

11. Real Churches Disarm Disputes

Disagreements in our church are derailing us.

Romans 14

There are doctrines and duties that are indisputable for a genuine Christian. Certain fundamental truths and moral absolutes are self-evident in the Scriptures. They are the essentials of the faith that are not open to debate. The teaching of the apostle Paul in the first thirteen chapters of Romans includes some of these essentials.



- The deity and humanity of Jesus Christ (The preamble of Romans 1)
- The Gentiles have sinned (Romans 1)
- The Jews have sinned (Romans 2)
- All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3)
- Salvation is by grace through faith in Christ apart from any works (Romans 4)
- Salvation is by grace through faith in Christ for good works (Romans 5)
- Sanctification is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 6)
- Sanctification is apart from the law by the power of the Spirit (Romans 7-8)
- The place of the Jews in the plan of God (Romans 9-11)
- The place of the church in the plan of God (Romans 12)
- The place of government in the plan of God (Romans 13)

Paul closes these essentials of the faith with a declaration of the essentials of ethics.

Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and

drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. (Romans 13:13-14)

Augustine was a young man with a sordid past. In his *Confessions*, he says he heard a voice over a garden wall say, “Pick up and read!” He picked up a Bible and opened to these verses and he was gloriously converted to Christ.

The doctrines and duties of Romans 1-13 are not open to debate. They are often denied, but these truths are self-evident to a person who seeks to know God’s will (John 7:17). Unfortunately, some Christians think that *everything* in the Bible should be black or white, right or wrong, undeniable and indisputable. The apostle Paul lived in reality. Paul understood that we see in a mirror dimly and today we know only in part.

In life there are gray areas. There are questions of conscience where godly Christians disagree. Hot topics surge in every culture that are nonessentials. After laying down the foundational truths in Romans 1- 13, Paul gives us good directions on how to navigate the disputable areas of life.

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on *disputable matters*. One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Romans 14:1-4, emphasis added)

Disputable Issues: What exactly are they?

Disputable matters are not fundamentals of the faith or moral absolutes, but nonessentials, as we have already seen in the book of Romans.

They are not areas where most Christians agree, but rather the issues where many Christians disagree and openly debate. “Disputable matters” is the Greek word, *dialogismos*, from which we get the word

“dialogue.” The word means “to reason through.” The disputable issues stir up discussion, boil the blood, and generate debate among believers. In the first-century church in Rome, the disputable issues were keeping the Sabbath and eating meat (Romans 14:2). Today, some people still debate diet and days, but there are other hot topics in every generation.

School: One family’s faith allows them to use the public schools.
Another family’s faith allows only home schooling.

Gambling: One person’s faith considers all gambling to be wrong.
Another’s conscience considers gambling just another

game.

Alcoholic: One person’s faith allows them to drink in moderation.

Drinks: Another’s conscience considers all alcohol drinking as
wrong.

Divorce: One person’s faith allows divorce and remarriage in some
cases.

Another’s conscience considers all remarriage to be
wrong.

Translations: One person’s faith allows only the King James Version.
Another person’s appreciates all the translations.

Baptism: One person’s faith allows baptism by immersion only.
Another person’s faith allows any mode or method.

Historically, there are many other issues that created heated discussions: cosmetics, TV, movies, spiritual gifts, women’s roles in the church, worship styles, rock music, and caffeine, to name a few.

Disputable matters are either areas of silence in Scripture or issues where Scripture speaks, but there is still open debate. The very areas that Paul addressed in Rome have clear biblical teaching. Paul does mention that all foods are clean (Romans 14:14). Paul taught the Colossians that the Old Testament Sabbath day was a shadow of Christ, and that since the Messiah Jesus had come, the need for the shadow of the Sabbath day had passed away (Colossians 2:16-17). Paul could have spent the bulk of Romans 14 showing the totality of the New Testament teaching on the issue of the Sabbath and the appropriate use of food, but he does not, because being “right” in areas of conscience is not the highest good.

Paul's approach to disputable issues could have been more and better teaching. Paul could have written a whole chapter explaining all the truth about days and diets. *Paul is not just concerned about being right! He is concerned about right attitudes and right relationships!* He is concerned about speaking the truth in love. In the nonessentials, more important than the right position is treating people in the right way. To that end, Paul gives us three directives to guide us through disputable matters.

