

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

Video Lecture Series

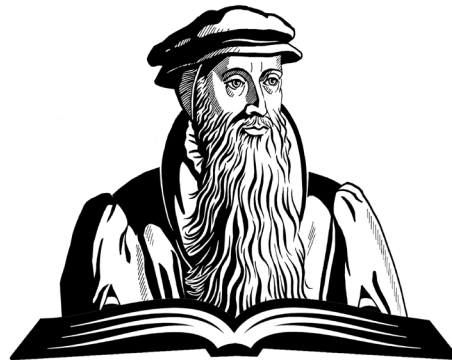
by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Module 2

THE LAW OF LOVE IN THE CHURCH

Lecture 2

Three Principles for Harmony



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

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by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

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
4. The King's Instructions for the Strong
5. The King's Instructions for the Weak
6. Conclusion and Exhortation

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

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Module 2 ~ Lecture 2 **Three Principles for Harmony**

Again, welcome to our second study on subject of the Law of Love in the Matters of Liberty, found in Romans 14, verse 1, to 15, verse 7. Now instead of expounding these chapters verse by verse, I will present to you the principles that are given in these chapters, and bring it all together, following it up with various applications.

The first principle is that believers don't think alike about the issues that are unessential to the Christian faith. The church of Rome is a good example of this fact among Christians. One group of the members viewed all the ceremonial details of the Mosaic law as annulled by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, another group of believers in the Lord Jesus held that a number of the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic law were not repealed. This becomes clear when we read Romans 14, verse 3 and 5: "Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. . . One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike." Now these differences of opinion are fomenting disharmony among the brethren in the Roman church. One group not only is conscientiously observing various aspects of the Mosaic law, but they also appear to judge the others as second-rate Christians. Now, perhaps they were even seeking to impose their view on the other segment of the church. And the group who didn't share these Mosaic convictions is also not acting right. They were clearly despising or looking down on the others. Perhaps they might even call them names, like "narrow-minded." Now Rome wasn't the only church experiencing these differences and stresses because of it. The church of Corinth also experienced strain around the question whether Christians could eat food that was somehow connected to the idolatry of the age in which they lived. Undoubtedly, your own church will have such issues in which brothers or sisters in the body have different views. Perhaps on clothing styles, or use of jewelry, or our level of involvement in our culture, or the use of technology, to just give a few examples. And there may also be differences in how we view certain aspects of our worship service, and what we include or exclude, as we gather together in our congregational worship. These variations pertaining to minor points of faith and practices are to be expected, and to be allowed. The challenge is how to dwell in unity,

how to bear and forebear each other in the spirit of meekness and love, when we deal with matters that are unessential.

What is meant with what we call “unessentials”? Unessential matters are all those matters that do not determine or define your soul relationship with God in Christ. They have nothing to do with your actual salvation—that is unessential. Let it be clear that unessential does not mean “unimportant.” How we live is important. Details of our personal choices in the realm of Christian liberty may not affect our relationship with God. We will not lose our salvation, for example, by eating or not eating pork. Observing Christ’s birthday on December 25th will not hamper our communion with God. Sitting or standing during our singing or praying or Scripture reading does not make me more or less saved. All these behaviors or choices may affect our relationship with fellow brothers and sisters in our local church. Though ranked “unessential” with regard to salvation, they actually are essential with regard to our relationship to fellow believers.

