

Approaching Matters of Health & Science without Divisiveness

If you're like me, you've found yourself nearly pulling apart at the seams over the past year and a half with regards to mask mandates, social distancing, and vaccinations. The difficulty lies not with these ideas themselves but rather the troubles that arise when dealing with congregational members that can be very divided over the issues. For every member that desires that worship services be masks-mandatory for the sake of their health, there is another member who holds to the principal that there needs to be freedom of choice. For every member that wishes to be distanced from others during worship, there is a member who opposes such distancing as it may restrict Christian fellowship. And for every member that speaks in favor of vaccinations and encourages others to go "get the jab," there is a member who speaks out against vaccinations for a variety of reasons.

That is the reality that can often leave pastors feeling insufficient and generally at a loss with how to proceed—pulling apart at the seams, if you will. Now, I'll be honest: at various times over the past year and a half, my approach has been to ignore the noise. That has been an easy approach to take since I do live in Florida, and we haven't had any state-wide restrictions laid against us. But just like every time I've attempted to take the same approach when it comes to strange noises coming out of the hood of my car, it just doesn't work out well in the long run.

The current divide that we're seeing concerning everything revolving around COVID-19 is just a microcosm of a bigger issue that has been relevant for quite some time. That is the way that Christians treat one another regarding health decisions. At any given time, we may find varying opinions on health practices accompanied by very judgmental divisiveness.

The section of Scripture that comes to mind when dealing with this sort of congregational divide comes from Paul's letter to the Romans:

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ² One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. ¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹ for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." ¹² So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. (Romans 14:1-12 ESV)

The church in Rome was very divided due to the ethnic makeup of the group. We know that the congregation contained both Jews and Gentiles, as Paul addresses both groups in his letter. First, he addresses the Jews in 4:1, writing, *“What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?”* In 11:13-14, he addresses his *Gentile* readers directly: *“Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry¹⁴ in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.”* The disparate ethnic and religious backgrounds of the congregation naturally led to some disagreements on matters related to Christian freedom.

The primary principal being delt with in Romans 14 is regarding the food laws of the Old Testament. On the one hand, the position was held that believers can eat all things. This position had strong support from Scripture, as Jesus declared the same in Mark 7:18-19: *“Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him,¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?”* (Thus he declared all foods clean.)” Additionally, we can find more support for this position in Peter’s rooftop vision. (Acts 10:9-16) On the other hand, the position was held that Old Testament laws regarding meat ought to still be observed. The food-related ceremonial laws of the Old Testament¹ had long been a focus for the Children of Israel, and, as such, proved to be a difficult practice to shake. And yet, the Roman Christians who were still following the food restrictions of the Old Testament were doing so “in honor of the Lord.”

Paul is clear in designating the latter position as belonging to those “weak in the faith.” Not that Paul was suggesting they were about to fall away from the faith, but rather that they didn’t quite understand fully the freedom which Christ had won. But the bigger concern for Paul was the treatment of the two groups toward one another.

Twice in the text, Paul expresses dismay over the troubling actions of the opposing groups. In verse 3, he writes, *“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.”* In verse 10, he repeats himself, saying, *“Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother?”*

The two verbs, “pass judgment” (ἐξουθενέω) and “despise” (κρίνω) sound similarly bad in English, but they carry different force. The former includes “disdaining, considering of no account.”² The latter involves the stronger note of “condemnation.”³ It’s easy to see how these actions came about. Those who were “strong,” understanding that Jesus had declared all food clean, had become guilty of simply dismissing their weaker brethren. Those who were “weak” and eating only vegetables were guilty of passing a condemning judgment on those who ate meat freely. Both mindsets are condemned by the Apostle Paul.

