

# Weak & Strong

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[ 0 : 00 ] In 1923, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the major Christian denomination in Eastern Europe, decided to update its calendar. This decision caused a significant amount of distress among the church's members because it was felt that changing the date of Easter was breaking a millennia-old tradition for no good theological reason.

Consequently, the Eastern Orthodox Church split into two groups, the new calendarists who accepted the new calendar and the old calendarists who stuck to the old calculation of Easter. Each group branded the others as heretics and refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of each other's leadership, seemingly breaking the church in two. To this day, the split remains very real for those in Eastern Europe, although the divide has softened in recent years.

Hey everyone, my name is Aidan and I'm a member of the congregation here at St Paul's. I want to start off with that fun little historical story because interestingly, in the last week, the concept of a split or schism in the church is a very relevant one.

As just this week, announcements of a new diocese of the Southern Cross created headlines like Australian-Anglican Church splits in the Sydney Morning Herald and the ABC.

[ 1 : 12 ] This decision has come from disagreements between Christians around Australia over the blessing of same-sex marriages. And if you've got questions about it, I'd recommend having a chat to our senior minister, Steve, or watching the video he made this week, which should have been sent out if you're on the mailing list.

But what a coincidence then that this of all weeks, we're scheduled to look at Romans 14, a passage that wants to answer a surprisingly very relevant question.

What do we do when Christians disagree? The Bible's answer to this question is probably not what you'd expect given the quarrelsome and curmudgeonly history of the Christian church. But before we get to that answer, we need a bit of context.

So let me pray before we get started. Heavenly Father, as we come to look at Romans 14 today, let our hearts be open, our minds be willing to change, and our spirits be eager to hear the gospel.

Amen. If this is your first time joining us here for our Roman series, or if you need a bit of a reminder of where we've been, we're reading through Paul the Apostle's letter to the Roman church, which isn't so much a letter as a deep dive into Christian thinking on God, humanity, and the law.

[ 2 : 24 ] Now, Paul hadn't actually met the Roman church he was writing to, but he knew of them through friends who had visited Rome. And the news he was getting was a bit troubling. There was a divide beginning to form in the Roman church.

Christians and Rome had split into two camps, based on a disagreement not over marriage or money, but over meat. If you look back at your Bibles with me, Paul outlines this debate in verse 2 of chapter 14.

I'll go to the other one. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. Apparently, there were two groups of the Roman church at this time. Those who thought that it was wrong for Christians to eat meat, known as the weak, and there were Christians that thought they should be able to eat whatever they want, regardless of where it came from, which Paul labels the strong.

Now, this isn't a fight you'd find in many churches around Australia today, but the pattern of this disagreement is something that has been replicated in thousands, if not millions, of church throughout history. On one side, those with a firm belief that some particular practice is wrong, in this case eating meat, look down upon others as less committed followers of Christ.

[ 3 : 40 ] On the other hand, believers who think that the practice is fine to do, i.e. are fine with eating meat, show contempt towards their dissenting brothers and sisters, viewing them as

pedantic and needlessly judgmental.

So from disagreement on a theological question, real problems can start to occur, where otherwise healthy relationships are poisoned by bitterness, judgment and contempt.

And it's into this context that Paul gives his answer to the very relevant question. What do we do when Christians disagree? Paul's answer? Practice acceptance, not judgment.

Have a look at verse 6 with me. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God. And whoever abstains does so to the Lord and give thanks to God.

Rather than engaging in this feedback loop of negativity and animosity, Paul offers up a radical new way of relating to each other, a policy of acceptance that leaves judgment up to God.

[ 4 : 42 ] Now there's a lot of nuance in Paul's plan for resolving a conflict in the Roman church, but throughout verses 6 to 8, Paul keeps repeating his core idea. Whatever you do, do it for the Lord.

If you've been a Christian for a while, this might not seem particularly surprising to you. A fundamental part of the Christian faith is giving everything in your life over to Jesus. But Paul reminds us here that this doesn't just change how we relate to God, it also changes how we relate to each other.

Who are you to judge somebody else's servant? To their own master's servants stand or fall, says Paul in verse 4. And again in verse 10.

You then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment. Paul is telling the Roman church, get out of God's chair.

If everything I do as a Christian is for God, then I am a servant of God, and I have no right to do God's job for him, especially in the case of judging humanity.

[ 5 : 49 ] Most importantly, if I see a fellow servant of God, I have no right to judge my brother or sister on whether they're serving God correctly. Only the one they're serving can determine that.

