



On Unity in the Church

It is really good to be together around God's Word today, particularly after this last week. I woke up exactly a week ago to what I thought would be a normal day, gathering with our church for worship, walking through God's Word, sharing the vision for all God desires to do in and through us in the days ahead. I had no idea that in the coming hours, for the first time, I would meet the President of our country. I would stand with him on this stage and pray for him publicly. I would explain my decision to do so to the church. I would see social media in a firestorm. I would turn down numerous requests to be on national TV and find myself working this week amidst increased security risks. My original plan was to be out of town today, but I rearranged that plan, because I wanted to be with you to lead us through God's Word together.

But before we dive into the Word, I don't assume that everyone here knows the details of what happened last week. Some of you are blissfully unaware of all that has taken place. So I think it would be helpful from the start just to cover the big details to make sure we're all on the same page. So bear with me for a moment if you know all of this.

At the end of my sermon last Sunday, at our 1:00 worship gathering here at Tysons, I stepped to the side of the stage for what I thought would be a couple minutes in quiet reflection as we prepared to take the Lord's Supper. But I was immediately called backstage and told by our staff and representatives that the President of the United States was on his way here, he would arrive in a matter of minutes and he would like for us to pray for him.

Throughout our history as a church, we have always avoided political involvement, but at no point in our history has the sitting President ever come to us and asked for prayer. A flood of thoughts went into my mind, a number of which could have risen to the top and affected my decision one way or the other. But the one that rose to the very top was 1 Timothy 2:1-6:

¹ First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³ This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

So I agreed to lead our church to pray for the President in person, on this stage. I came back out to lead the Lord's Supper, then I walked off to the side over here where the President was soon to arrive. In that brief moment, I prayed specifically for an opportunity to speak the gospel to the President and for faithfulness to pray the gospel over him. I won't go into the details of our conversation backstage, but one of our other pastors and I spoke the gospel in a way that I pray was clear, forthright and compassionate.

Then I walked back out on stage and reminded those who were gathered of something I had just said at the end of the sermon, that what unites us as a church is not our ethnicity or our background or our politics. What unites us is the gospel and the Word of God that tells us what I had read to them from 1 Timothy 2:1-6. Then I said, "We have a unique honor to pray as a church over our President." So I prayed for him, for other leaders and for our country. When I finished, the President walked off stage without comment. We celebrated some missionary heroes among us, then we sent one another out like we do every Sunday with the Great Commission from our ultimate King.

I immediately knew that some members of our church would be glad this happened, for reasons we'll discuss. I also knew that other members of our church would not be glad this happened, for reasons we'll discuss. Both of those responses were confirmed as I heard from various leaders and members in our church, so I spent most of Sunday night writing a letter to you as our church family. I first wanted to make sure you knew what had happened. I also wanted to reemphasize how I only want to lead us to God's Word in a way that transcends political parties and positions. I only want to lead us in a way that celebrates the unity we have in Christ amidst all our differences.

That is my concern today. I want to be clear from the start. My concern today is not to defend myself or my decision. The passage we're about to read in Romans makes clear that Jesus is my Judge and I'm called to live for His commendation. That doesn't mean certain things like this don't sting personally, but I know that no one else—including any one of you—is my judge. The President is not my judge. No one on social media is my judge. Jesus is my Judge and I am so glad He is.

All this to say, my concern today is not to try to please everybody. I think I've actually made that pretty evident this week. I made some people glad last Sunday, but some people mad. So what did I do? I turned around Monday and took the people who were glad and made them mad with my letter. So albeit unintentionally, I insured that no one was happy with me. I somehow managed to be labeled both a far right-wing conservative and a far left-wing liberal in less than 24 hours. That's not easy to do. All this to say, I'm not living for your commendation. I'm living for Jesus, my Judge and your Judge. This is my concern.

The burden that's on my heart today is that amidst a variety of conversations, comments, posts, tweets, questions and criticisms this last week, my greatest concern is how Jesus has been lost in the

middle of it all. And quite plainly, while I obviously created some problems with my decision last week, I think it could be argued that this last week didn't just create problems—it uncovered problems. It revealed problems; not just problems in our country, but problems in the church.