It’s hard not to see the relevance of this section for our current times when considering these contemptuous attitudes. On both sides of our current health-related issues, it can be easy to dismiss the opposing stance as “of no account” or even with “condemnation.” The main

¹ Cf. Genesis 32:32; Exodus 12:9; 23:19; Leviticus 8:31; 11; Deuteronomy 14:2-21

² Gingrich

³ Gingrich

difference between the issues which separate us today and those within the Roman congregation is that we have no clear dividing line in Scripture between those who are weak and those who are strong with regard to vaccines, social distancing, or other health related issues. Rather, we might be tempted to make those distinctions ourselves, considering our own opinions “strong” and the contrary opinions “weak.”

That does not mean, however, that we are without Scriptural guidance in our current day. For example, specifically addressing COVID-19 related health decisions, the best I can figure, we have two distinct doctrinal teachings which intersect concerning these issues. They are the Fourth and Fifth Commandments. For the sake of the scope of this paper, I will not be dealing with the Fourth Commandment or the government’s authority in matters like vaccine- or mask-mandates. I believe that would be a good topic for a future paper all by itself. But, considering the *Fifth* Commandment, we can find direction for all manner of health-related issues, far beyond the current divide over COVID-19.

In the Fifth Commandment, we find God’s expectations for us regarding ours and our neighbors’ bodies. “You shall not murder.” In Martin Luther’s explanation to the Fifth Commandment, he expands the scope beyond murder to include any kind of harm. “We should fear and love God that we do not hurt nor harm our neighbor’s body; but we should help and be a friend to him in every bodily need.”⁴

The Apostle Paul declares in Romans 13:10, “*Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*” We can see several examples of the failure to show love for a neighbor’s body and life in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. (Cf. Luke 10:25-37) First, robbers overtook a traveler, stripped him, and beat him. Then, a priest and a Levite ignored the man’s great bodily need as they “*passed by on the other side.*” In all three cases, the failure to love their neighbor and care for his body and life made them guilty of this commandment.

In consideration of this commandment, we are directed, as Christians, to investigate whether certain courses of action or medical treatments would be beneficial or harmful to ours or our neighbors’ bodies. The best we can do is study the information made available from medical professionals and researchers and then filter that information through this commandment. “Would doing this hurt myself or my neighbor? Would *not* doing this hurt myself or my neighbor?”

Two Christians may take this doctrinal thought and work through it with consideration of things like masks, social distancing, and vaccinations and still come to opposite conclusions. That’s not because God’s Word is unclear but because the individual situations may be unclear. For instance, some individuals may come to the conclusion through conscientious research that getting a vaccine *may be beneficial* to the health and safety of both themselves and their neighbors, whereas other individuals may come to the conclusion through conscientious research that getting a vaccine would be *more likely to be harmful and dangerous* to themselves and their neighbors. The former would conclude that the Fifth Commandment directs them to receive a vaccine, while the latter would conclude that the Fifth Commandment

⁴ Luther, Martin. *The Small Catechism*.

directs them to decline a vaccine. This then would be a similar situation to what Paul was discussing in Romans 14:6, when he wrote, *“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.”*

While Paul did not have in mind issues of health and science but rather was addressing whether or not meat offered to idols was a matter Christian liberty—and for that matter was addressing the larger issue of how Christian liberty is to be used for the building up of the Church by exercising our liberty in Christ in love—there are some principles in this section that apply to our question about the matters of health and science at large.

In just the past decade, we have seen various health trends touting the benefits of carb-free diets, no sugar diets, diets to support gut health, and diets based around superfoods like kale, cauliflower, and quinoa. Working even further back into history, we can find those who tout the benefit of a glass of red wine a day as well as those who advocate for the abstention of alcohol all-together. We can find those who say that the consumption of cholesterol is bad as well as those who say that our body creates its own cholesterol, regardless of what we eat. We can find those who advocate for nose-to-tail wild game diets as well as those who advocate for plant-based diets. If we go back far enough, we can even find medical experts who promoted blood-letting as a cure-all for many illnesses and diseases.

