

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

Video Lecture Series

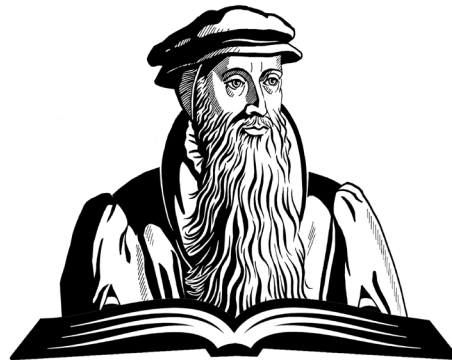
by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Module 2

THE LAW OF LOVE IN THE CHURCH

Lecture 3

The Strong and the Weak in the Faith



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

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Module 2 ~ Lecture 3

The Strong and the Weak in the Faith

Welcome, dear friends, to this third study on the subject of the Law of Love in Matters of Liberty. We're finding this material in Romans 14, verse 1, to 15, verse 7. In our previous study, we have reviewed three principles that we have derived from the passage in Romans. Just to review, we've learned so far that believers don't think alike about issues that are unessential. And a second, that the area of Christian liberty has the potential to really strain harmonious relationships among genuine believers. And thirdly, that to avoid this disharmony and this division, we need to keep focusing on the major truths of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now in this study, we will review another two principles that are based on these instructions God gives us in Romans 14.

So the fourth principle, believers within a church family do not all have the same maturity in faith. The apostle opens this chapter with referring to a specific category of believers. Listen to what he wrote, in verse 1, "Him that is weak in the faith receive he." He contrasted these with the strong in the faith, in which he includes himself, as you'll see, in chapter 15, verse 1, where Paul wrote, "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak." Now, it's very important for us to define the weak and the strong in the faith, to understand this chapter. Who are the weak in the faith within our church family? Are they the narrow-minded? Are they legalistic? Are they even superstitious people? They are none of these. All these labels are wrongly used to describe those believers who hold to different views in the area of Christian liberty. As a matter of fact, these weak in the faith may be very tender-hearted. Many of them are sincerely seeking to serve God and to please him. Now, it's of course possible that a number of them are judgmental, or controlling, or even legalistic, but that isn't always the case with the weak in the faith. Many of them who felt it was wrong to eat certain foods or to omit certain feast days, they did so because their consciences felt violated. It is therefore important for us to define clearly the weak in the faith well.

So, first of all, make sure we read well how Paul described them. Notice, Paul did not write that they were weak "in faith," they were weak "in the faith." A person who is weak in faith is one who struggles to believe or to trust in Jesus' gospel. They may struggle to believe in the promises of the forgiveness of all their wrong. In other words, the weak "in faith" struggle with assurance of faith.

In this chapter, Paul is not writing to them. He had them in mind when he wrote chapters 5 through 11 in this book, and in those chapters, he addressed the matters of assurance of faith from various angles. But in chapters 14 and 15, he is addressing the weak “in the faith.” So who are the weak in the faith? Well, these are the persons who are still unclear about the teachings about the gospel of salvation. Let us be clear, the weak in the faith are real Christians. They are born again, repentant, looking to Christ for salvation, while putting no confidence in themselves or anything they do. Yet, they have only a feeble grasp of the fulness and the freedom of the gospel. They’re still imperfectly understanding the Christian doctrines of salvation in Christ alone. In Rome, they probably were former Jews, raised in the traditions of the Pharisees, and they had not yet understood fully that the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament have been cancelled by the death of Jesus Christ. So, these very God-fearing brethren still feel conscience-bound to uphold the old ways. They live largely still by the “touch not,” “taste not,” “handle not” principles of the Jewish laws and traditions. And possibly, possibly some of them were legalistic, leaning towards a work-based religion, but we must resist the temptation to place all of them in that category.

Today, we still find such believers in our fellowship, who have grown up, perhaps, within a Christian setting, while unregenerate. Through that, their consciences are shaped by how they were brought up, and having been brought up under the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, we all sense, of course, then an urge to clean up our lives, and when such finally have come to trust in Jesus Christ, they still have a very sensitive conscience about certain matters of lifestyle that they were raised with. Indeed, sometimes they become more zealous in those aspects, thinking that this belongs to being saved. Let me explain this with an example. Imagine a Jewish believer, who, in midlife, became a Christian. So all his life, he has been immersed in a very strict religious environment. His beloved parents, and grandparents, and family, and neighbors, leaders, and teachers have emphasized total separation from the world, or cleanliness, and various strict codes of behavior. It’s basically hammered into them that those who lived like that were super-spiritual. And for example, they may never use a car. Let’s think of that. This upbringing has become so habitual, and has shaped their conscience. And now, he’s become a Christian. He’s experienced the joy of salvation through Jesus’ merits in life and death. He worships God. He rejoices in Christ and his work, and he has no confidence in the flesh. Yet, he still has a huge conscientious issue with stepping into a car. It just feels wrong. His conscious feels defiled when he steps into a car. Now, we might feel tempted to ridicule that, or to oppose it vigorously. We might get impatient with his burdened heart about our use of cars. But what is now the Lord’s will on how to walk along with him? Now that answer is found in Romans 14, verse 15, as we will review.

