When Good People Disagree

Don't judge, don't trip anyone up, and mind your own walk

SPEAKER	Geno Hildebrandt
DATE	Sunday, May 10, 2020
PASSAGES	Romans 14:1-15:7; Isaiah 45:23; 1 John 1:9; Hebrews 13:17
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:55:16 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Paul's goal for a church divided over meat and holy days was that it would glorify God "with one voice." He gets there by three moves: don't judge the brother or sister who belongs to Jesus, don't use your freedom to make them stumble, and pay attention to your own walk. Then welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- It is fine to see things differently. What matters is how we treat and think about one another.
- Disputable matters – food, alcohol, smoking, political issues, how to respond to a pandemic – are not the gospel, and they have nothing to do with whether someone belongs to Jesus.
- "Weak in faith" cuts both ways. Each side can call the other weak. God has welcomed both.
- Assume the best: the person who disagrees with you is doing what they can to honor the Lord from the heart.
- Do not count your freedom more precious than the blood Jesus shed for the person who disagrees with you.
- Stop looking around at what everyone else is doing wrong. "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" – ask what the Spirit is pressing on your own conscience.

- Even life-and-death stakes do not rise to the level of gospel truth. We still listen, honor one another, and seek one voice.

▶ 0:55:50

"We are a nation divided," Geno began, and lately over when and how to come out of stay-at-home orders. The virus was still killing people at a frightening rate, and quarantine seemed to be slowing it; unemployment had hit its highest level since the Great Depression, and the most vulnerable were struggling to feed their families. A *USA Today* piece described "two Americas," one eager to reopen and one still sheltering, often side by side. The divide had become caustic.

Not in our midst

▶ 0:58:58

His concern was Hope Chapel. People were writing to him, and he worried the church was adopting attitudes that would divide it unnecessarily. "My desire is for us to come together as a faith community, supporting and honoring one another, even as we continue to see our world through different lenses." And this would not be over by mid-June. Health experts were talking about a year or two until there was a vaccine, so the church needed to learn to love one another through a long disagreement.

Begin at the end

▶ 1:02:05

The text runs to the end of Romans 14 and into chapter 15, and Geno started with its conclusion:

> "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."
>
> ROMANS 15:5–6 ↗

Endurance and encouragement are exactly what a long season needs, he said. "You" is plural – "all y'all," in Central Texas. Harmony runs horizontally with one another and vertically with Christ, and the goal is one voice: not two or three camps, not voices of dissension.

▶ 1:03:41

The first-century church argued constantly about two things: eating meat, most of which had been slaughtered in rituals to idols, and honoring one day above another. Watch, Geno said, how Paul works through them.

1. Don't judge

▶ 1:05:15

> "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand."
>
> ROMANS 14:1–4 ↗

The judgment goes both ways. "God has welcomed him" may be the most critical words – God has welcomed the one you disagree with. They are not your servant; they belong to Jesus, and he judges. "So stop it."

▶ 1:06:50

"Weak in faith" does not mean uneducated or feeble. It describes someone who cannot believe what another believes about a questionable practice – and each side can look at the other and call it weak. Paul says not to quarrel over opinions, or as the NIV puts it, disputable matters. These are not the person and work of Jesus, the cross, the resurrection or the truth of the Bible. They are customs and opinions where reasonable people disagree: alcohol, smoking, food, holy days, political parties.

▶ 1:08:52

He offered two deliberately silly stereotypes: a brother who is a Democrat and smokes, and a Republican brother with a great gun collection and a stash of hoarded food. None of it has anything to do with whether they belong to Jesus. "I accept my brothers because they belong to Jesus." Because Jesus is our master, our concern is whether we are pleasing him. And here is the catch: "I need you to talk to me about my attitude" – in grace, not to win someone to your side, but to help each other follow Jesus better.

▶ 1:11:44

> "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God."
>
> ROMANS 14:5–6 ↗

Give the benefit of the doubt: she is doing the best she knows to honor God from her heart. Geno told of a sister who reached over and turned off the tap while he washed dishes. Surprised, he asked what she thought, and learned of her deep concern for clean water. He could say amen to that, and changed his habit. She was seeking to honor God and inviting him to join her.

▶ 1:14:16

"None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself… whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:7–9). Everyone who follows Christ answers to Christ, "not to me and not to you." And all of us will stand before God's judgment seat; "every knee shall bow to me" (Romans 14:10–12, quoting Isaiah 45:23). Each will give an account of himself. "We cannot think less of one another" over shelter-in-place, Geno said. "We can disagree, but we must continue to honor and prefer one another above ourselves."

2. Don't make your brother stumble

▶ 1:16:49

> "Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean."
>
> ROMANS 14:13–14 ↗

If you believe something is wrong for you, Geno said, do not do it; that is your conscience and your walk before God. If someone else has freedom, talk it through in grace, and perhaps agree to disagree.

▶ 1:18:31

He pulled back the curtain on the board. Matt had compared their task to seminary, where two PhDs read the same text and come away with different interpretations; competing medical experts were doing the same. The board had talked at length, traded articles, and consulted three medical

professionals working with hospitalized Covid patients, and had not yet reached consensus. “We love each other, we trust each other, we just don’t think alike.”