I have no right to judge my fellow servant because judgment is the Lord's alone. All I can do in the meantime is try and get along with my brother or sister and try and work together to serve our Lord in the best way we can.

For example, let's meet Alison and Ben. Alison thinks that eating food in church is totally fine, since God made food for us to enjoy and the building in which we meet isn't particularly special.

On the other hand, Ben thinks it's unbiblical to eat in church because it's the building we dedicate to worshipping God and we should treat it with respect. That's a pretty significant divide between Alison and Ben, and if Alison ever brings a sandwich into church, then one day there might be some real tension, some conflict, and potentially even arguments breaking out.

But if both Alison and Ben follow Paul's policy of acceptance over judgment, Ben can accept that Alison is serving God how she sees best, and Alison can accept that Ben is serving God how he sees best.

[ 7 : 08 ] And both can trust that God will be the one to judge, and so there's no need for an argument. Instead, we're able to accept one another's differing beliefs without breaking community.

But like lots of things, replacing judgment with acceptance is much easier said than done. When someone turns up to church wearing something or talking about something or doing something we think is wrong, how can we act biblically in that moment?

I think it's helpful to understand some of the emotions that cause judgment. And in my admittedly limited experience, a significant amount of Christian judgment seems to come from genuine worry.

Now, I'm only 24 years old. I haven't experienced all of what life's got to offer. I, you know, don't have many deep insights into the human condition. But even from this vantage point, I can see that judgment doesn't often spring from mean-spirited or malicious churchgoers.

In fact, in many circumstances, experiences of judgment within the Christian community come from one believer being genuinely worried about the faith of another, based on external assumptions about their life.

[ 8 : 22 ] We have a sense that if someone isn't serving God as best they could, they have a deeply held belief that we know to be wrong, potentially their faith is at risk. And they need to be made aware of their mistake as soon as possible.

Because we genuinely care about them as our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. But if that's you, if you are someone who feels called to take that sort of action, the challenge in this passage is actually to entrust that job to God.

Let the Lord take care of judging their faith, because ultimately, He is the one who maintains and sustains it. Don't stop caring about your church family, and by no means, don't stop checking in on how they're going with Jesus.

But we need to stop worrying about the strength of each other's faith based on what we do and don't do. Judging from assumptions and guesswork rather than genuine conversation.

And start learning instead to accept one another, even if the way you live for Jesus is different to the way I do. I think Paul sums it up best in verse 19. Rather than worry about judgment, make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification.

[ 9 : 33 ] So then, in this new happy community of acceptance, does this mean we should just accept all practices of our fellow believers, regardless of what it is? Well, no.

Paul's policy of acceptance in Romans 14, its specific policy meant for a specific set of issues, which calls us to make a careful distinction between gospel issues and disputable issues.

Let's have a look at verse 1. Accept the one whose faith is weak without quarreling over disputable matters. Ah, so there's the qualification. Disputable matters.

Paul's policy is specifically for disputable matters. I think that'd be a really good phrase to keep in the front of your head because it's going to be a really important one. What is a disputable matter? Well, let's start with the Bible itself. Rather than disputable matters, your translation might have opinions or doubtful issues or, in the King James Version, doubtful disputations.

[ 10 : 35 ] These are different attempts to translate the Greek word dialogismoi. Now, full disclosure, I don't know biblical Greek, but after doing some research, a common consensus among theologians like John Stott, Kent Hughes, and Tim Keller is that the word refers to matters of practice about which God has not specifically spoken.

Keller explicitly translated it as meaning matters of conscience, which he and the other theologians take to mean as an action which God has neither clearly forbidden nor clearly commanded.

So the policy of acceptance above disagreement applies to practice about which the Bible is unclear and ambiguous. So, lots of things.

The Bible only has so many words after all and was written a long time before social media ethics became a popular topic. But it can sometimes still be difficult and controversial to figure out whether something, whether a topic of debate is disputable, is a disputable issue that you can agree to disagree over or something that is non-disputable, something that needs to be resolved before continuing in community together.

To give us a bit of a hand with this, I borrowed some guidelines written by a London preacher, Dick Lucas, who outlines three principles for identifying a disputable issue. Number one, the principles of the matter apply to behaviour or to practice, but not to doctrine.

