me read a couple of verses out. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?

That's verse four. It is before his own master that he stands or falls. Verse nine, for to this end Christ died and lived again that he may both be Lord of the dead and the living.

[13:41] We walk in them because Christ has died and risen again. Okay, what does that need? Some unpacking. What does that mean? Because Christ has died and risen again, he is Lord of all. He is Lord of us who have perfectly formed theological thoughts and he's Lord of people that come into this church that might not.

We live for Christ and we try and honour him with our decisions because he is our Lord. And as this passage tells us in sort of six, seven, eight, this other person who's come in, they're trying to honour Christ with their decisions as well.

So we should respect their relationship with Christ. Now here is a small bonus point here. Verse five, 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. We're talking about people who've actually thought this stuff through. We're not talking about mindless adherence to weird doctrine, okay?

We're talking about people who've actually kind of thought this through.

So they're wrong but at least they're kind of thoughtful about it. Alright. The third argument that Paul uses are verse 10. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or why do you despise your brother?

[14:59] we welcome people because you actually have this person that comes in the door who you've got some different ideas about.

You welcome them because you are related to them in the strongest possible way. Family.

Because of your shared faith in Christ, they're your brother, they're your sister.

brother. And all families have the strange cousin or weird aunt or something, you know, but like, they're all invited to the party.

I mean, that makes sense, right? Okay. Moving along. Last argument. This is sort of end of verse 10, 11 and 12.

For we all stand before the judgment seat of God, for it is written, as I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me and every tongue shall confess to God. So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

[16:05] Why do we welcome them? Because we all stand before God in judgment. All of us, you, me, them. And if we reject somebody, if we make some non-essential thing the test of orthodoxy and thereby, you know, cut them out of the loop, make a judgment call on their salvation, we are playing God.

And it is a terrible, terrible thing to play God. It is God's business to judge them eternally, not ours. And your personal assessment of someone else's beliefs does not affect their standing before God at all.

Because we will all stand before God individually and make an account for our lives. And when I get there, I can't go, God, God, God, okay, wait, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop. Before you get to me, I just want to tell you about Jim.

Because when I work with him, I saw some weird, weird stuff. And I think you should know about it. You should know about it. Just before you get to me. Stealing bus tickets.

All right. So, in sum, if you exclude someone and say they're not welcome because you've elevated some non-essential thing, you're playing God.

[17:36] That's a, man, that's a pretty heavy thing to do. Okay, some final thoughts. In this passage, Paul differentiates between the strong and the weak.

And the weak are theologically a little bit off. There is nothing in this that says they were both right. Clearly, one of them is a little bit off.

But you know what's really interesting about this stuff? When Paul talks about the strong and the weak, it's the strong that he asks to change.

Not the weak. It's the strong, he says, you guys have got to do something about this. You've got to be welcoming. So let's make unity more important than non-essential stuff.

Let's not follow the trajectory of the Protestant church for a long time and let secondary stuff divide us.

[18:38] you know, we have these smaller truths that we may be very attached to, you know, baptism and the priesting of woman and whatever it is.

We have these small things that we're attached to that we quite like. But if I was to kind of like summarize all of this together in one point, it would be this. Above these small things that we kind of like, that we feel like we've got a bit of a grasp on, there is a greater truth and we should grasp that more firmly than we grasp these things.

We should hold on to that with an eagerness that we hold on to these little things. And that greater truth is that Christ is Lord of all.

And we are a family. I have found this passage really convicting. Really, really convicting.

And the reason is because I spent a lot of money on a really good theological education. And it's puffed me up with pride.

[19:47] and it's it's really easy for me to tell if I'm not on track with this greater truth thing.

I can tell I'm not on track with it sometimes if I use my my knowledge as a weapon. If I use it to look down on people, you know.

I find myself sometimes quick to judge. I can write people off pretty easily. I came from a charismatic church in New Zealand.

I was there for 20 years before I came out here. And it was one of the really pretty fruity charismatic churches. You know, like it was pretty fruity. It was great. I loved it. And, you know, after three years of sitting in a library reading the church fathers and stuff, I often would look back and very proudly and very wrongly and think, wow, well, I'm really glad I've got all my ducks in a row.

You know, I hope I see some of those guys in heaven because I might not because they're a bit off, you know. Like, terrible thoughts like that. I would look at, I'm friends with people on Facebook back in New Zealand and some of them are still, they're all pretty much still in the church.

[21:13] And, and they would write these kind of Facebook updates which are often quite cheesy, you know. And, and I read one recently that a lady who I dearly love said, I've been born again, again, right.

And I remember reading that thinking, oh, that's so stupid. Like, you know, that's not theologically right. Goodness, I hope she, you know, I wish I could get her in a room and really talk her through

this because that's not right.

Right. I mean, who am I to? That's just so, I'm just being a jerk. I'm being so unloving.

I'm not, I'm working against what God is trying to do in the church. Here's what had happened is that my, and this is, Jim articulated this to me the other day and it kind of just snapped with me.

I was like, yes, that's what's been happening to me sometimes. It's my learning for God has outrun my love for him and his people. My learning for God has outrun my love for him and his people.

[22 : 26] Don't ever let that happen. And of course, the solution to that is repentance. And the way I repent of that is I'm going to ask this very simple question, which I'll finish with.

what have I done to deserve being in God's family? I've done nothing. But God chose me and he welcomed me in through Christ, just as we should welcome the people that come through these doors.

Amen? Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. We're going to pray now, so you can sit or kneel, whatever is comfortable for you.

Dear God, our Father, we thank you for such a beautiful day, Lord. We thank you for the sun in the sky and its warmth and being able to be outside.

[23 : 37] We thank you for the joy of your creation, and we thank you for the fellowship that we got to share before the service. It was just wonderful. Dear Lord, we thank you that we can gather together and that we can hear your word proclaimed and we thank you for freedom to sing your praise and that you listen to our prayer, Lord. Lord, in your mercy. Lord, we thank you for our faith in Christ as our Lord and Son.