In our current day, we even have two totally opposite branches of medicine which claim to accomplish the same goals. I’m speaking about Western Medicine and Eastern Medicine, and there may be benefits to both. But to conclude that Western Medicine is automatically superior to Eastern Medicine, or vice versa, doesn’t take into account that these approaches to the treatment of problems brought on by sin are developed by human beings with limited understanding and who err in processing information. The only absolute cure for the problems of sin is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and the forgiveness of sins that is ours through faith in Him. To look to the conclusions of man in a vain attempt to circumvent death, subverts the Gospel of Christ through whom alone we can have victory over death.

So, are we ever going to stumble into the best possible diet and lifestyle and medical practice so that the ever-changing health trends stop changing? No, we won’t, because the fact of pain and sickness and disease and death is the reality that God determined after the fall of man:

To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you." ¹⁷ And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:16-19 ESV)

In a world that is desperately trying to return to the paradisaical Garden of Eden, we can expect to find shortcomings in every healthcare trend and medicinal application as well as in the new

trends and medicines that take their places. Does that exempt us from striving to live a healthy life, taking care of the bodies God has given us? Not at all. Stated again, as Christians, the best we can do is to study the findings of science and medicine and filter them through the Fifth Commandment. “Will this vaccine hurt me or my family? Will this vaccine be beneficial to me and my family? Is it damaging to my health to eat bacon? Is it harmful to have an at-home childbirth? Should I receive medical treatment for this illness, or should I let it run its course?”

Regardless of determination, these decisions ought to be respected when a Christian, through sound judgment on the basis of Scripture, makes such a decision. Assuming this to be the thought process for a Christian, we can recognize the conclusion as a valid conclusion, *even if it is the opposite of our own*. Yet, this is where our sinful nature comes into play once more. Remember that in Romans 14, even where there was a clear “strong” position and a clear “weak” position, the real matter of concern to Paul was the treatment of Christians toward one another regarding their respective positions. That divisiveness is still a concern today.

How easy it is to come to a conclusion and then determine that it is the only proper conclusion! It’s tempting to take our *opinions* and declare them to be facts. We then consider our own conclusions to be the “strong” position and regard our neighbors’ conclusions to be the “weak” position. Adopting this sinful mindset, we easily slip into the errors of the Roman congregation, either “passing judgment” or “despising” our brothers, while oftentimes doing both together.

Have you ever heard it said that “if you wear a mask, you’re living in fear”? Or have you ever heard it said that “if you don’t get a vaccine, it’s because you don’t care about anyone else”? If we use those arguments, what else are we doing other than “passing judgment” or “despising” our brothers? We would either be “disdaining them, considering them of no account” or perhaps even “condemning” them as unbelievers—or, at least, so weak in the faith that they might soon fall away.

When people massively overgeneralize like this, it’s because they are turning a matter of opinion into doctrine. And by “they,” I mean “we,” since we all have fallen into this trap. We’ve all dismissed another’s contrary opinion by impugning their motives as being wrong or un-Christian from the start.

If we are to approach matters of science and medicine without divisiveness, the first step is to look into the mirror of God’s Law and inspect whether we have been prone to harboring such a divisive attitude. Acknowledging the existence of this attitude within us, let us then repent to the Lord of our sins. It’s good and right to do so, as Paul reminds his readers, “*Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹ for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.” ¹² So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.*” While we might be tempted to make snide remarks and *secretly* pass judgment on those who disagree with us in matters of science and medicine, Paul refers us to the very *public* place of judgment before which we will all stand on the Last Day. Jesus used this same imagery as a warning when He said, “*I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak.*” (Matthew 12:36)

Guilt due to sin is a unifier between people on both sides of our current pandemic-related issues and on every side the ever-ongoing divide in matters of science and medicine. But thankfully, within the Christian Church, we have an *even greater* unifier in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. *“For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.”*⁸ *For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”*⁹ *For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.”* (Romans 14:7-9)

Our identity is not tied up in whether we’ve received a vaccine or refused a vaccine, whether we eat meat or practice veganism, but rather our identity is tied up into Whom we belong. *“We are the Lord’s.”* That statement stands out in a section during which Paul has isolated the two groups, referring to one as “strong” and one as “weak.” But here, he uses that great, unifying “we.” We are in this Church and blessed fellowship with the Lord *together*.