Directive #1: Accept one another

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. (Romans 14:1)

God highlighted the truths of Romans 14 to me in my relationship with my brother Jeff. We are three years apart. We are very different. Jeff is an artist. I am an analyst. Jeff played the drums. I played with high school debate. Jeff played tennis. I played basketball. Jeff majored in art. I majored in economics. We were very different and we were headed in completely different directions.

By a miracle of God's grace, we both became Christians at the same Billy Graham Crusade in Cleveland, Ohio, in July 1972. I finished college at the University of Notre Dame and Jeff went to Wheaton College. I attended Wheaton Graduate School after college and we roomed together for a year. During that year, we disagreed about everything. We disagreed over what God expected in our personal walks with God. We disagreed over which Christian groups and which friends to be around. We disagreed on the role of the Christian in culture. We passionately debated everything. I was developing a bad, judgmental attitude toward my brother. Finally, God led me to Romans 14. I memorized the entire chapter. I asked God to build these truths into my life, especially in the way I related to my brother.

- Romans 14:1 "Do not pass judgment on (cut off) your brother."
- Romans 14:2 "Do not look down on* your brother over a disputable issue" (* "to throw out as nothing and thus treat as nothing and with contempt" (Wuest 1955, 174)
- Romans 14:3 "Do not condemn your brother."

Jeff and I learned to accept one another and we are still learning. There are two reasons given for an attitude of acceptance. First, “God has accepted him” (Romans 14:3). Second, “God is able to make him stand” (Romans 14:4). When fears flood our hearts that our brother is going to blow it; when we tend to see everything as black and white, with us always right; when we tend to think in all-or-nothing terms; when we act like OUR WAY IS YAHWEH; we desperately need for God to teach us the priority of accepting one another in the disputable areas.

Directive #2: Be fully convinced in your own mind

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. (Romans 14:5)

It is wrong to be cold and condemning of others. It is also wrong to be wishy-washy and wimpy. We do not try to please everyone and we know what we believe. Doris Kearns Goodwin, in her classic story of Abraham Lincoln, *Team of Rivals*, reveals his spirit. “Though Lincoln did not drink, smoke tobacco, use profane language, or engage in games of chance, he never condescended to those who did (Goodwin 2005, 150).

We need to study the Scriptures ourselves and come to our own conclusions. Why? Because each one of us will stand and give an account to the Lord for ourselves, not for our brother’s beliefs! By the way, my brother became a tenured professor at Wheaton College and today he is a Christian businessman. “You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat” (Romans 14:10).

One of the great disputable areas today is the use of alcohol. In Western Europe, there are very few Christians who totally abstain from drinking alcoholic beverages. One man who had the freedom of conscience to drink alcohol found a creative path for those with a tendency to drunkenness.

History is replete with stories of people who have designed and built successful businesses and become the source of great philanthropy. In so doing they are following the work of the Father. In 1759, a determined man named Arthur Guinness, thirty-four years of

age, rode through the gates of an old, dilapidated, ill-equipped brewery situated at St. James Gate in Dublin. He had just signed a lease for on the property for 9,000 years (no, that's not a typo) at 45 pounds per annum (\$79 US today). Mark Rainsford's Ale Brewery (as it was known then) was no different from any other, and it had been for sale for ten years, with no one having shown any interest in it. At that time, beer was almost unknown in rural Ireland, where whiskey, gin, and poteen were the alcoholic beverages most readily available. Cheap to buy, high in alcohol content, and readily available, these drinks were responsible for widespread alcoholism and indolence,

Arthur Guinness was a builder. He was an entrepreneur who could dream up business plans and marketing strategies, who could make a worthless brewery into a booming industry. He was also a devout Christian with a deep social conscience. He was concerned about the plight of young Irish drunks who wandered aimlessly around the whiskey and gin houses found on nearly every street corner. Once, while walking the streets of Dublin, he cried out to God to do something about the general drunkenness of Irish society, and he felt overwhelmingly burdened to be part of the answer to his own prayer. Like a true apprentice-child, he decided there and then to brew a drink the Irish would enjoy and that would also be good for them,

Guinness decided to brew a beer relatively unknown to Ireland at that time. The beverage contained roasted barley that gave it a characteristically darker color. This brew, well known in England, was called "porter" because of its popularity with the porters and the stevedores of Covenant Garden and Billingsgate in London, But Guinness's recipe produced more than your average dark beer. With its rich creamy head, its a beer we 11 drink in heaven. Full-bodied, smooth, creamy, and slightly bitter, its a wonderful delicious beverage. In fact, its more like a meal, since it is so full of minerals and natural trace elements. It has incredible qualities to it, Guinness is so heavy and full of iron that most drinkers couldn't drink more than a couple of pints. This coupled with the fact that it has a considerable lower alcohol level than whiskey or gin, meant that fewer people were getting drunk.