For those of you who didn't see any of this on social media, do not feel the need to catch up. I'll just summarize it by saying this. You could scroll through social media for 60 seconds at any point this week and one conclusion was clear: we are sick. Accusation, contempt, derision, division—it's not just the left side or right side, those kind of people, this kind of tweet or post. It's all of us, including me. The church is not healthy, particularly amidst the current political climate in our country.

But here's the deal. While I truly care about and pray for other Christians in other churches, my primary concern is the health of this church. I'm trusting that either through a good decision or a bad decision I made last week—whatever kind of decision you may think it was—I'm trusting that God is using it to help us see some sickness in our hearts and bring healing to us as a church. That is what I want to do today through God's Word. I want us to hear from God.

All week long I've been looking forward to this. Amidst all this, we need to just stop for a moment together and ask God to speak to us and bring healing to our hearts and in our church. I can't make that healing happen. That's been clear this week. But I know God's Word can. So I want to ask us to listen to God's Word humbly today. Let's work hard to put our pride, positions, thoughts and opinions aside for a few moments. Let's resist the urge to pick them back up. Let's lay all of these things down before God and listen to Him as a church.

Now, I know that as we do this, some people here or who will listen to or read this sermon later are not part of this church. Maybe you're a follower of Jesus and part of another church. We welcome you to listen in and hear God's Word with us, to consider any sickness in your own heart or your own church, asking God for a healing only He can give. Others are listening and you're not followers of Jesus. Maybe you're visiting today; maybe you're with the press and are just looking for a story. We want to welcome you. We hope you will find us hospitable. We want to invite you, if at all possible, not just to listen today for a story you can publish, but to listen today for a story that actually has power to change your life for all of eternity.

Let me say one other thing before we dive into God's Word. I'm going to work really hard today to make my every word count. One thing that's been clear this week is that every word matters; every word can be picked apart—even words you don't use can be picked apart. So I would just ask that you listen closely and hang with me through all we're covering, because it all fits together. Try not to listen at one point, then tune out for a while, then come back in and hear something that won't make sense if you miss what's in the middle.

Context is really important and it's often lost in the way things get reported. With all due respect to reporters, I would ask you to report as best as possible in context. The things we're talking about today are so important to us. These truths are our life. We live and die for the truths of God's Word. So I just ask you to be particularly sensitive to the context of what's being communicated instead just looking for sound bites.

Enough said. Let's hear from God. Let's pray.

O God, we need to hear from You. Please help us right now—please help me, please help us all—to lay down our pride, positions, opinions and thoughts, and to listen to You. Please speak to each one of our hearts and to us as Your church, as a church family gathered across Washington, DC, to other Christians in churches listening in and to non-Christians whom we want to know how much You love them. Please make that clear in Your Word today. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

We'll start in John 17:20-23. This is the end of Jesus' prayer right before He goes to the cross. This is how He closes it: *"I do not ask for these only..."* That's a reference to His disciples for whom He had been praying. *"...but also for those who will believe in me through their word..."* So that's you and me, everyone who believes in Jesus. Jesus is praying for us right here. What does He pray? *"...[T]hat they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us."*

What an amazing request that we in the church might be one with the same kind of unity the Father and the Son share in the Trinity? You can't get any more unified than that—and that's what Jesus prays for us. Here's the purpose in verse 21: *"...so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* We'll come back to that phrase in a minute. Then Jesus prays it again in verses 22-23: *"The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that..."* here's the purpose again *"...so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."*

Unity in the church is so important that Jesus died for it.

What a prayer! There's so much we could talk about here, but don't miss the big picture. Unity in the church is so important that Jesus died for it. Right after praying these words, Jesus went to the cross—why? Please listen closely, particularly if you're visiting, to this story that has the power to change your life forever.

God created every single one of us and at this moment God is sustaining every single one of us. Every single one of us has sinned against God, meaning we have turned aside from God's ways to our own ways. We have said we know better than God what is best for our lives. As a result of our sin, we are separated from God and we will one day die. That is the payment for sin. If we die in the state of separation from God, we will spend eternity separated from God.

But God loves us. God loves us so much that He sent His Son Jesus, God in the flesh, to the world, where Jesus lived the life we could not live—a life of no sin. Then, even though He had no sin for which to die, Jesus chose to die. But if He wasn't dying for His sin, whose sin was He dying for? He was dying for your sin and my sin. Jesus died to pay the price for our sin.

