

## When We Disagree Over COVID-19

Hoo boy. You'd think Christians would be elated to be coming back together after so many weeks of physical distancing and online services. We're coming back together—but we're not happy.

- Some in our churches think it's just plain stupid to cower in fear, hiding behind masks instead of hiding in the shelter of God's protection. *Where's your trust in God, people?!*
- Some in our churches think we're being hasty to bring the church family together when there's still so much at risk. *Why do you think trusting God means you can be foolhardy?!*
- Some despise the "snowflakes" who are afraid to do anything without first bathing in hand sanitizer.
- Some judge the callous, non-mask wears who don't care who dies.

I don't think there's been this much dissension about meeting together since Sue Ellen Johnson wore that pantsuit to church in 1972 ... or David Clark brought that pair of drum sticks into the sanctuary in 1987 ... or, well, come to think of it, we've been fairly consistent in finding fault with the way others have approached life in the church and life as a believer.

We can go all the way back to the first century. Jewish Christians struggled with letting go of the old dietary laws and judged the Gentile believers for being "too loose" in what they ate. Meanwhile, the Gentiles despised the Jewish believers for being so backward and not joining them in a pulled pork BBQ sandwich.

Paul jumped into the foray taking place in the church in Rome.

"Welcome anyone who is weak in faith, but don't argue about disputed matters. One person believes he may eat anything, while one who is weak eats only vegetables. One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat must not judge one who does, because God has accepted him" (Rom. 14:1-3).

Paul did not rebuke either the "carnivores" or the "vegetarians" for what they believed, but he did rebuke them for their attitude.

- The "weak" group was condemning the other side.
- The "strong" group was despising the other side.

Paul also addressed their squabble over the disputable matter of observing certain days as holy. While Paul had a definite opinion on the matters, he didn't argue for his viewpoint. Instead, he said that, whatever you do, be convinced in your own mind and do it unto Christ.

"Whoever observes the day, observes it for the honor of the Lord. Whoever eats, eats for the Lord, since **he gives thanks to God**; and whoever does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat it, and **he gives thanks to God**. For none of us lives for himself, and no one dies for himself. If we live, **we live for the Lord**; and if we die, **we die for the Lord**. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (Rom. 14:6-8).

Whatever we do, we do it to honor Christ—and we do it with a heart of thanks. As Paul said elsewhere: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

OK, Paul, we get it: accept one another. But Paul isn't through with us. Just leaving each other alone in our respective views is not enough. We must also work to build the other person up

"Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister.... For if your brother or sister is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy, by what you eat, someone for whom Christ died" (Rom. 14:13,15).

The world's way is to tell the other person to grow up and get over it. But the law of love says to stop what you're doing for the sake of the other person—even if your viewpoint is right. We face something far more important than being right. The most important thing is to act with love.

"Therefore, do not let your good be slandered, for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:16-17).

Let me put this in the context of the debate entering the church over COVID-19. The kingdom of God is not a matter of facemasks, distancing, and hand sanitizer, but living in the righteous, peace, and joy found in the Holy Spirit.

Incidentally, Paul kept referring to the weaker brother or sister. In the debate raging about how to come back as a church, who is the weaker person? With whatever issue we face, it's always the other person, right?

OK, so let's assume that, regarding COVID-19, you are right and you are the more mature believer. **As the "stronger" person, your responsibility is to not put a stumbling block in the path of someone else.**

- Don't judge the other person. Build him up.
- Don't despise the other person. Build her up.

We're going to get past all this COVID-19. And when this is all past us, what will matter is how we loved and treated each other.

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