How could it be that two so-divided opinions could still form a “we”? The source is found in verse 9: *“For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.”* Our Savior’s death and resurrection resulted in His Lordship over all. This Lordship extends beyond the bounds of time, as His rule is over both the living and the dead. And His Lordship extends without regard to our distinctions such as “vaxxers” and “anti-vaxxers.” Our Gracious Lord is the one who considers *no* one “of no account,” and by His grace even sinners like us are now “uncondemned.” The result is that we who stand guilty of passing reviling accusations against one another, impugning motives, and dismissing our Brothers-in-Christ have now found fellowship with God Himself through the redemptive blood of God’s Son.

In addition to that, Christ’s unity with us now determines that we have unity with one another, as *“There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call--*⁵ *one Lord, one faith, one baptism,*⁶ *one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”* (Ephesians 4:4-6 ESV) In light of these facts, those difference of opinion which often leave us worked up suddenly seem much more trivial. And, in fact, they are trivial. Belonging to the Lord together with all those who have been baptized into Christ, we are reminded that belonging to the Lord transcends even death itself. And that is especially comforting during our current times.

A paper published at Columbia University in October 2020 calculated that America suffered “130,000 – 210,000 Avoidable COVID-19 Deaths.”⁵ In July of this year, CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky gave an address at a White House press briefing indicating the CDC’s findings that 99.5% of people that have died from COVID-19 in 2021 were unvaccinated. This led to her declaration that “virtually all virus-linked deaths [were] entirely avoidable.”⁶

This is, of course, an entirely humanistic view on life and death—as if death can be avoided. The one statistic that is guaranteed is that the human race has a 100% mortality rate. The Psalmist has the correct view on the length of life when He praises God, saying, *“Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed*

⁵ <https://ncdp.columbia.edu/custom-content/uploads/2020/10/Avoidable-COVID-19-Deaths-US-NCDP.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jemimamcevoy/2021/07/01/995-of-people-killed-by-covid-in-last-6-months-were-unvaccinated-data-suggests/?sh=79eba7cb493d>

for me, when as yet there was none of them." (Psalm 139:16 ESV) The Lord dictates the length of our days, regardless of the mode of transport from this life to the next. With that correct perspective, it is proper to say that every single person who has died in the past year has lived their full life.

And so, there is one attitude that ought to prevail in our minds, the same attitude described by Moses in his Psalm, *"So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."* (Psalm 90:12) Instead of counting perceived motives against one another, let us spend our lives counting off our own days left in this life, using the allotted time for that which builds up the body of Christ.

Now, after putting the differences of opinion within the Roman congregation into perspective in chapter 14:1-12, Paul wraps up this section with verse 13: *"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."* (Romans 14:13 ESV) It is important to make the distinction here between proper judging and improper judging, especially in a culture where any form of judgment is condemned outright.

God is the one who judges, we do not. However, God has dictated His own judgment on many matters throughout Scripture. In those areas, it is proper for us to pronounce God's judgment against those who trespass against His Word. Indeed, it is even *improper* for us to shy away from announcing God's judgment in such cases. But in the areas of science and medicine where each individual Christian must evaluate on the basis of Scripture which decisions to make, here we may remain silent, lest we fall into the sort of divisive attitude which might place a stumbling block before our brother. Augustine described this well, when he wrote: "Paul says this [Romans 14:4]⁷ so that, when something might be done with either good or bad motives, we should leave the judgment to God and not presume to judge the heart of someone else, which we do not see."⁸

May the Lord forgive us for our divisiveness, and may He continue to bless us through His Word, so that *together* we may continue to *"grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen."* (2 Peter 3:18 ESV)

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⁷ "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." (ESV)

⁸ Augustine, *Commentary on Statements in Romans*, 79 (Middendorf, *Romans 9-16*, 1409)