Then, as if that good news wasn't enough, three days later Jesus rose from the grave, conquering sin and conquering death, so that any one of us—no matter who we are or what we have done—can be restored to a right relationship with God through faith in Jesus. Anyone, anywhere, including anyone today, who turns from themselves and trusts in Jesus will be forgiven of all their sin and be given eternal life with God. We invite you to receive God's love in your life today.

And when you do, you will realize that this is what unites the church. This is who the church is. We are not a group of people who share the same history, ethnicity or socio-economic status. We are not a group of people who share the same political positions. That's not what Jesus died for. Jesus died to make us one around Himself. Just as He is in the Father and the Father is in Him, unity is so important in the church that Jesus died for it.

The unity the church displays to the world affects the spread of the gospel in the world.

Then, watch this. Jesus prays that this unity would be a reality so that the world might know that God sent Him to die for their sins. The unity the church displays to the world affects the spread of the gospel in the world. We talk all the time around here about taking the gospel throughout this city, throughout our country, to all nations. But don't miss it. This is so important. We won't spread the gospel in the world if we don't demonstrate the unity of the church. Other people seeing Christ hinges on this kind of picture of unity. It's so important and it's so not easy.

That's why I want you to turn with me now to Romans 14. Let me set up the context here. Paul is writing this letter to a pretty cosmopolitan church in Rome, where the followers of Christ in the church were having disagreements over what food to eat or abstain from eating. Some people said it's okay to eat meat; others said we should not eat meat. And there were disagreements about particular days that some people thought should be honored and celebrated, while other people didn't.

So what does the Bible say to a church where the followers of Jesus in it disagree with each other? Let's hear God's Word. We're going to read from the beginning of Romans 14 all the way through Romans 15:13. It's a long passage, but let's follow it all, because this Word has power. Listen to what God says:

^{14:1} 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.

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. ¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵ For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

²⁰ Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. ²² The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

¹⁵ We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ² Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³ For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." ⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

⁸ For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles,
and sing to your name."

¹⁰ And again it is said,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."

¹¹ And again,
"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples extol him."

¹² And again Isaiah says,
"The root of Jesse will come,
even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;
in him will the Gentiles hope."

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Again, there is so much we could talk about here. But let's get the big picture.

The general question in the Bible

The general question being asked in the Bible was how can a church hold together when some members are so different from each other? I used the word "general" there, because there are specific issues that were being addressed in the first century between Jews and Gentiles about what food to eat or what day to celebrate. These are very different from the context we're in now. The references to strong and weak here are in some ways unique to that context and they take a lot of time to dive into in order to truly understand them.

We'll study this more in depth one day when we walk through Romans. But for today, instead of drilling down to that level, I'm going to stop one level up and just acknowledge that there are differences here among the Christians in Rome. Some who are labeled strong here feel free, for example, to eat meat. Others who are labeled weak here don't feel free to eat meat. It was causing all kinds of problems, because each group was prone to think of the other group, "You should believe what I believe." It affected the way they related to each other when, for example, they had a meal together or when they came to a certain holiday.

That was the unique circumstance then that in a variety of ways was different from the situation we're walking through today. So we're not even saying, in our situation today, who might be strong or weak. Everybody likes to think of themselves as strong, but that's not the point today. We're just acknowledging, for the church at Rome at that time, that on certain issues there were clear differences of thought, opinion and even conviction.

The general question the Bible is answering is this: How can a church hold together when some members are so different from each other? I think that question makes this passage very relevant for us. We have over 100 nations represented in our church. We come from all kinds of different backgrounds, from all kinds of different histories, from all kinds of different ethnicities, with all kinds of different

traditions—even in the church. As a result, we have all kinds of thoughts, opinions and convictions that affect the way we relate to each other.

The answer is not...

So how can we in this church hold together when some members are so different from each other? The answer the Bible gives in this passage is not to be in different churches. The Bible doesn't say, "Have a church for the carnivores over here and the vegetarians over there." Or, "Have a church for the Jews over here and the Gentiles over there." It probably would have been easier, but that's not what the Bible instructs them to do here. Nor does the Bible say they should create a church that is comfortable for only one of these groups, serving one but not the other, giving preference to one over the other.

