

CONFLICT RESOLUTION *AND* THE LAW OF LOVE IN THE CHURCH

Video Lecture Series

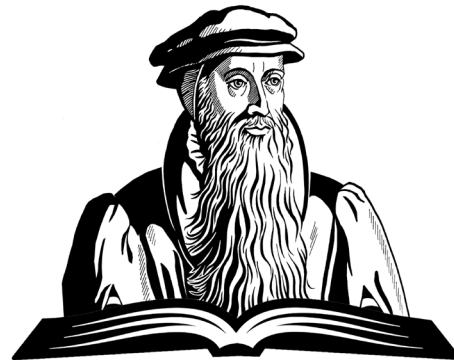
by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Module 2

THE LAW OF LOVE IN THE CHURCH

Lecture 1

Introduction



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 2 ~

The Law of Love in the Church

- 1. Introduction**
2. Three Principles for Harmony
3. The Strong and the Weak in the Faith
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CONFLICT RESOLUTION *AND* THE LAW OF LOVE IN THE CHURCH

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Module 2 ~ Lecture 1 **Introduction**

Dear friends, a hearty welcome to our introductory study on the subject of the Law of Love in Matters of Liberty. It shall be based on Romans 14, verse 1 to chapter 15, verse 7. I address myself to those belonging to the spiritual kingdom of Jesus Christ. In other words, those who, by the grace of God, are born-again believers. You were, by the grace of God, delivered from the power of darkness, quickened from being dead in trespasses and sin, and united to Jesus Christ through faith. As such, you have become part of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and none of this was based on our works or merits, but as Paul pointed out in Ephesians 2:10, “we are his workmanship”—His workmanship—“created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” A part of these good works is to live in fellowship with all the spiritual family of God. Many of your fellow saints you will never meet in this world, but we will live closely with fellow believers in our local church family. With them, we are called to live in harmony, not pleasing ourselves, but serving one another. Paul stated God’s will in the concluding verses of Romans 15, the section we’re looking at: “That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore receive ye one another”—how?—“as Christ also received us”—and is receiving us—“to the glory of God.” Now I admit, that’s a huge assignment. That’s much too large for our weak hearts and weak knees, especially when we live with challenging people, or even worse, when we struggle ourselves with the baggage of our indwelling sin. How needed to daily pray what Jesus taught us in the Lord’s prayer: “Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9–10). The Heidelberg Catechism expounds these petitions brilliantly in these words: “Grant us to know thee, to sanctify and glorify thee. Rule us so by thy word and Spirit, that we may submit ourselves more and more to thee; and preserve and increase thy church. Grant that we and all men may renounce our own will, and without murmuring obey thy will, which is only good; that so every one may attend to, and perform the duties of his station and calling, as willingly and as faithfully as the angels do in heaven.” So, the Heidelberg Catechism.

Now how to attain and how to maintain such a God-glorifying and harmonious life in the

church family is the subject of this series of lectures. Our main focus will be on the Scriptures from Romans 14 and 15. Living at peace and in harmony in a local church family, and doing God's will without murmuring is a real challenge. And what are the challenging factors we face in this task? Well, there are a number of them.

First, we face the normal stresses and strains of life in general. Our bodies and our minds are human and they can be tired. Sickness can add significant burdens, as well as economic or social poverty. Now add to this mixture any racial tensions that exist all around us. Now these realities can easily spark friction and fractures in our harmony and peace.

The second challenge is that even though we are, and may be, by the grace of God, partakers of God's saving grace, we still wrestle with the remnants of our indwelling sin. The best of God's saints still experience weakness and infirmities in their faith. So it's good to remind ourselves that a Biblical church on earth is never a showcase of perfect people. Instead, let us consider our church as a hospital of recovering sinners, who are to assist each other in this journey of recovery.

Now a third challenge, among God's saints, we have a wide variety of characters. As in a natural family, so in a spiritual family, the dynamics of different personalities can create friction and disharmony. Now every father and mother knows how young and impulsive or stubborn children can quickly upset the peace, and even cause those of us who are mature to act in sin. Now add to this the differences in our natural makeup or our temperaments. Brothers and sisters, grace does sanctify sinners, but it does not change our personalities. The raw truth is that not all believers are as easy to get along with. Other saints are more reserved, while others love the publicity. Some are assertive or ambitious in character, and many others would rather follow directions than lead. So this uniqueness in our Creator's design and purpose, we cannot undo. We are meant to complement each other, rather than to compete with each other. And yet due to sin, these differences can easily become a cause of disharmony, especially when one begins to dominate, or even worse, abuse his power or authority.