So young Arthur Guinness made a beverage for the Irish that was good for them. Soon, his porter was overtaking the sales of Irish ales and English porters, and then it became even more popular than Irish whiskey. Today, it is the national drink of Ireland, I don't doubt that many preachers today would have difficulty seeing the building of a successful brewery as a work of God, but by following his impulse as an entrepreneur with a social conscience, Guinness showed himself to be a faithful apprentice-child, a creator and a builder, (Frost 2006,190-191)

If we do not take the time to search the Scriptures and come to our own personal convictions, there are those who will pressure us to adopt their point of view. Paul recognized certain dangers which faced the church. These dangers also face the church today. The first danger is that any assembly of believers may become so divided over these inconsequential questions as to produce disunity among those who have been brought into the family of God.

The second danger is that Jesus Christ may be set aside from his place as head, and that others may usurp that place and seek to control the lives of the members of the body according to their own conscience. Paul gives us two reasons to motivate us to come to our own personal convictions. First, we belong to the Lord (Romans 14:6-8). The Lord is our head, our Savior, our all in all! Second, we will give an account to Him (Romans 14:9-12).

For example, it's tempting just to blast away at alcohol. Alcohol has caused so much tragedy and so much heartbreak that it would be easy to just rail against it like a fire and brimstone preacher. We need balance. We need a full biblical perspective. We need to understand the whole counsel of God on this hard topic.

Unlike the issue of gambling, there is a great deal of direct biblical teaching on the use of alcohol. When you do a word search on the word "gamble, the computer quickly shoots back, "no references." If you try "wine" and "drunk, you find that these related words occur some 217 times in the Bible and there are sixty-two references to drunkenness. Let's distill the biblical data and trust God for the refreshment of his truth. I find the Scriptures to teach three prescriptions concerning the use of alcohol.

Biblical Prescription #1: Drunkenness is sin and leads into the darkness

First, the unchanging principle of God's Word is that drunkenness is sin. This is a moral absolute. Drunkenness is wrong. The propriety of getting drunk is not up for debate among genuine Christians. This is an ethical essential. Romans 13:13-14 says that drunkenness is indisputably darkness and not light. Drunkenness is sin.

Ephesians 5:18 teaches very clearly: "Do not get drunk with wine,

which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.” The word “debauchery” means “riotous living” as in the lifestyle of the prodigal son in Luke 15:13. A synonymous noun in Greek is *aselgeia*, which means lasciviousness, outrageous conduct, wanton violence.” That’s exactly what happened with Noah. First, it was drunkenness. Then his drunkenness led to the emergence of the debauchery in Ham’s heart. So too with Lot. In Genesis 19:32, wine leads to drunkenness that leads to debauchery, as Lot’s daughters commit incest with him in his drunken stupor and produce two godless tribes.

To be filled with wine or any intoxicating drug is sin. But what about drinking **some** alcohol? This is a disputable area where some Christians have a personal conviction against any alcoholic beverages, and some Christians have a personal conviction that it is acceptable to drink without drunkenness. What do the Scriptures say?

Biblical Prescription #2: Drinking is not sin, but it is dangerous

Because of the horrors of drunkenness, we could conclude that all drinking of alcohol is sin. That does not square with Scripture. An early reference to “wine” occurs in Genesis 14:18.

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of

God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying,

Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth.
And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.”

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything. (Genesis 14:18-20)

Abraham drank wine. He did not get drunk. Abram drank with Melchizedek the same beverage that Noah abused. The same Hebrew word is used in Deuteronomy 14:22-23: “Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always.” It is *lethal legalism* that prohibits every believer from taking a drink. God never thought of that. He provided for festivals and celebrations, and they included the use of alcoholic beverages in his presence so that we

would rejoice before him, and learn that part of honoring God is a joyful heart!