The answer is...

No, the Bible says when members of the church are really different from each other, the answer is to build unity around Jesus. "Welcome one another," Romans 14:1 says. Romans 15:5-6 states, *"May God...grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."* Build unity around Jesus.

This is put as plainly as possible in this passage. If the Christians at Rome focused on what food they were eating or what days they were celebrating, but did not focus on Jesus, there would be major damage in the church. They would not stick together. Mark it down: whenever we lose our focus on Jesus, there will always be damage in the church. Always.

The critical question for us now is...

So the critical question for us now is: how do we build unity around Jesus, if we're not going to be in different churches? Let's be honest, that might be easier. We're bringing 100-plus nations together in a church amidst the politics of Washington, DC, of all places. God is doing a unique work here, but it's not easy. There will be resistance to it. So how do we build and maintain unity around Jesus? Listen to what God is saying to us in Romans 14 and 15.

First, when God's Word speaks clearly and essentially about an issue, obey the Word. Now, every word matters here. I'm using words here with specific meaning, so follow this. When I use the word "clear" here, I'm referring to what is clear in God's Word for obedience. When God's Word clearly says to do this or not do that, we obey. What we're reading here is not a license for anybody in the church to do whatever they want and we still try to stay unified. For example, when the Bible says, "Do not lie," we don't say, "Okay, there are some people who believe it's okay to lie over here, but people who believe

it's better to tell the truth over here, yet we unite together." No, that's not what the Bible is teaching. Where God has spoken clearly through His Word, we believe it and obey it.

This is what unites us: the Word of God, ultimately revealed in Jesus. That's the point of this passage. These issues are not a matter of sin or disobedience to God's Word, according one's conscience—specifically, one's level of faith. The Bible is not saying that those who eat meat or don't eat meat are sinning. Followers of Jesus may approach that issue and a lot of other issues differently according to their conscience. What matters most is every one of us is operating out of faith in God and His Word.

This is how Romans 14 closes: *"Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin."* One of Paul's favorite phrases in Romans is "the obedience of faith." So when you have a clear word from God in the Bible, obey it. I also added the word "essential," because each of these groups in Romans to some degree thought it was clear that they should or should not eat meat. Paul, who's writing this letter, actually sides with the strong who are free to eat meat.

If we had time to dive in deeper, we could look at why he would argue biblically, "You can eat meat." For the record, I eat meat. But the point is that it's not essential to hold that conviction, first to be a follower of Christ and second to be in the church together. It's not essential that we agree on this issue in order for us to have fellowship in Christ as the church. We are free to disagree and still have fellowship in the church. Not every issue rises to the same level. We have freedom in Christ in the church to think differently about some things. But that's the challenge, right? So what do you do when you don't have a clear word from God in the Bible that is essential for Christian brotherhood and sisterhood in the church that is essential as we've defined it here?

The Bible says when God's Word does not speak clearly and essentially about an issue, do what you believe best honors Jesus. That's the language in Romans 14:6-8:

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. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. 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.

The point is we are free to do whatever we believe best honors Jesus. It's really interesting that the Bible says here it's good to have strong convictions about what we believe best honors Jesus—even in situations where we have freedom. This seems a bit counterintuitive to me. If the aim at the church in Rome is unity, then I would expect the Bible to say about nonessential things, "Don't have strong convictions." But the Bible actually says the opposite here. Romans 14:5 states, *"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.” Huh? The Bible doesn’t say, “Don’t have conviction about what you should or should not eat, what days you should or should not esteem.” God actually says, “You need to be convinced in your mind that what you are doing honors the Lord.” If that’s abstaining from certain food, then so be it. If that’s eating certain food, then so be it.

So in our differences, it’s actually good for us to have strong convictions about what most honors Jesus. You might think, “Well, doesn’t that make the problem worse, when people who are different have strong convictions?” No, not if we follow the rest of what God’s Word says here.

When others in the church have different convictions on issues that are not clearly and essentially addressed in God’s Word, love them.

