

Leading Your Church Through Controversy

Michael F. Bird



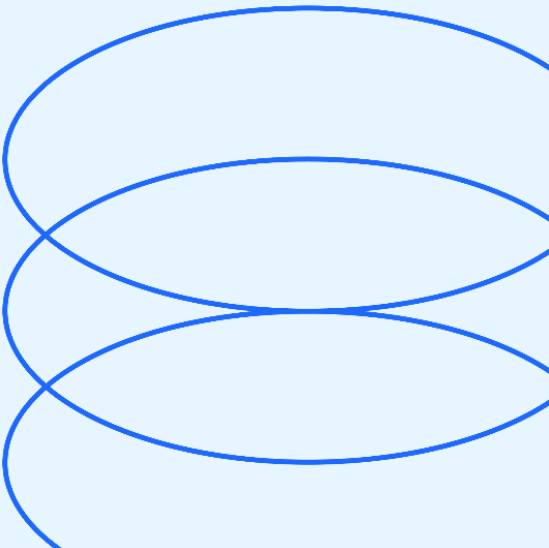
About the Author

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Introduction



It was a Wednesday evening at a mid-sized church somewhere in suburban America. The Sunday worship team was holding its weekly planning meeting, when suddenly matters descended into heated allegations and accusations. The presenting issue was whether the church should continue to fly the American flag in the main auditorium.

One elder, an Iraq war veteran, considered it a nonnegotiable point of patriotic reverence. Holding the alternative view, a young man who grew up in the church and was now a sophomore in college and in charge of a worship band, regarded it as a conflation of kingdom and empire that bordered on idolatry. Within thirty minutes, decades of shared ministry, joyous worship, and prayer meetings had been scorched by words that neither man could retract.

By the following Sunday, two petitions were circulating, and divisions were opening up along generational and ethnic lines about the propriety of having a US flag in church during worship.

If you have led a church for any length of time, some version of this story will be all too familiar to you. Perhaps the incendiary topic was not a flag but a preferred worship style, a political party's grip on certain members, a stance on vaccines, views on immigration, the color of the new carpet, Critical Race Theory, the latest heresy *de jour*, or whether the church should open or close its doors during a pandemic. Me? I once had to help a church work through a bitter divide after a certain candidate was not appointed as pastor. I'm sure many of you have experienced similar debates and debacles. Sadly, many churches have a talent for turning personality conflicts, generational divides, and convictions on secondary matters into first-order crises.

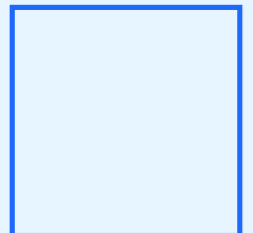
So, when tensions are high and friendships are fraying, **how do pastors and church leaders guide people through controversy without letting controversy destroy the flock?**

The good news is that we are not the first generation to wrestle with this question. The Apostle Paul confronted a strikingly similar situation in the churches of first-century Rome. His counsel in Romans 14:1–15:13 remains arguably the most penetrating pastoral guide to leading Christian communities through their diversities and disagreements.

Paul's exhortations are neither naïve nor sentimental. They are forged in the crucible of a real church divided by real convictions about food, holy days, and wine—matters that touched the deepest nerves of identity, devotion, and cultural survival. What Paul offers in this (much-neglected) section of his Epistle to the Romans is not a twelve-step conflict resolution program but a theologically grounded vision for how the lordship of Jesus Christ relativizes our disputes, reorients our loves, and reconstitutes our unity.

By immersing themselves in, digesting, and reflecting on this passage, pastors will be ready to shepherd their flocks through the controversies that threaten to tear them apart.

One Lord over every servant: how Jesus's Lordship changes everything



The first thing Paul does in Romans 14 is not to adjudicate the dispute itself. He does not pick sides or tell us who is right about meat and who is wrong about the Sabbath. Instead, he lifts the eyes of both factions, the “weak” and the “strong,” to the one Lord who reigns over them all.