A fourth challenging factor is the spiritual journey each of us has made prior to being saved. Some that are saved have come into the kingdom with a deeply troubling life history behind them. There are those who have experienced deep trauma. Others come with loads of emotional baggage due to neglect or abuse. Then there are those who have grown up in their families like little kings or queens, and such may find serving, or to be the last or the least, very difficult to do. As a result, we find tensions building up in the relationships among the believers. Well, then there are those in the fellowship who have lived a sin-indulgent, or rebellious lifestyle. Though all saved by grace, and all turned away from their sins, their outlook on life may differ greatly of those who have always lived a tidy, strict, and devout religious life. How easy it is for the one to judge the other, or to look down on the other. Perhaps fellow saints, who may make different allowances in things that are undefined in Scripture, we either judge or we look down.

So that brings us to the fifth challenge that could facilitate disunity. This factor is the difference in spiritual maturity, in grasping the fulness of the gospel. That's kind of what the apostle here is dealing with in Romans 14 and 15. Now imagine, for example, the Philippian jailor mentioned in Acts 16. All his life, he lived a rough lifestyle in the darkness and the grip of heathenism. Then we know God sovereignly saved him, and he began his brand new life in Christ. I'm sure the man was full of zeal, freed from the burden of sin, and filled with the joy in the Holy Ghost. And though he experienced rejection and opposition from his former friends, he might have been like those Peter described in 1 Peter 1:7 and 8—"ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls." And he's filled with that.

And now imagine that living next door to him, lived a strict Jewish family. All their lives, they have lived according to the Mosaic laws and the rabbinical traditions. They avoided any close contact with their heathen neighbors. Each Sabbath day, they went to the synagogue. Each day, they ate and dressed exactly as they were taught by their Jewish teachers and forefathers. But now, through the gospel preaching however, they also have become believers in Jesus Christ. Recently, they have joined the Philippian local church family, of which also the jailor is a member. And though these Jewish people's trust now is in Jesus Christ for salvation, now they struggle to let go of the practices they used to do, thinking that they were pleasing God with them. Their consciences are still bound by their many religious practices of former years. For them, for example, to omit the Sabbath day services still feels wrong. Or to stop that yearly ritual of the Passover felt like a sinful neglect. For them to mix with other Christians like the jailor and his family still feels awkward, as all their life they were taught not to fellowship with those people. So you see, the Jewish family felt that various things their brothers and sisters in Christ did are a trespass of God's law. Now, isn't it easy to see how these different mindsets of genuine Christians can lead to disharmony within the local body of the church.

Possibly another example of this tension was actually felt between Jesus and his own early disciples. Undoubtedly, the disciples felt unease when they saw their Master in various actions. We know that Jesus often acted or spoke so different than what they were raised with or what they were used to. Jesus wasn't like the rabbis who taught them all those years in the synagogue, and who walked or strode through the village streets. You know, their Master wasn't like that. Their Master Jesus healed the sick. He went to eat at the Pharisee's house on the Sabbath day. He went on a long walk on the Sabbath day, while even plucking the ear of corn and rubbing it between his hands, and eating it, and not disapproving it, as the rabbis did. He did not insist on their washing their hands before the meal. He even touched an unclean and untouchable leper. His interactions with the Samaritan woman, as described in John 4, literally shocked them. No rabbi would ever talk to a woman in public, and certainly not a Samaritan one of that character. Now it is recorded in Luke that he ate with publicans and harlots. At one meal, he allowed himself to be touched by a woman who broke all the social norms, as she unveiled her hair to wash his feet; the woman had even a bad reputation. So Jesus' kind and decisive actions, as you know, did anger the hypocritical Pharisees. They wrote him off as no good, but most likely, it also brought real unease in his own disciples. There were moments they felt that Jesus was too radical, or went too far in his deeds. Peter's reaction, even after Pentecost, supports the suggestion that Jesus' disciples would have struggled with the liberties Jesus took. When, in a vision, God instructs Peter to do something very, very un-Jewish, you know, it went too far for Peter. God told him to rise up and to eat, and Peter's response is instant and fierce, "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean" (Acts 10:14). Doing that would have violated every fiber of Peter's conscience, while he was a believer in Jesus. Yet the Lord instructed him that this was no more a conscience matter.