God’s Word says that when others in the church have different convictions on decisions that, as we have defined them, are not clearly and essentially addressed in God’s Word, what do we do? We love them. We love them. Now, are we to love everyone who has different convictions than us on anything? The Bible teaches us to love our enemies. All the more so, the Bible teaches us to love one another. That’s the thrust, really, of this entire section in Romans, starting back in Romans 12, when God calls the church to love one another with brotherly affection, like we’re family, with genuine love.

We see this theme throughout what we just read. Welcome one another. Do not pass unbiblical judgment on each other. Do not despise each other. If you do, “*You are no longer walking in love*” (verse 15). Love others in the church. Practically, this means you listen to and respect others’ convictions. Do you realize there are followers of Jesus in the church who think differently than you and that it’s loving to listen to them and respect the reality that they believe differently than you? Remember, we’re talking about issues here that are not clearly and essentially spelled out in God’s Word.

So let’s take last Sunday as an example. To bring the President on stage in the gathering of the church to pray for him, or not to bring the President on stage in the gathering of the church to pray for him—that is the question. Let’s clarify what the question is not, because there has been an astonishing amount of confusion here. The question is not whether or not to pray for the President, privately or publicly. Of course we do that. Every follower of Jesus believes we should do that. Why? Because that’s clear in the Bible. I read it earlier in 1 Timothy 2:1: “*I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions.*” This is good and it’s pleasing in the sight of God.

Unfortunately, this has been totally missed over the last week. People read my letter and thought, “Are you saying that you shouldn’t have prayed? How can a pastor feel bad or even apologize for praying?” We won’t even get into a debate about what an apology is. Regardless, what Christian or

church member—much less pastor—would say we should not pray for the President? This is where, if I put myself in your shoes and I hear that your pastor or any pastor has apologized for praying for the President, I’m thinking, “What’s wrong with that pastor? That’s messed up. Of course we pray for our President.”

If any Christian is hurt by praying for the President, that would be a problem in that Christian’s heart. Every pastor, every follower of Jesus, should unapologetically pray for the President without question. And not just the president of our country in the United States, but for the presidents of other countries. This is a clear command the Bible says we must obey. We never know exactly what we can assume, but this is clear.

I would just ask as a side note, how often are we obeying this command? If we prayed for our President for as much time and with as much intensity as we have addressed this issue this week, only God knows what kind of effect that might have. I feel as though I’m repeating this, but I want this to be clear: we must pray for our President, privately and publicly. That is not a question. We have a Bible verse for that one and I read it last week.

The question is whether or not to bring the President on to the stage in our church gathering to pray for him publicly in front of all kinds of cameras. We do not have a specific Bible verse for this one. First Timothy 3 does not say, “When the President is on his way back from playing golf and stops at your church, here is what you do.” So, followers of Jesus who fully believe the Bible and totally agree on 1 Timothy 2 might answer that question in different ways.

Just think about this—and I’d like to ask you not to clap or amen or anything like that for either of these ways I’m about to mention. I rarely ask you to stay quiet, but this time I am. The point here is to listen, so let’s just listen. On one hand, some might say with deep conviction, absolutely, 100% yes, we should bring the President on stage in our church gathering to pray for him. What a unique opportunity to obey 1 Timothy 2 together, doing so publicly as an example that could encourage a lot of people to pray for him, demonstrating how to pray for him, knowing that this honors the President—which is a biblical thing to do.

Romans 13:7 says to respect and honor governing authorities. First Peter 2:17 says to honor the emperor. That was a command given to a church who was being persecuted and killed by the emperor. So regardless of what you think about the President, you are to honor him. And you should count it an honor, not in private, but in public, to pray with and for him, just like you would do for any President, regardless of party affiliation.

And this is not just for the sake of the President. We care about the good of our neighbors, so it’s good to publicly pray with and for our leaders, that they would work for justice and mercy in our country, particularly when it comes to such important issues as the sanctity and dignity of every human life in all

kinds of spheres. Then in this prayer, you have an opportunity to pray the gospel, not only over the President, but in front of all kinds of people who need to hear the gospel. I don't presume that exhausts all the reasons why you would say this, but suffice it to say there are some followers of Jesus who believe, "Yes, pray for the President publicly, on stage, in a worship gathering of the church."