Paul commands that they “Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters” (Rom 14:1). This imperative verb “accept,” or better yet, “welcome,” frames the entire section, reappearing in Romans 15:7 as the climactic conclusion: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you.”¹ The basis for welcoming one another is not that we agree on everything, but that Christ has welcomed us. And who can turn away one whom the Lord Jesus himself has accepted?

Paul’s argument is, I would argue, *kyriocentric*: centered on the lordship of Jesus. He uses the word κύριος (*kyrios*, “Lord”) twelve times across Romans 14:1–15:13. The point is stunningly simple: “If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (Rom 14:8). Jesus “died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living” (Rom 14:9). If Jesus reigns over life and death, then he certainly reigns over our disagreements about flag placement, worship styles, and immigration law. As Eugene Peterson elegantly paraphrases, “That’s why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other.”²

For the pastor leading a divided church, this is your first and most essential move:

Remind your people that they all serve the same Lord. We are all united in “One Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph 4:5).

Paul asks this rhetorical question of the Romans: “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master [*kyrios*], servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord [*kyrios*] is able to make them stand” (Rom 14:4). One household slave cannot peer into an adjacent room, disapprove of another slave’s conduct, unilaterally pronounce a sentence of condemnation on that servant, and carry out the punishment. That would be to usurp the master’s prerogative! If God has justified someone (Rom 8:30), then we cannot condemn them (Rom 8:33). If God has raised them up, then we cannot put them down. If they belong to the Lord, then they belong to us who claim the same Lord. N. T. Wright puts it memorably: “Justification by faith” entails “fellowship by faith.”³ Fellowship is what justification looks like when it sits down at the table of Christian community.

¹ James G. D. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38B (Word, 1988), 2:851.

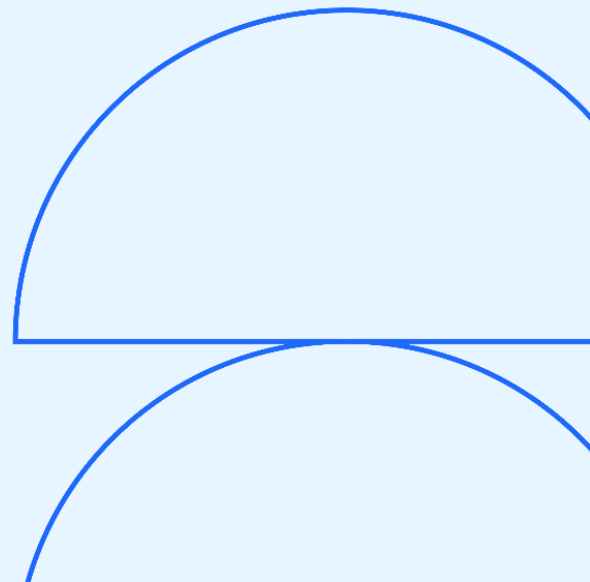
² Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase in *The Message* of Romans 14:9.

³ N. T. Wright, “Romans,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Abingdon, 2002), 10:733.

In our polarized contexts, where cultural identity often functions as a rival lordship, the church desperately needs pastors who will assert that Jesus alone—not any party or platform—is Lord of the congregation. If the church divides along the lines of ethnic or political loyalty, as Wright warns, “it is still living in the world of Caesar.”⁴

⁴ Wright, “Romans,” 10:739.

Theological triage: identifying the hills worth dying on



One of the most critical skills for any church leader is the ability to distinguish between matters that are essential to the faith, matters that are important but not salvation-essential, and matters that may be treated with indifference.⁵ As Doug Moo comments, “Divisions in the church over nonessentials diverts precious time and energy from its basic mission: the proclamation of the gospel and the glorifying of God.”⁶

Paul clearly regards the disputes about meat, sacred days, and wine as *adiaphora*, matters of indifference, or something for each conscience to determine for itself. He does not come out for or against vegetarianism. He does not rule on Sabbath observance. He simply says, “Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind” (Rom 14:5). Make up your mind without making war on those who disagree!

For pastors, this means developing a “theological triage,” a disciplined sorting of issues into first-tier, second-tier, and third-tier categories.

