

When is it OK to Disagree in Church?

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[0 : 00] Good evening everyone. This is a great topic to be thinking about during a general election campaign. How can we agree to disagree? Not much of that's happening at the moment around the country.

When Justin Welby became Archbishop of Canterbury in 2013, he took leadership of the broadest of broad churches. In Scotland, the Presbyterian Church, when there's been a major disagreement, has tended to split.

If you go in Denver, you'll find all sorts of Presbyterian churches of different hues. The church in England, the Anglican Church, by and large, has chosen to stay together in a slightly uneasy coalition of evangelicals, liberals and Anglo-Catholics.

It disagrees internally on all sorts of things. Recent disagreements would be over things like same-sex marriage or whether they should have women bishops.

And there are lots of things where the Church of England internally disagrees. And Justin Welby looked at that. He became Archbishop of Canterbury and said, we need to think as a church of what good disagreement means.

[1 : 12] We need to balance grace and truth. On one hand, we want to deal graciously with our brothers and sisters in Christ and to show them the love of Christ in everything we do.

But on the other hand, we need to define what is it that the Church stands for? What are the things that are non-negotiable? What are the truths that we must agree on?

And so he started what I think is quite an interesting discussion over the last few years in the Church of England about good disagreement. And later on, I'll probably recommend a book in which I found quite helpful on that.

Now, we're not as broad a church as the Church of England. Perhaps broader than it sometimes appears, but certainly not that broad. But it's still a relevant question for us because we're not going to agree on everything.

The only way we'd agree on everything would be if we all had perfect understanding and perfect wisdom, and we know that's not the case. We disagree on all sorts of things, and we want to disagree well, and we want to know when it is okay, as the question says, to disagree, and when it's not okay to disagree.

[2 : 22] Now, I'm going to limit a little what I'm going to talk about this evening. We disagree on all sorts of things. We might disagree on what did we think of the speaker last Sunday, or what should the floor covering the upstairs hall be?

Not trivial things, but perhaps not critical in the big picture. So we're going to be looking this evening only at disagreement over what the Bible teaches and what we should do as a result.

When is it okay for us to agree to disagree about these things? I'm going to take one question, when, and I'm going to try to answer it with three other questions, which are why, what, and how. So for your relatives, you remember why, what, and how. So we start with the why. Why do we disagree? And there are good reasons for disagreeing, and there are bad reasons for disagreeing. So bad reasons for disagreeing I've called pride and prejudice. Pride is to do with our relationships with each other. And it's about me wanting to be seen to be better than others, perhaps even me just not liking someone else and disagreeing almost out of principle because of that.

[3 : 41] But it is the personal thing that I'm disagreeing because of my relationship with someone else. Church in Corinth, you may remember, had a big disagreement about who the best leaders were.

Some people said, well, I support, I'm part of the party of Peter Cephas. Some of them said, well, I'm Paul. Some said I'm Apollos. And then some said, I'm Christ. And you might think, well, that's

quite good.

But actually, probably they were trying to look down on the others and say, we're superior to you because we look to Christ rather than to anyone else. So factions had come in. Pride had got into the church.

And it was really dividing it. One of the great heresies that the early church had to contend against was something called Gnosticism. And Gnostics were people who thought they had superior knowledge and insight.

And again, they looked down on others and they disagreed with them because they thought they were better than other people. So having pride or disagreeing because of our personal relationship is a very bad reason for disagreeing.

[4 : 50] Then there's prejudice. Prejudice is how we come to look at Scripture and we make Scripture say what we want it to say. Now, that might come out of the way we grew up.

Maybe we're taught in a certain way as we grew up. And either we follow that way or perhaps even we've rebelled against it and we're inclined to things that are the opposite of it. Or perhaps we follow a certain school of theology.

We have a nice book of theology, of doctrine that we refer to in every circumstance. And we try to make every Scripture fit in with that rather than thinking through what is the Bible actually saying to us.

Or perhaps we find at times that the plain meaning of Scripture doesn't really fit in with our lifestyle. The way we're living doesn't appear to conform to Scripture.

And so we try to make Scripture say what we would want it to say and to tie in with how we are living. And that clearly is wrong. If we come to Scripture with our own preconception, our own ideas of what it should say, then we're liable to get the wrong view from it and disagree wrongly with others.