Now can you see how these different views can create a real tension in your church family? Can you see how difficult it may be to maintain an open and a loving fellowship, while you do not see eye to eye on all matters of life and faith? Now, gladly, we're not on our own to resolve this stress and strain so common in our church families. The Lord of his church has given very clear and actually very extensive directions on dealing with these issues. These instructions are mainly found in Romans 14, verse 1 up to chapter 15, verse 7, as well as in 1 Corinthians 10, verses 23 to 33. And in this series in Christian liberty, we will explore the principal teachings of these Scriptures. So in the following lectures, our aims are three. First, let's consider the will of the Lord in

how his people are to live in this unity of Christian liberty. And secondly, let's define what are the matters that fall actually under Christian liberty. And thirdly, to consider practically how are we to bear and to forebear each other in the spirit of meekness and love, while we may differ on matters of Christian liberty.

Well first of all, what is the will of God in how his people are to live in unity? Well, there ought to be no doubt that living in unity is God's will. To live in unity requires a great deal of love, and this genuine love is never a matter of education, or of culture, or even of our best intentions. Genuine love, as defined by Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, verses 4 to 8, is the work of Jesus Christ. It is only when Christ is truly living within us, by his Spirit, that we will see that kind of love—love that suffers long, that is kind, that doesn't envy; love that doesn't brag or blow their own trumpet, or acts rudely. But instead, a love that seeks the well-being and peace of others first. Or a love that is not easily provoked or irritated by the behavior or the choices of others. A love that doesn't think evil of others, that doesn't suspect them, or judges them. But instead, in love we bear others, we think the best of them, we hope the best of them, and we endure faithfully in loving each other. Such loving action in the body of Christ is an enormous power to promote unity. Satan knows that. Satan knows that love in action is a mighty weapon in the hand of God, and it is therefore in his best interest to do all to disturb it. And one method is that he will blow things out of proportion. You could call that the method of distortion. Distortion is when we major on the things that are minor, or when we turn the minors into majors. And what do we mean with major matters? Major matters are the clear revelations and instructions of God's will for our faith and for our life. Doctrines like justification by faith, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, inspiration of the Scriptures, the Godhead of the Son of man—Jesus Christ, the divinity of the Holy Spirit, the Ten Commandments. Those are all examples of major matters. As Christians, friends, we must be united on these cornerstones and pillars of divine truth. Though culture, and though language may differ, all Christians will find unity in confessing the articles of the Christian faith. That is the unity of the majors, as they are confessed in the Apostles' Creed.

So what are the minor matters—some examples of that? Well, they are the matters of life and faith that are not specified in God's revealed will. For example, are all Christians to observe the traditional celebration of Christ's birth in December? Is this celebration a must or a "may"? Other examples of minor matters in life are clothing styles, the use of jewelry, drinking alcoholic drinks, or even certain foods. A minor matter related to the faith may be, also the question between infant or adult baptism. No, what may be a minor matter of disagreement in one culture, may not be a matter at all in another setting. In other words, the minor things may be very localized, or even part of your denomination. So this part of the Christian life and faith is referred to as Christian Liberty. Well what happens if someone begins to proclaim an undefined aspect of life as God's expressed will for life or faith. For example, there's nothing wrong if believers desire to fellowship together on a week night or a Saturday morning for prayer and Bible study. Well, what if the leadership or a number of members begin to "guilt trip" others who don't attend these weekly or Saturday events? What if they begin to teach that it is God's will for everyone to join these prayer and Bible study times at all appointed times, unless you're dreadfully sick or out of town? What if some will judge you for not attending. What if those who attend begin to think and to talk about the non-attenders as second-rate Christians? Well, you see that will create tension, and can even lead to great disharmony. Now how to avoid this, and how to handle this—the King did not leave us without his detailed instructions, and they again prove to be a well of life for each church family, if honored and followed.

So, we are now ready, after this introduction, in our next presentation, to look into the Scriptures of Romans 14 and 15. And may God bless us all and make us a blessing, as we share with each other in our local churches. Thank you.