Now the other group Paul identified are the strong in the faith. These are the Christian believers who have a much better grasp of the full extent of their Christian privileges. The strong have made the most progress in understanding the New Testament revelation of salvation. They realize that through Christ’s atoning death, they were delivered from the yoke of the law, which Peter refers to, for example, in Acts 15:10, when he says, “Now therefore,” brethren, “why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” And through the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit, the strong in the faith understood their liberty in Christ. They understood that the small details of meat and drink—food and drink, and other restrictions that were imposed by the Mosaic laws, as well as the various traditions of the Jewish men, were now obsolete. Awareness about these differences, and the degree of understanding of the gospel within the church family is crucial. Every church leader, like Paul, ought to carefully study these chapters, and teach the principles within their congregations. Well then, these are to

teach by example, as the Apostle did. Paul practiced what he preached in this chapter. Though he was strong in the faith, hear how he carried out his own convictions, as recorded in 1 Corinthians 9, verses 19 to 23: “For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,)”—why?—“that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak.” I made myself “all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel’s sake.” Now, for now, let us accept this fact as true—Not all believers in the Father’s spiritual family have the same spiritual maturity.

How are we to hand this is the fifth principle. For the fifth principle is, the strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak in the faith. In exploring this fifth principle, we are actually getting into the heart of God’s directions how to handle the matter belonging to Christian liberty. In this fifth principle, I will first follow Paul’s instructions to the strong in faith.

The first action is given in verse 1: “Him that is weak in the faith receive.” A beautiful example of this word “receive” is found in Acts 28, verse 2. The people of Melita “received the survivors of the shipwrecked boat with great kindness, and they surrounded them with the ministry of love. That’s the word “receive.” In that same manner, we are to receive the weak in our affections with kindness and understanding of their needs. And though tempted to avoid them or isolate them, the strong are to do the exact opposite. The most beautiful example of “receive” is what God himself does. In verse 3, Paul wrote, “for God hath received him.” Friends, if God received the weak in the faith with his or her scruples, why should not we? In chapter 15, verse 7, Paul draws our thoughts to the example of Jesus Christ himself, “Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.”

Now secondly, Paul added, “receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.” The strong were to be careful not to bring disturbance to the conscientious views and practices of the weak in the faith. Now the strong are forbidden to aggravate an issue that was tender to the weak. In other words, no pushing them, no forcing them, with fierce debates or strong objections. Also, no cold shoulders, no harsh repulses. No, we are to receive them tenderly, recognizing their different practices or convictions. They were to allow them to be their own without undue pressure to step away from their convictions. Here, the strong in the faith are to be shepherds of the younger lambs. They are to be led instead of being forced by our strong reasoning. So, this initial instruction of the Lord does not mean we are never to make efforts to enlighten the weak in the faith, so that they also may become strong in the faith. But the details of this very important matter, we will discuss more in depth in our following sessions.

So thirdly then, the Apostle exhorts in verse 3, “Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not.” How easy this is to do, with those who hold on scruples the strong find unnecessary. Quickly we shrug our shoulders as we look down upon them, and we despise them for their views. Now, to despise is to consider someone with contempt, as being unnecessarily scrupulous about something. This despising response can be verbal, but more often, even nonverbal. Friends, our unspoken language felt by the weak, could be, “Ah! Your views are ridiculous. We will put up with them, but you are holding us back. Your position hinders this church. I just wish you would grow up.” Now that is a form of despising the weak, rather than of receiving of them in love.

Well, fourthly, and this applies to both groups, the strong and the weak in the faith, they are to show respect to the convictions of fellow brothers or sisters. We aren’t even called to make a

judgment on things where God has not communicated his will, but left us with liberty. God is the judge. And to him, each believer is accountable. And Paul reminds us of this in verse 4. He says, “Who are thou that judgest another man’s servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth.” Now, this question implied in this verse is, “Who gave you the right to sit in judgment on others?” So, Paul sets down the will of God, in verses 5 and 6, to show respect for each other’s convictions. He says, “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.” Now again, this exhortation applies both to the strong and to the weak in the faith. Both may disagree on matters in the area of Christian liberty, yet both are seeking to honor their Lord. Both are eager to do what pleases their Lord and their Redeemer. Both give thanks for what they eat, or for what they set aside for a sacred purpose. Both are not acting in their own self-interest, as verses 7 and 8 reflects, for it says, “None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.” In other words, both the strong and the weak are united on this point. They both desire to live and to act to the honor of God, doing his will.

And therefore, the course of action is that each believer examines the Scripture and himself, and acts accordingly. God’s will is clear: “Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind”—verse 5. The words, “be fully persuaded” denotes the highest conviction. In other words, it’s not just a matter of opinion, or prejudice, or feeling. No, rather, it is to be a matter on which the mind is made up by the personal conclusions of the study of the Word of God. Now, just to make sure that we don’t misinterpret this, this direction does not pertain to the subject of morality that is defined in God’s Word. No, it applies to the context here: to the ceremonial things, to the personal liberties, to the family customs, to the social matters or the cultural aspects that are not defined in the Holy Bible, as God’s will for life and faith. And if, as a believer, you are convinced that it is wrong to eat certain foods, then by all means, abstain. If you’re of the opposite opinion, then enjoy it, while you give thanks. Or if you feel convinced to fast each Lord’s Day, by all means, do it unto the Lord. And if, as a church, you are convinced that for your personal edification and profit, it is helpful to set aside a day to commemorate the birth, or the death, or the resurrection, or the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, well, by all means, do this unto the Lord. But if someone devotes that time to the common labor of the day, being convinced that there is no Biblical mandate to set aside such a day, no one should uncharitably judge them for that. Many Christians mark, for example, October 31 as a Reformation Day. Nowhere does the Bible command this, but neither does the Scripture forbid us to commemorate God’s deeds on a special annual day set aside for that. So no one is to be reproached or to be opposed for doing this, but neither is anyone allowed to push others to observe this as a matter of conscience, or perhaps reproach others for not celebrating the start of the Reformation.

So, let me conclude this session with a beautiful counsel given by one of the seventh-century pastors, who said this, “In things necessary, unity; in things indifferent, liberty; but in all things, charity.” Thank you.