[6 : 03] Positively, why make me disagree? And I've called that guard the gospel. That was Paul's instruction to Timothy, wasn't it? Guard the gospel. Now at that big level, and we'll be thinking a little bit about this later on, that means hold firm to the truths of the gospel and contend, confront anyone who disagrees with the fundamental truths.

Pastor Spence, a bit more wide than that, though. And it is to say we want to look at the Scripture. I want to assess what it says.

Try and work out what it is saying to the world and to me. And to be willing to stand up for that and have a discussion with others if I don't agree with them.

So perfectly valid at times for us to have different views of what the Scripture says and therefore to be in disagreement about it. But then there's the question of why would we agree to disagree?

Accepting that we will sometimes disagree, why would we agree to disagree and say, okay, we'll get on with things, but we'll disagree on this point? Again, there's a bad reason.

[7 : 13] The bad reason is simply to avoid conflict. To give us an easy life. The kind of laissez-faire approach, which maybe is quite prevalent in many ways in our world.

What you believe, what you believe, I'll believe what I believe, and let's not worry about the details of it. Now, when it comes to the Gospel and to the fundamental truths of our faith, we cannot agree to disagree simply to avoid getting into conflict or argument with others.

The things that are basic are things that must be stood up for, that must be defended. But the good reason for agreeing to disagree is to maintain unity in the church.

To say to each other, we are brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus. Yes, we agree, disagree on certain things. They're not things that are absolutely fundamental to faith, and we want to remain united in the body of Christ.

We don't want to get distracted from our main job, which is to glorify God and to preach the Gospel by these things which ultimately are not of primary importance.

[8 : 28] We as Christians are united in Christ, and we wish to remain that way, and therefore there are occasions when we will agree to disagree and maintain unity within the church.

But only on things that are not of the primary importance, that are not the most important in terms of the Gospel. So let's move on and look at that, and having thought about why, let's have a think about what.

And I've developed just a little scale going from things that I think are non-negotiable in terms of agreeing and disagreeing, to things which ultimately we might call trivial, that are unimportant.

If we disagree over them, it doesn't matter, and we mustn't get involved in heated arguments about it. So let's start at the top. We cannot disagree or agree to disagree on what it means to have saving faith.

What does it mean to be a Christian? And we all, I'm sure, would agree that what it means to be a Christian is to recognize that the only way to God, the only way for forgiveness of our sins, is through the Lord Jesus.

[9 : 45] To put it in the Bible terms, to become a Christian is to believe in Jesus. Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life, says John.

And if you and I agree together that our belief in Jesus is what binds us together, we are brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus.

If we can't agree that faith in Jesus is the only way to God, then we have a fundamental difference between us.

Now we could have some discussion about what does it mean to believe in Jesus. And let me suggest one thing from John and one thing from Paul. So John says at the end of the gospel, So it's about who Jesus is.

And then Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, he says, So in other words, that is about what Jesus has done.

[11 : 05] Who Jesus is and what he has done, these are the two things which are vital to believing in him and to having saving faith. And we cannot agree to disagree with anyone who says, Well, Jesus was just a man.

He wasn't really the Son of God, just a good man. Nor can we agree to disagree with anyone who says, Well, I recognize Jesus is a good man. I recognize he died on the cross. But it is still through my own work in some kind of shape or form that I get right with God.

This is the absolute non-negotiable for Christians. We cannot agree to disagree on this. Jesus is the only way to God, God's Son who died on the cross and who rose again.

So that is saving faith. And someone may be my brother and sister in Christ. They may not understand anything about the Holy Spirit. They may not understand about the inspiration of Scripture.

All the things that we would say were fairly fundamental in our faith. But if they have a saving faith in the Lord Jesus, if they believe in him, then they are my brother or my sister in Christ.

[12 : 15] But there are other things which are really important. And I've called them gospel truth. Now, these are the kind of things that down the centuries, people have put into creeds and statements of faith and have said these are the things which are important in our faith.

These are the things which we believe and which anyone who takes the Bible seriously will also believe. We have a list of things which call what we believe.

It's over on the wall over there. If you want to look at it, it's on the website. The fundamental things that we as a church believe. Very similar to the Evangelical Alliance Statement of Faith, which does a similar thing.