But other followers of Jesus, with deep conviction, would say, "Yes, by all means pray for the President, and yes, pray for the President publicly in our worship gathering. Absolutely, for all the good and right and biblical reasons already mentioned. But do not bring the President on stage into the gathering of the church, when so much of politics is all about appearances. You are taking a holy moment and turning it into a public spectacle that can be twisted, used and abused by the media or by politicians for all kinds of agendas." Some, maybe many, will view this as our church's endorsement of the President or his policies—or at the very least, our pastor's endorsement of the President or his policies.

This will be very discouraging to some, maybe many, members of the church who also value the sanctity and dignity of human life, yet disagree with some, maybe many, of the President's policies, or find some of his words or actions offensive, not just personally, but biblically offensive to God. Not to mention those outside the church who have been turned off to the church because of all the ways they've seen the church co-opted by political parties and positions. They will see this on the news and want nothing to do with McLean Bible Church. They think, "Yes, we want the gospel to spread, but don't mix the gospel with political party and position."

On top of that, what about the clear biblical warning in James 2 to not show preferential treatment or favoritism in the gathering of the church? That's also a command in the Bible. There's even a biblical precedent of challenging leaders in political positions. John the Baptist didn't hesitate to do this and he lost his head for it (Matthew 14:1-12).

"So if you're going to bring the President on stage, why would you not speak more clearly about what God's Word says to him?" In the end, just ask the question: does bringing the President on stage lead the church toward unity in the gospel? If not, then don't do it.

Now again, I don't presume I've come close to exhausting the reasons why not to do this. My point is simply to say it is possible for followers of Jesus who love and believe the Bible fully to have different convictions here. One side argues to bring the President up for the advancement of the gospel in one way, yet the other side says to not bring the President up for the advancement of the gospel in another way. One side says, "We need to be unified in bringing the President up," while the other side says, "We need to be unified by not bringing the President up." Both sides can actually be passionate about the gospel and unity.

This is why some of you were really disappointed last Sunday, because you thought your pastor was compromising the gospel and what truly unites us. Others of you were really disappointed with the

letter on Monday, because you thought your pastor was shrinking back from the gospel and trying to manufacture a false unity. You say, “What are we to do, then?” There’s not a tidy answer to that question and I am not assuming this sermon will solve it.

But the Bible I know is speaking to our hearts about the importance of loving one another by listening to one another. I think about things I heard and read this week that said, “Don’t listen to those people in the church who think this or that.” I thought, “Those people are our brothers and sisters, whom we love. This means, yes, at the very least, we listen to them.” James 1:19 is clear: we are to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to tweet. It doesn’t actually say that, but I would say it’s clearly implied. Slow to post.

We live in a culture that entices us at every moment to speak our thoughts from behind a screen instead of looking in the eyes of our brother or sister in love and listening. God help us not to get caught up in the ways of this world. God help us to listen and understand what’s happening instead of jumping to conclusions and help us to respect the convictions of those in the church who disagree with us.

Have you talked with someone who has a different opinion than you do about an issue like this last week? If not, let me encourage to find a brother or sister who believes differently from you, sit down with them and listen to them. Don’t post, tweet or share what you think. Sit down, face to face, ask questions and then just listen. If you can’t find someone different from you, then maybe work to broaden your relationships with other brothers and sisters in the church.

We can obey God’s command to be quick to listen by pursuing relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ who have different convictions than us, realizing this is only one decision among so many decisions we make based on convictions we have. In politics, who should we vote for? Bible believing Christians have different convictions. What should we think about this position or that policy? We are different and it’s not easy.

I think about when we read Psalm 82 a few months ago. We prayed together in our gatherings for justice for the unborn and justice for every person regardless of ethnicity or religious belief. So how do we put those prayers into practice amidst politics that pit us against one another? This is not easy, which is why I trust providentially that I have decided to do next year’s Secret Church on God, Government and the Gospel. It’s not in any way to advocate for a particular political party, but to open our Bibles together and identify the common biblical foundations that have guided Christians to relate to all kinds of governments throughout the history of the church.

God is so good. He has not left us alone in this world, yet He has given us all we need in His Word. This doesn’t make these conversations easy in a fallen world, but it’s all the more reason we need to listen well to others who love and believe the Bible just as much as we do yet come away with some different thoughts than we have. This is just politics; that’s only one area where we’re different. We’re not

even talking about all the other ways we have different opinions or convictions. This means we have a lot of listening to do, as well as a lot to learn and understand from each other.