- **First-tier** doctrines are the essentials that define the faith: the Trinity, the gospel of salvation by grace through faith, the authority of Scripture, the bodily resurrection of Christ. These are the “mere Christianity” doctrines reflected in the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, and these are the hills worth dying on.
- **Second-tier** issues shape the character and order of a church: baptism, church government, the nature of the Lord’s Supper, schemes of eschatology, and the like, but no one should be declared a heretic over them.
- **Third-tier** matters are questions of conscience and conviction: whether a Christian should drink alcohol, what Bible translation to use, how to observe Halloween, or whether to fly a national flag in the sanctuary.

The trouble, of course, is that not everyone agrees on what belongs in which tier. Paul knew this. In first-century Rome, for a Jewish believer steeped in the stories of Daniel or the Maccabean martyrdom traditions, refusing to eat meat tainted by pagan handlers was not a trivial preference. It was far more than that: It was a sign of covenant loyalty. It was the line in the sand that separated Jews from Greeks, allegiance from apostasy, and the faithful from the pagans. Paul respected this seriousness even as he classified the issue as secondary. He did not mock the conviction. He simply refused to let it become the basis for division.

⁵ Albert Mohler, “A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity,” *Albert Mohler* (blog), July 12, 2005, <https://albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity/>.

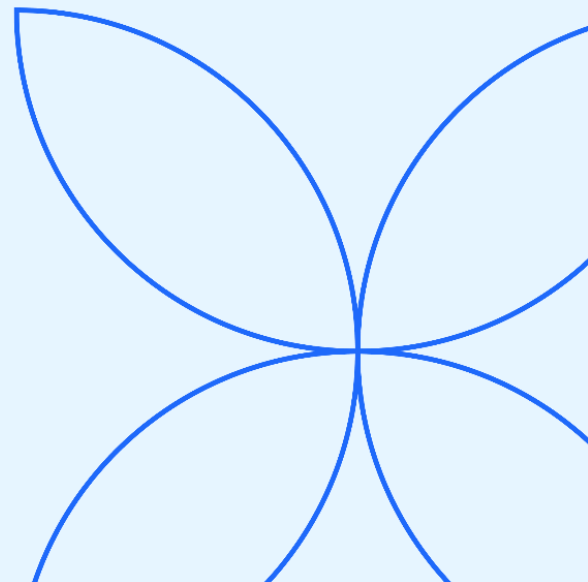
⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 2018), 872.

Every generation has its own version of the vestarian controversy: the sixteenth-century English dispute over whether ministers could wear surplices and chasubles. It was a debate that led to imprisonments, pamphlet wars, and the eventual Puritan split from the Church of England. We might respond, “Who cares if the preacher wears a three-piece Armani suit, a monastic robe, or a chicken suit as long as the Word is preached?” But for the Puritans, vestments symbolized the continuing tyranny of clericalism and those flirting with papal paraphernalia. Little things, like boiled meat or a priest’s garments, can stir up enormous theological artillery when they evoke a larger story of struggle.

The pastoral lesson is this: The wise leader does not dismiss the underlying seriousness of disputed matters, but teaches the congregation to see them within a hierarchy of affections and allegiances. If you major on minor things, you will end up as a cranky kook, clinging to human-centered teachings that choke the gospel of grace. If you minor on major things, you will end up theologically vacuous or as a mere people pleaser, permitting a pattern of life that is contrary to Scripture. There is an old German proverb that speaks to this: The most important thing is to make sure the most important thing remains the most important thing.⁷

⁷ Michael F. Bird, [*A Bird’s-Eye View of Paul: The Man, His Mission and His Message*](#) (InterVarsity, 2008), 154.

Love over leverage: why being right is not enough



Here is something that cuts close to the bone: Paul tells the “strong,” those whose beliefs gives them freedom in certain matters, that they bear the greater responsibility in the conflict. “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves” (Rom 15:1).

Paul does not give the weak the power of veto over the strong, but neither does he give the strong the right to ride roughshod over the consciences of the weak. What he demands is a posture shaped by the cross: self-giving love rather than the exercise of naked power.⁸ “If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died” (Rom 14:15).