And these are things which talk about the Lord Jesus. We talk about God the Father first. They talk about humans and our condition, about the Lord Jesus, about Scripture, about the Holy Spirit, and about the Lord's return.

These kind of things which, as Evangelical Christians, we hold as being fairly fundamental to our faith. Yes, it's possible to be a Christian and not understand these things.

[13 : 21] But if you have come to know Jesus and are taking the Bible seriously, then before very long you should come to understand and believe in these things. And I would say for us, these also are things we cannot agree to disagree on in church.

If you choose to become a member of this church, it is expected that you will agree with all of the things in what we believe in our statement of faith.

The fundamental things that define Evangelical Christianity. They're very important. If we move down again, there are a number of things which I've called important but secondary.

And I've divided that into doctrinal and practical for a reason which I'll explain in a minute. So these are things which, in the interpretation of Scripture, people who are Bible-believing Evangelicals might disagree on, but they are important and we need to think them through and have a view on them.

So we look at the doctrinal ones first. Let me give you a kind of big illustration of that. When people look at God's plan of salvation, there are two main ways in which Evangelicals would look at it. [14:40] One is called covenant theology, and the other is called dispensational theology. You may have heard of them. You may be familiar with them. On a very simplistic level, covenant theology says that since the fall, there has been a covenant of grace between God and human beings.

And it's been gradually revealed over a series of covenants with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, and so on, culminating in the new covenant through the Lord Jesus. But overarching it, it is one covenant.

There's one story of Scripture. Dispensational theology says there are different periods, different dispensations in the history of mankind.

Two very big ones, the dispensation of law, which was the period from Moses to Christ, and the dispensation of grace, which is the church era. And dispensationalists say the way that men and women related to God was very different, particularly in these two periods.

In the Old Testament, you had the law of Moses, you had the sacrificial system, you had the very detailed ceremonial and food laws, and so on. And in the New Testament, that is all swept away, and we now have access to God only through faith in Christ Jesus.

[16:03] Now, you might say, these are both interesting ways of looking at the history. Does it make any difference? They're both helpful in their own way. One of the things you find whenever you look at these things is that what you believe does affect how you act.

So if you don't believe the gospel truth that we've talked about earlier on, that will probably have effects on your lifestyle, on your approach to morality, on your approach to relationship with others, and so on.

And when it comes to covenant and dispensational theology, less significant differences, but there are some. So, for example, if you adhere to covenant theology, you see the Old Testament and the New Testament almost as one, it's a kind of artificial division in the middle.

And you might say, Israel in the Old Testament is the church, the equivalent of the church, and the church is Israel in the New Testament. And so then when you read Old Testament passages, you look in them for the Lord Jesus, you try to see Christ in every passage, and to say, well, there's just one way of approaching God throughout history, it is through faith, albeit expressed in different ways.

But you've probably spent quite a lot of time studying the Old Testament. If you take a dispensational view of things, there will be quite a large portion of the Old Testament where you might say, well, these are of historic interest, they're of interest in the development of faith through the Scripture, but they're not directly relevant to us today.

[17:39] And we won't try to read more into them than is there on the surface. Now, as you may know, a dispensationalist very often they look at types and shadows, in particular, past the Scripture, and see in them the Lord Jesus.

But as a generalization, they would tend to take a more literal view of the Bible. And so might spend less time studying the Old Testament than those who adhere to covenant theology.

It might also affect your worldview. Dispensationists will tend to believe normally that there's a future for the nation of Israel. You have the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, you've now got the church, but God has plans for the future for the nation of Israel.

And that will affect their view of how the Middle East situation is, and perhaps their political views as well. Now, we need to be careful not to exaggerate too much, because dispensation and covenant theology can agree on lots and lots of things.

But it is something that's important to think through, but very much of secondary importance. Practical things, in some ways, are more difficult.

[18:47] We can agree to disagree on the doctrinal things, and as long as one side doesn't preach too vigorously against the other and put them down, then in a church we can agree to disagree on some of these things.

But if you're a church, you either practice infant baptism or you don't. You either have speaking in tongues at your service or you don't. You either have women preaching or you don't.

And so this isn't the kind of thing where we say, well, we just agree to disagree, and you can do what you want and I do what I want, because we have to have one practice in church.

And again, if you sign up to the church at Branceville, we're not asking you to agree necessarily with what we do, but we're certainly asking you to go along with the practical things that we do as a church.