▶ 1:20:50

“If your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died… For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit… So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Romans 14:15–19). Food and drink we can hold loosely; righteousness, peace and joy we cannot compromise.

▶ 1:22:53

Does that constrain what I do and say? Yes, appropriately. Geno drinks in moderation and sees nothing wrong with a glass of wine, but you will rarely see him drink in public, because he is the pastor of Hope Chapel and a brother to people who would be sorely offended. “Do I count my freedom as more precious than the life investment Christ has made in my opponent?” – even the one who wrote a mean Facebook post about me? “Grow up. We should all grow up.” Staying obstinate and easily offended is not spiritual; it tears down the body.

3. Pay attention to your own walk

▶ 1:26:30

> “It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”
>
> ROMANS 14:21–23 ↗

Geno asked for the slide to stay up. Verse 22 is critical: “Quit looking around you and discovering what everybody else is doing wrong. Look at yourself.” Where is the Holy Spirit pricking your conscience? “Don’t be the conscience for somebody else.” He admitted the questions he asks himself – would Jesus watch this show with me, help me write this post? – and that he sometimes blocks them out.

Welcome one another

▶ 1:29:26

> "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.'"
>
> ROMANS 15:1–3 ↗

Jesus was accused, bullied, cursed, beaten and executed for us; our reproaches fell on him. So we should bear reproach for those we disagree with and lay down our rights for their sake. Then Paul arrives back where Geno began – endurance, encouragement, hope, one voice – and adds: "Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15:4–7). An obligation to carry the weak, a goal of rich harmony, an exhortation to welcome fully.

▶ 1:32:58

For anyone wondering whether such a community exists: Hope Chapel is not perfect but is giving it its best shot, and you belong to God's family not by joining Hope but by joining Jesus. Geno offered a simple prayer someone once taught him – sorry, please, thank you – and prayed it with 1 John 1:9: if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive.

▶ 1:36:52

His application: the board was not yet ready to reopen and not yet in consensus. Some would be disappointed by the slowness; others would be disappointed when the doors did open. "In that disappointment, we will seek to live in rich harmony," confessing that the one whose faith looks different, or weaker, "is a beloved sister or a loving brother in Christ Jesus, and that's good enough."

Questions

▶ 1:39:48

Matt, six feet away, relayed texted questions. Where is the limit on bending to others' offense, when offense becomes leverage? Geno could draw no line in the sand. The offended person should go to the other, ideally over meals with feet under each other's table, and the other may moderate. But someone offended almost continually has a problem; the Bible gives not rules but a call to love, so ask instead, "What are the limits of love?" He told of Lon, a rodeo-team friend from Texas State saved out of a hard-drinking culture, who met old friends in bars on one condition: "I'll buy you a beer, and you buy me a Dr Pepper." No condemnation, and no going back.

▶ 1:45:41

How do you raise a blind spot without an explosion? Not in your first conversation. Build a bridge strong enough to carry freight, then cross it – and go to learn why they do what they do. On the board,

he explained that it does not vote but seeks consensus, each member bringing what they sense the Spirit is saying, often until an "aha" moment when everyone sees the same thing. Yes, it gives power to the minority view, and at times he chafes, but he trusts the Spirit's leadership.

▶ 1:51:27

Last, the hardest: both sides see reopening as life and death. Even so, Geno said, it does not rise to the level of gospel truth. Those chafing under restrictions should honor the vulnerable – masks would likely be recommended for a while. Those most at risk might stay home longer, and should refuse judgment on those exercising freedom: "I know my young friends love Jesus and wouldn't do anything to harm me." And the two views meet at spiritual authority: he believed the board had the responsibility to set the course, and the church should submit to its leaders. The two pastors closed by thanking each other – Geno for Matt's balanced, scientific perspective as a man whose wife was caring for Covid patients. "Matt and I don't always agree, and I've learned to listen to him."

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Romans 15:5–6
- Romans 14:1–4
- Romans 14:5–6
- Romans 14:7–9
- Romans 14:10–12
- Isaiah 45:23
- Romans 14:13–14
- Romans 14:15–19
- Romans 14:21–23
- Romans 15:1–3
- Romans 15:4–7
- 1 John 1:9
- Hebrews 13:17

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. What disputable matter – then or now – are you most tempted to treat as if it were the gospel?
2. Paul says “God has welcomed him.” How does that phrase change the way you see someone you disagree with?
3. Geno limits a freedom he has in public for the sake of others. What freedom might you need to hold more loosely, and for whom?
4. Romans 14:22 turns the spotlight on our own conscience. What is the Holy Spirit pressing on in you, rather than in someone else?
5. Who is one person you disagree with that you could build a bridge to this week, and how will you start?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Geno Hildebrandt is the pastor of Hope Chapel and sits on its board of directors as an ex officio member, alongside Matt Ryniker. He came to Christ in the mid-1970s and has been part of the board’s long, prayerful search for consensus on reopening during the pandemic. He took live questions from the congregation after this message, relayed by Matt.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BaFXYHg7v_0&t=3316s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.