Directive #3: Be careful not to be a stumbling block

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brothers way. (Romans 14:13)

Drinking alcohol is very dangerous because it is so deceptive. We can think that we have no problem at all, when the truth that everyone else can see is that we are coming under alcohol's power. The denial is so strong that we cannot see the problem. If drinking alcohol is producing fights in your family or if wine is making you a proud, hard person, then it's time to take the third biblical prescription.

Biblical Prescription #3: Abstinence can be a great influence for Christ

The third clear teaching of God's Word is that there are many examples where believers are called to abstain from alcohol in order to have a greater influence for Christ.

- We see this in Luke 1 as part of God's specific plan for John the Baptist.
- We see this in Leviticus 10:9-the priest is not permitted to drink on duty.
- We see this in Numbers 6 as part of God's specific plan for the Nazirite.
- We see this in Judges 13-God's call to Samson to be a Nazirite.
- We see this in Daniel 1 as part of God's specific plan for Daniel in Babylon.
- We see it in Proverbs 31:4-9 as part of God's specific plan for leaders.

Samson was intended by God to be a Nazirite from birth. God raised him up to be a standard against the increasing worldliness of Israel in

his day. Israel was asleep spiritually. Israel was increasingly like the pagan Philistines around them. God raised up Samson to be different.

God intended for Daniel to have the same kind of powerful impact on the culture around him. “But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way” (Daniel 1:8). God intended for John the Baptist to have the same kind of powerful impact on the culture around him: “... for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth” (Luke 1:15). One noble decision that God leads some believers to make is to voluntarily abstain from alcohol as a special commitment to Christ.

If God leads us to make such a statement to our culture and context, Romans 14 gives us three truths that we must keep in tension. First, we must accept one another. I must not look down on, condemn, or judge someone who holds a different conviction. I accept you, and I trust that you will accept me in the disputable area of drinking. Second, we must be fully convinced in our own conscience before Christ about whether we are to drink or not to drink. Perhaps you are not sure where you stand. I would encourage you to pray, to seek counsel, to study God’s Word, and stand firm. Third, we must be careful not to cause a brother to stumble. We must limit our personal freedom so as not to cause a brother to stumble. With this framework in place, I would like to share with you my personal conviction, which I hold by faith before Jesus Christ.

The weak Christians in Rome (guided only by the light of their own consciences and not the revealed Word of God) thought it was wrong to eat meat. The strong Christians in Rome had the personal freedom of conscience to eat anything. Paul appeals to their love. He asks them to be careful with their personal freedom. They must be careful not to exercise their freedom in such a way that a weaker brother stumbles as a result. Christian love means that I would not eat meat around a brother who might be emboldened by my example to do something against his own conscience.

As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your

brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. (Romans 14:14-16)

Let's take another example. One Christian might have the personal freedom of conscience to watch TV in his own home. Another Christian believes that it is wrong to even have a TV in the home. I have freedom of conscience to have a TV. I can thank God for my TV, and I can seek to glorify God in the use of my TV. If a man comes over to my house who believes that it is wrong to have a TV, what should I do? I should seek his good. I must respect his convictions. I will not allow him to speak evil of the TV, but I must never try to persuade him to watch a show. This would embolden him to sin against his own conscience, which is to cause a brother to stumble.

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin. (Romans 14:22-23)

Now, there are some legalistic Christians who try to use the argument of the weaker brother and the stumbling block all the time. They say that someone might be offended by you eating meat, or watching TV, so you must never do it! That's not what Paul teaches!

Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. (Romans 14:16)

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. (Romans 14:22)

Legalists say they are offended when you don't act the way they think is right! Causing someone to stumble is when we encourage someone to do something against his own conscience. It is not causing someone to stumble when we ourselves act in freedom. Legalism tries to impose one's personal convictions on everyone else! Being careful not to be a stumbling block means that when I am around someone who has a different conviction, I do not try to get them to do it my way. But it does not mean conforming to a legalistic Christian.

First, we need to accept one another. Second, we need to be fully

convinced in our own minds on the disputable issues of life after we study the Scriptures for ourselves. Third, we need to be careful to never be a stumbling block to another Christian. May we have the spirit of the great fifth century bishop of Antioch, John Chrysostom: “In the essentials unity, in the nonessentials charity, in all things Jesus Christ.”