[ 12 : 00 ] Lucas' justification for this is that Paul has just spent 11 chapters outlining clear teaching on the proper Christian beliefs and worldview. He's not suddenly in Romans 14 inviting Christians to challenge what he's written.

Paul is addressing disagreements over the way people should practically respond to this message. Number two, for a matter to be disputable, there must be no clear, relevant commands.

The Bible is God's absolute, final, authoritative word on the behaviour that is pleasing and acceptable to him. The instructions in it aren't optional extras we get to choose if we want to follow when we become a Christian.

Within the clear boundaries God has set, we're free to debate which is the better way to live for God and accept when our fellow sister or brother disagrees. But if God has already made his stance clear on an issue, who are we to contradict what he said, even if we feel uncomfortable or angry at his word?

Yet if there isn't a biblical command about a certain practice, then that matter might just be disputable. And finally, number three, all... Waiting for it, there you go.

[ 13 : 13 ] All issues are disputable except gospel issues. What Lucas means by this is that Christians have the true and real freedom to have different opinions without suffering exclusion or judgment.

Except if those opinions modify the gospel. If the gospel, i.e. faith in Jesus' death and resurrection becomes not enough to achieve salvation, if something additional is required to be saved and enter God's kingdom, whether some practice, behaviour or belief, then that matter is not disputable.

To be a Christian is to be a believer in the gospel. And as Paul says in Galatians 1 verse 9, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel other than what you've accepted, let them be under God's curse.

So enough theory. Let's have a go at this. Let's have a go at figuring out whether an issue is disputable or not. Can we agree to disagree on it or does it need to be resolved for continuing in community?

Now I'm not looking to figure out whether... I'm not looking to figure out what is right and wrong on this issue. That's important. But it's also important to know what type of issue this is. So imagine Ben from earlier has turned up to church and said, all Christians must wear shoes while in church. [14:27] No bare feet allowed. Anyone who comes into church needs to put on shoes before coming to worship God. I want you to turn to the person next to you and have a chat about whether wearing shoes in church is a disputable issue.

If you're at home, turn to the people next to you or have a good think on this topic. And I want you to try and justify your position either using the guidelines that will be on the screen or other thoughts you might have.

Since it's a bit of a bigger topic, I'll give you three, four minutes to have a chat about it and then we'll come back. So have a chat. All right. Let's come back.

For the record, I think wearing shoes in church is a disputable issue and something we can agree to disagree on because it's about practice. Because one, it's about practice.

Two, as far as I know, there's nothing specific in the Bible to the covering of feet in church and it doesn't add or take away from the gospel message. But I think your instincts on that question may have highlighted something about where you lie on something I'm calling the disputable scale.

[15:34] On one end of the spectrum is the tendency to mark everything as disputable, often associated with more liberal theology. This is where every issue, no matter how big, small or central to the gospel, can be smoothed over by some magic church policy, even if it means compromising on the central message of the gospel.

While on the other end is fundamentalism, where nothing is disputable and those who don't follow the exact same practices and behaviours of you aren't real Christians. Now it's unlikely you're exactly at either end of these spectrums, but all of us are somewhere on this scale, whether you're more likely to prioritise tolerance over truth or conventions over accuracy.

Now I'm a conflict avoider, so my instinct is to say we can agree to disagree and avoid a hard conversation. But if you're someone who really cares about traditions, your instinct might be to say that the way we've always done things is the best and maybe the only way to do things here.

Either way, whatever side of the scale you're on, we all need to focus on the truth that can only come from the Bible. Making sure that our claims of whether things are disputable or not are solely based on its truth, not on our own feelings or what we know as normal.

So before claiming something is a gospel issue, take a moment to think about whether the problem is disputable or not. Because if it isn't, then wise, careful, and considerate action needs to be taken.

[17:01] And if it is disputable, then we need to follow Paul's policy of acceptance over judgment. So given that we've talked through the differences between disputable and non-disputable issues, what are some disputable issues that we here at Chatswood are likely to face?

What are some disputable issues that are relevant to us in this building? Well, as much as it's been an important topic in the last week, Paul's policy of acceptance over judgment is always going to be significant for St. Paul's because as Steve said at the beginning of the year, we are striving to be a supernatural community.

One where our community isn't just made up of people who are similar to each other, but a multicultural one. One that is both diverse and unified at the same time.

But that's a challenging aim. Because with many different cultures coming together, there are going to be some big differences about what we view as acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. What type of clothes is it okay to wear?