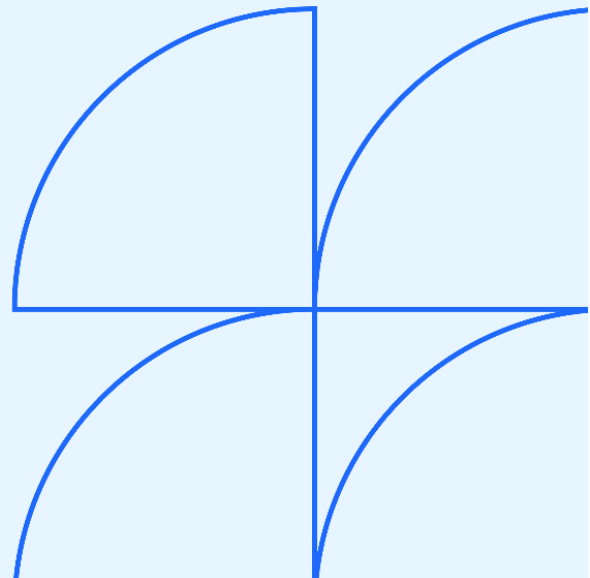
This is one of the most sobering sentences in all of Paul’s letters. You might win the argument. You might impress your likeminded peers. You might own the libs or take down the white Christian nationalist! But you lose a brother or sister for whom Jesus died. And if Jesus is for them, crucified for them to wash away their sins and yours, then how can you seek to bring them to ruin?

This has enormous implications for the church. In an age when social media rewards the loudest and most polarizing voices, where pundits want us enraged in order to be engaged, Paul’s counsel is countercultural to the point of appearing absurd. The Christian who says, “I believe I’m right on this issue, but I’m going to constrain the exercise of my freedom because I love you more than I love being right,” will not trend on X, Truth Social, or Facebook. But that person is imitating Jesus. “For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me’” (Rom 15:3). Jesus’s own example of absorbing insult rather than retaliating with power is the pattern for the strong. Their tolerance is not a capitulation to error but a recapitulation of Jesus’s own self-giving service.

In practice, this means that the leader who has the stronger theological position on a disputable matter must be the first to lay down arms. This is not because truth does not matter, but because love is the context in which truth does its best work. Perhaps one of the greatest lessons of Romans 14 is this: When it comes to secondary matters, it is more important to be loving than to be proven right. In the end, there is far more at stake than steak, Veterans Day, and libations of Jamba Juice.

⁸ Peter Adam, *Gospel Trials in 1662: To Stay or to Go?* (Latimer Trust, 2012), 56.

The kingdom lens: placing things in context of the bigger picture



Paul offers one of his most remarkable statements in the midst of this controversy: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). This is a pastoral earthquake disguised as a theological aside. Paul is telling quarreling Christians that the kingdom they belong to—the very kingdom for which they were redeemed, the kingdom announced by Jesus and inaugurated by his resurrection—has nothing to do with the petty jurisdictional boundaries they are trying to erect around food and drink.⁹

Note what Paul says the kingdom is—“righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”—and is not—“eating and drinking” (Rom 14:17). This kingdom vision is indispensable to our thinking. Our partisan and parochial debates about flags, vaccines, and political parties are not kingdom business. What is kingdom business is being right with God and treating each other rightly. It is peace with God and living at peace with others. It is the effusion of joy among us, not the condescension of judgment, that should characterize churches. **If that is true, then the pastor must relentlessly point the congregation toward this precise kingdom defined not by worldly allegiance but by righteousness, peace, and joy.**

Yet Paul has more to say than not to major on the minors or let external agendas ruin your life together in Christ. Paul tells the Roman house churches to actively build the bonds of unity with each other even *amidst* their differences. He says, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Rom 14:19). I have to confess that this is one of my favorite verses in all of Romans, and I wish it would be read out three times at the beginning of every elder board meeting, deacons’ gathering, denominational assembly, and church business meeting. Instead of destroying God’s work in his servants, we are to build each other up, like adding another stone to a beautiful cathedral, like raising up a pulpit for the first time, or like the filling of a baptismal pool.