So the second principle: the area of Christian liberty has the potential to strain harmonious relationships among believers. It’s clear from Romans 14, that this was the case in the congregation of Rome. Paul pointed out that some were despising, while others were judging. In verse 3, he wrote, “Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth.” Now verse 15, he noted, “But if thy brother be grieved,” and then he added a warning, “Destroy not him.” Now these are words highlighting the critical nature of this matter in the church at Rome. In verse 16, the Apostle admonished, “Let not then your good be evil spoken of.” Evil speaking among brethren is hardly conducive to promote peace and happiness. In verse 19, Paul urged everyone, “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things where-with one may edify another.” To edify means to build up each other in the faith, and in the walk of life. Well, that implies that what they were doing wasn’t only breaking relationships, but it was having an ill effect on the personal faith life of their fellow believers. Now, in verse 20, Paul added another dimension to verse 15’s warning about grieving. He says, besides destroying and grieving fellow believers with indulging in the use of our liberty, the strong in faith are warned—he says, “For meat”—for food, or for a little food item—“destroy not the work of God.” And in verse 21, Paul details more of the evil effects. He says brothers stumble, or are offended, or are made weak. And in his concluding admonition in verse 23, and there he adds a most dreadful result, for some of the weak in the faith do things that go against their own conscience, and such actions will bring harm in their communion with God, and rob the believers of the precious benefit John mentions in 1 John, chapter 3, verse 21, where he says, “Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God.” So these are serious matters.

The subject, brethren, of Christian liberty on unessential matters is a wise administrative aspect of the Lord’s kingdom. Jesus gathers his elect church from all tribes, all languages and cultures. There will, of necessity, be a huge variety among his people. If you place side-by-side a believing brother raised in the midwest America, and a brother raised in the ghettos of India, you will encounter formidable differences between those two. The western brother heartily eats his steak with knife and fork and napkin, sitting at a table. But the Indian brother, he may still have difficulty eating beef, but he has no problem eating his rice and sauce with his bare hand while sitting on the floor. These are differences, but not essential. Or, when we observe the worship service of an African congregation of Christians, and compare it to an Asian congregation, you will again notice vast differences. The one may feel rather uncomfortable with the music or the worship style, while the others may feel that God is worthy to receive suchlike praises. A personal example, I always grew up thinking that a guitar belonged to the world’s musical instruments. It took me some years

to get used to the idea that a guitar is as much a musical instrument as a piano or an organ, and therefore has equal rights to be used in an official worship service. Yet other brethren in the Lord, they hold the view very tenderly that no musical instruments are to be part of the worship service, for they say we're only to sing with our hearts and voices. Now, isn't it a wise aspect of our Lord's administration of his very varied worldwide kingdom, that he has not specified every detail of the matters that are unessential.

For sure, the New Testament brilliantly expounds God's holy law. Those are the nonnegotiables in the kingdom life and practice. Faith in Christ's finished work and repentance, they are God's call for every sinner, no matter where he comes from. Holiness in walk and talk, or Christ-like behavior, remains the bottom and the top of every Christian. Loving God and every neighbor as ourselves, including our enemy is a cross-cultural demand for every human being and every Christian for sure. But in matters of unessential character, the Lord allows freedom. There is a great amount of wisdom in that administrative regulation in his Word.

However, our adversary, Satan, knows how to use Christian liberty to create unchristian divisions and hostility. Sadly, the history of Jesus' kingdom on earth has many sad and shameful chapters, in which brethren in the Lord become divided and estranged from each other. A number of them are related to points that do not involve any Biblically-defined doctrine or principle. Brethren in the Lord have separated, even though they hold firmly to the doctrines of God, of Jesus Christ, of salvation through grace alone, etc. Now, how sad, children of God have been engaged in back-talking, in judging, condemning, infighting, and creating unnecessary divisions. And why? Why? Only because of their insistence on matters which even the Captain of Salvation did not specify in his Holy Scriptures. And all this is a sad witness to the world, it is disgraceful to the King, and harmful to the kingdom.

Abram recognized the impropriety of this, in Genesis 13. The herdsmen of Abram and Lot were striving about grazing rights. Moses noted that the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelled in the land, so they were witnessing all this. Now they witnessed this unholy squabble between the holy family. And therefore, Abram spoke up unto Lot, "Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren." Now, the issues that bring division in churches are usually not grazing cattle. After a careful review of the issues that can explode our relationships, must we not often conclude that it was as small and insignificant as a loose thread on clothing? We all know that once we begin to pull these loose threads, we may end up unraveling an entire section or seam of the garment. So, insistence on loose threads, while ignoring the wrong of the heart, doesn't serve anyone except Satan and his kingdom. It's easy to spend hours arguing whether piercing your ears is a Christian thing or not, while we get neither hot or cold about all those who pierce the King with unbelief or mockery. Again, sometimes Christians divide on how to dress, while forgetting that multitudes around us are not ready to stand before the judgment seat of the Lord Jesus Christ. How many have not put on the Lord Jesus Christ, while making provision for the flesh to fulfill all the lusts thereof? They are not ready, and we ignore that while we are fighting among each other.