What does respecting your parents look like? What does hospitality mean? What does church look like? What type of songs do we sing? What do we expect of our leaders? How do we do communion? What language do we read the Bible in?

[18:13] With people coming to St. Paul's from the multitude of cultures around Chatswood, it seems inevitable that we'll face conflict over the right way to live as a Christian. Indeed, I'm sure there have already been many disagreements over church practice in the years that St. Paul's has

been going.

So how are we still here together as a church despite these arguments and how can we make sure that St. Paul's remains both diverse and unified? Well, Paul's answer is simple.

Don't be a stumbling block for God's good work. Have a look at verse 20 with me. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.

Remember the two groups I mentioned earlier? Those that thought eating meat was sinful and those that thought it was fine? Well, Paul's clearly in the second group believing that Jesus has made all things clean.

But he goes on to say here that even though he knows he is right, membership in the kingdom of God is not first and foremost about being proven correct. No, the priority for those living for God is caring for others.

[ 19 : 28 ] See, we've already talked about the general case of what to do if two Christians disagree, but we're talking about the specific case where you know what's right and you see someone doing something you disagree with.

Realistically, if you view a fellow believer doing something you know is wrong, your instinct won't be oh, they're just doing things differently to me. Your instinct will be that's wrong.

Now, Australian society is very clear on what to do in a situation like this. It only takes one look at Twitter or Facebook to see that if I am right, it's my responsibility to prove myself right. Get the other person to acknowledge their own wrongness and then if they refuse to change their mind immediately, I should ridicule them for being wrong or at least say something along the lines of typical liberal snowflake or typical right-wing nutjob.

The Bible's answer on the other hand is radically different. Think of the needs of the other person first. Do what's best for the faith of your brother or sister even if it means limiting your own liberty or accepting actions you don't agree with.

Don't jeopardise their faith or their connection to God's church. What if by doing something you know to be right which they view as wrong, they become confused about what God wants and thus cause to sin in other areas?

[ 20 : 45 ] Or what if by calling them out on a practice you know to be wrong but they believe is right, you tempt them to unnecessary bitterness and malice? This isn't to say that we should abstain from upsetting anyone in our church lest the church become whim to the subject of grumpy Christians, but Paul is specifically talking here about issues that will cause the other person to doubt their relationship to Jesus.

Here's some quick examples. If you believe that all forms of music are fine for church but your Christian brother is only able to use one style of worship to praise God, you should do what is best for your brother and limit your liberty for the sake of their communion with God.

On the other hand, if you think it's inappropriate for Christians to wear immodest clothes, worrying about the faith of your Christian sister who wears things you deem indecent, worry, like help their situation?

Or will doing it behind their back cause them to feel judged, guilty, wrong for this congregation and maybe wrong for Jesus? When it comes to disputable issues, put the faith of your fellow believer first over any need to prove yourself right.

Accept them first as your faithful Christian sibling and don't cause them to stumble in that faith because as Paul says in verse 21, it is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

[ 22 : 08 ] So how do we take steps towards this new supernatural community of acceptance? Well, I think there's two clear takeaways. Firstly, think very hard before claiming something is a non-disputable gospel issue.

Often when we see someone doing something outside of what we know to be normal, it can feel like a massive issue because they're disrespecting the church. But before reacting on instinct and lashing out in judgment or worry, think back to those guidelines for if something is disputable or not. And if it is a disputable matter, then now is the time to practice acceptance, especially if you disagree with them. Remember what Paul writes to the Roman church. Who are you to judge someone else's servant?

Secondly, remember that a church of many cultures is not going to be a comfortable place. To borrow another Steve phrase, we need to embrace shared discomfort. Paul encouraged the Christians in Rome to put away their own wants and desires, put away the things that make you feel normal and comfortable.

If it means someone else will be able to continue in fellowship with God and with his church. Holding unity and diversity together means doing church differently to how you've always done it and doing it with Christians who do not live the same way you do.

[ 23 : 30 ] It means making changes to suit those in the minority because otherwise it isn't truly a shared discomfort. And most importantly, it means having an accepting attitude towards difference.

For some Pauls to grow in a multicultural suburb, it needs you to commit to acceptance. Regardless of what Christian walks through those doors, regardless of how they live, regardless of what they think, regardless of the disputable issues where you disagree, you personally need to commit to wholeheartedly loving and accepting them as your fellow believer.

This is a big and challenging task, but it's the one Jesus fulfilled when he loved us. And I pray it's the one we'll be able to commit to.