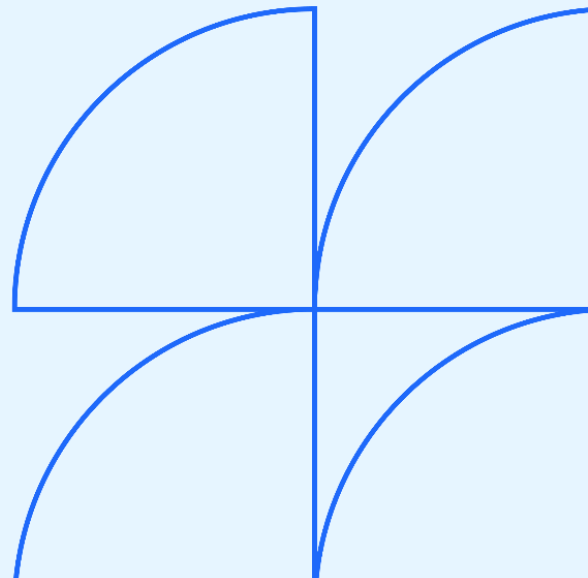
Paul bolsters this exhortation with the panoramic backdrop of redemptive history. In Romans 15:7–13, he piles up four Old Testament citations to undergird his point, drawing from the Pentateuch, the Psalms, and the Prophets, all to show that the multiethnic people of God, united under the Messiah, is what the whole story of Scripture has been driving toward.¹⁰ The local conflict between the house churches of Rome is placed against the cosmic scope of God’s plan to gather all nations under the lordship of the Root of Jesse, aka the Messiah, aka the Lord Jesus Christ. Assuming this entire scheme—Messiah, patriarchs, gentiles, mercy, praise—it would be utterly unthinkable for believers to harbor any prejudice against their fellow brothers and sisters. Church unity is not a premium extra, a quaint addition to the salvation package. Rather, it is the point of God’s rescuing project: That Jesus “might create

⁹ Brian Vickers, “The Kingdom of God in Paul’s Gospel,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12 (2008): 61.

¹⁰ Wright, “Romans,” 10:746–48.

the two in himself into one new man, thus making peace, and might reconcile both in one body to God through the cross, killing the enmity in himself” (Eph 2:15–16).

A pastoral playbook: 6 principles for disputable matters



Drawing the threads of Paul's counsel together, here are six principles that every church leader can employ when navigating disputable matters:¹¹

1. Learn to differentiate between areas of conviction and areas of command

What are the beliefs and practices that require conformity, and which allow flexibility? Generally speaking, the big-ticket items of our faith are found in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, since they have historically served as symbols of the apostolic faith. Beyond the major creeds, denominational distinctives, and basic ethics, we should be very hesitant to prescribe a theology or set of behaviors. The result can be a legalistic construction that places more authority on human tradition than on the freedom in the Spirit.

2. Don't major on minor doctrines or minor on major doctrines

We need a triage of beliefs: the primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary beliefs are the "mere Christianity" doctrines about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and salvation by grace. Secondary beliefs include baptism, the Lord's Supper, eschatology, and church government—stuff that is significant up to a point, but nothing anyone should be run out of town over. Tertiary beliefs are matters of conscience: alcohol, homeschooling, Bible translations, and the like.

If you major in minor things, you choke the gospel of grace. If you minor on major things, you betray it.

3. Withhold judgment where the gospel is not threatened and holiness is not compromised

Where the gospel is not at stake and holiness is not tainted, our automatic response should be to encourage freedom of conscience. Paul was adamant: "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another" (Rom 14:13). If someone calls Jesus "Lord," then it is Jesus's role and right to judge them, not ours.¹²

4. Exercise your convictions to build others up, not to tear them down

This is by far the hardest part. If you feel you have freedom to drink alcohol responsibly, do not flaunt it or shove it in the face of someone who is sensitive about it. If you feel the need to abstain, do so to God's glory, but do not appoint yourself the happy hour police for others.

¹¹ Michael F. Bird, *Romans*, Story of God Bible Commentary (Zondervan Academic, 2016), 498-500.

¹² Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 1988), 484.