Among the Romans, they argued about which foods were clean or unclean, or which Old Testament feast days they were to observe, even though the gospel ministry did not specify any details about it. Yet, in the meantime, thousands around them were perishing because they were not even knowing about the Bread of Life. So, brethren, let's aim to keep things in perspective. What would you think of those who are dying of cancer, and yet they are worried about their nails, or their hair, or their clothing? Will you not encourage them to focus on the essentials, how to be at peace with

God, and how to be at peace with your family and friends? Will you not admonish them to turn to Jesus Christ and to turn away from their sins, and to labor for that which endures to eternity? So, to conclude this principle, watch out for Satan's strategy to turn the minor points related to faith and practice into explosive points that will destroy the work of God. When a company of soldiers are divided through infighting, the enemy laughs. He knows full well what Jesus says, in Matthew 12, verse 25, "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand."

Now that brings me to a third principle: To avoid disharmony and division, focus on the major truths of the gospel. Fighting evil is sometimes best accomplished by focusing on the good. In other words, avoiding disunity and disharmony about differences can be best accomplished on focusing on what unites us. After all, is it not often true, after having resolved an argument with someone, that you realize that our difference were either a miscommunication or a misunderstanding about a tiny matter? This is also the instructions in Romans 14, verses 17 to 19, where Paul writes, "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another." So, as believers, we need to major on the majors that make for peace, instead of focusing on the minors of faith and life. We need to stand together in unity on those matters which are God's law and gospel. And let's be clear that Paul did not list all the major doctrines in this chapter. Those major truths of the Scripture you can find defined in Romans 1 to 11. Now as Christians, we cannot differ on such teachings as God as the Creator, evidencing his glory and his power in the creation of the world. We cannot differ on the definition of man's total depravity and our inability to save ourselves by our choices or by our works. Christians all over the world are united in their faith in the only name given under heaven whereby we must be saved and can be saved. Justification by faith in Jesus Christ only is a nonnegotiable truth in the Christian faith, so is the doctrine of the Trinity, the necessity of regeneration, and the sanctification of our human nature through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

The Scripture, in Romans 14, verses 17 to 19, reminds us that the kingdom of God does not consist of the trivialities of using or abstaining food and drink. There are no rules given either way in the gospel. And therefore, as a Christian, we are to allow freedom in those matters that are undefined. Now this teaching is totally in line with Jesus' own instruction, in Matthew 23:23. He rebuked the Pharisees for straining at a gnat or swallowing a camel. Listen to this, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" he said. "For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and [you] have omitted the weightier matters of the law, [like] judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone." So in these words, Jesus called them out on tithing miniscule amounts of herbs, while not focusing on the major practice of the law of love—behaviors that promote peace and joy. So by focusing our energy and arguments on these minor things, we do damage—we do damage to the glories of Christianity. One expositor said that we degrade Christianity by such contentions on the trivial matters. Friends, the great privilege of the gospel is not freedom from various Old Testament restrictions. The great privilege of the gospel are the teachings about justification by faith in Jesus' righteousness, about peace with God, about joy in God, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, let's strive to be united in the truths of God's revealed law and gospel. And being united in that does not mean we think alike on every issue which is not black or white in the Scripture. Or, to say it differently, unity in the ranks doesn't mean uniformity of the saints. God allows differences

like you see among the trees in the woods. All the trees are united in the essentials, but are far from uniform in color, in shape, in size, or even in the fruit they produce. So may God enable us to embrace these first three principles, and so glorify his name. Thank you.