We can't agree to disagree in the sense that I do one and you do the other, because we're one church and we work together. But these things are definitely secondary.

[19 : 47] They're the things that churches can fall out about, and certainly the things you see differences between different denominations in the way they work, but they're not of primary importance in terms of gospel truths.

And they shouldn't affect us working with other Christians, other believers, evangelical Christians with the same faith in the Lord Jesus. If we disagree in these things, then it is not that big a deal in terms of working together for the gospel.

Sometimes, sometimes, even within the church, some of the practical things we can work together to agree to disagree. So to give an example from this church, in this church we have quite a large group of people who believe that the New Testament pattern for communion is you meet to break bread on the first day of every week, that you have a period of open worship, hymns, prayers, readings.

You then give thanks and take the bread, and then give thanks and take the cup. And that's what happens every Sunday morning at 10 o'clock. We have other people who say, well, the exact frequency isn't that important as long as we have communion regularly, and the exact form doesn't really matter that much either.

We can give thanks for the bread and the cup together. We can even take them in the opposite order. And in this church, we have tried to accommodate both sets of people.

[21 : 19] Now, in some ways, these things are always a bit uneasy, but we have a communion service every Sunday at 10 o'clock, and once a month, we have communion at the old age. And the two look quite different, but both of them are people trying to remember the Lord Jesus as he has commanded, and to worship him as they think upon his death.

So sometimes in practical things, we can agree to disagree and accommodate different views.

Often, we can't. Slightly wider reading of practical would be the kind of thing we were looking at in Romans 14 earlier on, which has to do with conscience and what I feel able to do.

So in that situation, you had people, some people who felt that they needed to be vegetarians, that they didn't want to eat meat, and as a matter of conscience, didn't do it or didn't eat particular kinds of meat.

And you had other people who felt free to eat whatever they wanted. And Paul said, that's fine. Neither of you is sinning in your belief.

In fact, you would be sinning if you did the opposite of what you believed in. But just be aware of others, and show them respect, and show them love, and try not to be a stumbling block for others.

[22 : 34] Very interesting in that passage, I think, that Paul says that what is a sin for you might not be a sin for me. So seeing the person who doesn't feel that she has certain forms of meat, if someone comes and says, well, there's no difference, and you can eat anything you want, and they do that, they'll be going against their conscience, and they'll be sinning.

The person who thinks you can eat anything you want, if they eat lots of meat, then they're not sinning. So what is right for one isn't right for the other.

And that's quite an interesting one. I'm not going to go into more detail. That's quite an interesting one to try and get our heads around. But then finally, we have things which I've called unimportant but interesting.

Let me give you an example of that. John chapter 1 and verse 5 says, the light shone in the darkness, but the darkness did not overcome it. Or does it say, the light shone in the darkness, but the darkness did not understand it.

Now the word that's used for overcome or understand could broadly be translated grasp. And so the difference is between grasping with the hand, as in trying to overcome, or grasping with the mind, as in understanding.

[23 : 54] You could make a case for either interpretation. It's quite an interesting discussion point. Does it matter? No, it doesn't. Both statements are true. We know that from reading other scriptures.

And that is definitely not the kind of thing that we want to be falling out over in church. So things that are interesting but unimportant, we can very happily agree to disagree on.

Just one caveat on that. What's unimportant to me may not be unimportant to you. I think I've only ever once been in a meeting when at the end after the speaker had finished, someone felt the need to get up and to correct him.

And that was when I was at university. The speaker was Dr. Robert Gordon, who was then a lecturer in Old Testament, a later very distinguished professor of Hebrew. And Robert talked about Melchizedek, and he made it clear that he believed Melchizedek was a beautiful picture of the Lord Jesus, but no more.

At the end of the service, the oldest member of the church, Mr. Brown, who was well into his 90s, he got up and said, some of us believe that Melchizedek was a pre-incarnation appearance of the Lord Jesus.

[25 : 12] Now, the correction was graciously given. It was graciously received, although Robert didn't change his mind. And no one fell out over it. But what to many of us would have been an interesting point, interesting thing to discuss, to dear Mr. Brown, it was something that was very precious to him and was very important that Melchizedek was actually the Lord Jesus.