The real test of maturity and the real measure of love is how we express our convictions in the company of those who do not share them. I would argue that 99 percent of the time, being loving is better, wiser, and more mature than proving to be right.

5. Do not exchange freedom in Christ for slavery to human tradition

While we should avoid needlessly offending others, we must also be prepared to assert our freedom in Christ against those who would take it away. Just as Paul opposed Peter for not walking according to the truth of the gospel when he separated from gentiles during table fellowship (Gal 2:11–14), we must stand firm when Christian freedom is under threat. We cannot exchange freedom in Christ for slavery to human tradition. At the end of the day, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1).

However, Paul adds, “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not let your freedom become an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal 5:13). We are free from condemnation, but not free to be loveless or insensitive to the consciences of others.

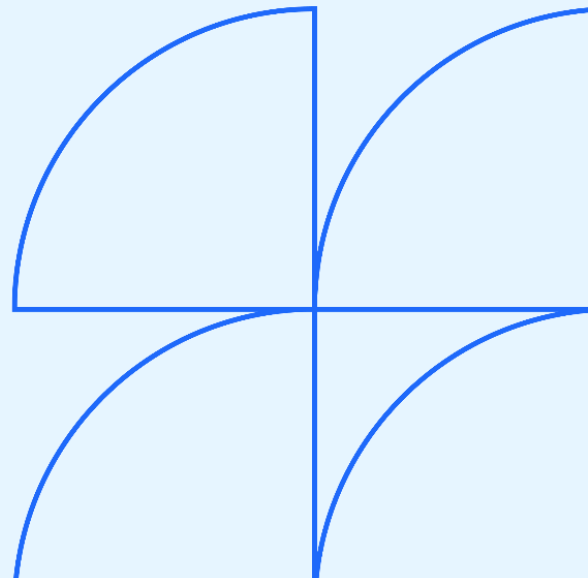
6. In all things act in love and carry each other’s burdens

When it comes to disputable matters, love should be our guiding rule. Love for God, love for enemies, even love for that flag-waving Baby Boomer or for that vegan millennial at church. If we love each other, we will value the freedom of our friends more than the triumph of our own convictions on disputable matters.

Share your mind, guard your conscience, but do so in love. As the ancient maxim puts it: “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”¹³

¹³ This maxim is variously attributed to Augustine, Richard Baxter, John Wesley, and others.

The burden of seeking unity



Once upon a time, there was a church filled with middle-aged people, mostly of Anglo-Saxon heritage, who noticed that their suburb had a massive growth of immigrants from China. A few Chinese people started coming to church, but they struggled because their English was less than brilliant. So the church, seeing a great opportunity for mission, decided to employ a Chinese pastor to plant a Mandarin-speaking congregation at their church. The Mandarin-speaking service would meet at 2:00 p.m., while the English-speaking service would meet at 10:00 a.m.

As things panned out, the Chinese congregation soon began to grow and really thrive. It was a success story of how to add a congregation to your church, engage in local mission and ministry, and reach out to immigrants.

Eventually, though, the Chinese congregation became the larger of the two congregations meeting in the building and contributed more to the church's budget than the English congregation. And so, after a couple of years had passed, a motion was put forward to swap worship times, so that the Mandarin-speaking congregation would meet at 10:00 a.m., and the English-speaking congregation at 2:00 p.m.

When this matter was put to a meeting of the now-mixed English/Chinese members, many of the English-speakers from the 10:00 a.m. service were outraged and indignant. "This is our church, we opened it up to these foreigners, and now they are kicking us out of our own church building." To which one Chinese member replied—in English—"We have been welcomed here, not as equals, but as foreigners, when we should be treated as brothers and sisters who have the same right as anyone to worship in the morning service."

In this dispute, who is right, who is wrong? How do they pursue the things that make for peace and mutual edification? How do they welcome each other as Jesus has welcomed them?

That is what must be discerned in each instance of division, dispute, and debate. Sadly, it is not easy, but that is the labor of a pastor: to heal the wounds between fighting sheep.

What is more, that is why Paul wrote Romans 14–15. Therein lay the principles on how you lead a church through controversy.

Recommended reading

On church conflict

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