And again, that's a bit of a Romans 14 type situation. Someone believes something, I might think there's no consequence, but to them it is, and I need to respect their views and to show love to them as a brother or sister in the Lord Jesus.

So we have, and the non-negotiables to the trivial, a wide range of things. The non-negotiables we can't agree to disagree on, the things that are unimportant, we need to agree to disagree if we don't immediately agree and we don't want to get involved in heated discussions about them.

Let's finish with the how. If at times we know we're going to agree to disagree, how can we do that well? Paul's letter to the Philippians is one where he greatly emphasizes the unity and the love that we have or should have in the Lord Jesus.

Chapter 2 and verse 2, he says, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.

[26 : 46] Chapter 4 and verse 2, he says, I plead with Yodi and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. In other words, really loving pastoral concern for the church as a whole and for these sisters.

Chapter 3 and verse 2 of Philippians says this, watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.

Do you get the huge difference in tone? The one encouraging people to think of each other, to have a real love for one another, to be united in the Lord, and the other coming across almost as vitriolic as he talks about those who particularly would insist on circumcision.

And I think that's a really important distinction that Paul makes there. So how should we disagree? If the truth of the gospel is at stake, if someone is doing something which would distract others from Christ by focusing on things that are not essential to salvation, we need to defend against that robustly.

Paul does it again and again in his epistles. The Lord Jesus does it again and again in the gospels. If people are being led astray and led away from true faith in God and the Lord Jesus, we need to be willing to stand up and say, this is wrong, this is what we believe, we cannot agree with that.

[28 : 27] But among brothers and sisters, where we disagree, we need to show Christian grace to one another. We need to display the unity that we have in the Lord Jesus.

So that means we respect each other's views. If you have a sincerely held view that I happen to disagree with, I don't rubbish it, I don't pretend that it's got no substance and can't possibly be right, I respect what you believe.

We need to seek common ground. We may agree, disagree on some things, but we agree on a whole lot of things. And the worst thing for Christians if we get so caught up in the things we disagree with, we end up shouting at each other, perhaps not literally, but shouting at each other about the things we disagree with, and we lose sight of what it is that we have together in the Lord Jesus.

And in everything, we need to demonstrate humility and love for one another. Recognize that none of us has a monopoly on truth, all of us are capable of being wrong, and that the key thing is that we show the love of Christ to each other and that those looking at us can see that we are Christians by the love that we have.

Two of the great preachers of the 18th century were Charles Wesley and George Whitefield. Now, Wesley and Whitefield disagreed on many things, many things, most notably on the divine sovereignty and human responsibility and the balance between the two, but lots and lots of things they disagreed on, and sometimes in quite a fiery way.

[30 : 16] But Wesley and Whitefield made a real effort as brothers in the Lord Jesus to get along with each other and to contend together for the gospel. To the extent that by the end of their lives, when George Whitefield died, he asked that John Wesley should speak at his funeral.

And Wesley said this as part of his sermon. Let us keep close to the grand scriptural doctrines which he, that is which we are everywhere delivered. There are many doctrines of a less essential nature, with regard to which even the sincere children of God are and have been divided for many ages.

In these we may think and let think. We may agree to disagree. But meantime, let us hold fast to the essentials of the faith which was once delivered to the saints, which this champion of God so strongly insisted on at all times and in all places.

John Wesley's brother, of course, was Charles Wesley. And Charles Wesley puts us the same sentiment in the hymn. I'll finish with this. This is what Charles Wesley wrote. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word to us this evening. We thank you for the fact that although we may disagree on many things of a secondary nature, that we have a unity in the Lord Jesus and that as brothers and sisters in him, we can disagree with grace and with love and with humility.

[32 : 11] We thank you too that the key truths of the gospel are crystal clear in your word. That there is no doubt about how we receive your grace, about how we have salvation through the Lord Jesus.

And there's no doubt either as we read the scriptures about your grace as the God of creation, about the work of the Lord Jesus, about the Holy Spirit and how he works in our lives.

We thank you that we can unite on these things. And we pray that you will help us to contend for the gospel where we need to, where there is error, where there is untruth. Help us to be willing to take a stand against it.

Always doing it with love but with a determination that the gospel of Christ may not be diluted. But help us, particularly in our church, to be marked by unity and by love and by consideration of one another.

We pray now you'll be with us as we continue and as we go into our time of questions. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.