What an opportunity we have to not isolate ourselves with people who are just like us. I guess we could do that, but I don't think that's what God is calling us to do. We've got the opportunity to be the church where we get to listen to and learn from all kinds of other followers of Jesus who love God and His Word and only want to do what best honors Him. We have an awesome opportunity to put Ephesians 4:2-3 into practice, to bear with one another in love, with humility and gentleness and patience, *"eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."*

That leads to the next thing God says. As we listen to each other, God tells us to refuse to disparage or quarrel with each other. The Bible could not be any clearer to every Christian in Romans 14:1, do not quarrel over opinions, even opinions you're convinced of in your own mind. Don't quarrel with each other (verse one), don't despise each (verse ten) and don't destroy each other (verse 15). Don't do it.

We live in a culture of contempt and disgust with those who think differently than us. This is evident not just in the way we speak, post or tweet; it's evident in the way we think. We may not disparage someone publicly with our mouths or our tweets or posts, but if we're not careful, we can build a whole case against them in our minds, in which we conclude that we have it all right and they have it all wrong in a way that just feeds pride inside of us—and we don't even realize it.

Years ago when I was going experiencing criticism, I read this article by Tim Keller, who served as pastor of Redeemer Church in New York City. When I read it, it was so helpful to me and I think it speaks to controversy and the criticism that comes with that. It's kind of long, but I think it will help us, so I'm going to read it in full. Keller writes:

Recently several people have asked me, "How do you deal with harsh criticism?" In each case, the inquirer had felt stung by what they felt were unfair attacks on him or her. In this internet age, anyone can have their views censured unfairly by people they don't know. So what do you do when that happens? Here's the gist of the counsel I give people when they ask me about this. For years I've been guided by a letter by John Newton that is usually entitled, "On Controversy."

The biggest danger of receiving criticism is not to your reputation, but to your heart. You feel the injustice of it and feel sorry for yourself. It tempts you to despise not only the critic, but the entire group of people from which they come. "Those people," you mutter under your breath. All this can make you prouder over time. Newton writes: "Whatever...makes us trust in ourselves that we are comparatively wise or good, so as to treat those with contempt who do not subscribe to our doctrines, or follow our party, is a proof and fruit of a self-righteous spirit." He argues that whenever contempt and superiority accompany our thoughts, it is a sign that God's grace is operating in our lives as a mere notion and speculation with no salutary influence upon our conduct.

So how can you avoid this temptation? First, you should look to see if there is a kernel of truth in even the most exaggerated and unfair broadsides. There is usually such

a kernel when the criticism comes from friends and there is often such truth when the disapproval comes from people who actually know you. So even if the censure is partly or even largely mistaken, look for what you may have indeed done wrong. Perhaps you simply acted or spoke in a way that was not circumspect. Maybe the critic is partly right for the wrong reasons. Nevertheless, identify your own shortcomings, repent in your own heart before the Lord for what you can and let that humble you. It will then be possible to learn from the criticism and stay gracious to the critic, even if you have to disagree with what he or she has said.

If the criticism comes from someone who doesn't know you at all—and often this is the case on the internet—it is possible that the criticism is completely unwarranted and profoundly mistaken. I am often pilloried not only for views I do have, but also even more often for views and motives that I do not hold at all. When that happens it is even easier to fall into a smugness and perhaps be tempted to laugh at how mistaken your critics are. “Pathetic,” you may be tempted to say. Don't do it. Even if there is not the slightest kernel of truth in what the critic says, you should not mock them in your thoughts. First, remind yourself of examples of your own mistakes, foolishness and cluelessness in the past, times in which you really got something wrong. Second, pray for the critic, that he or she grows in grace. Newton talks about it like this:

“If you account your critic a believer, as brothers and sisters in Christ, though greatly mistaken in the subject of debate between you, the words of David to Joab concerning Absalom are very applicable: ‘Deal gently with him for my sake.’ The Lord loves him and bears with him; therefore, you must not despise him or treat him harshly. The Lord bears with you likewise and expects that you should show tenderness to others from a sense of the much forgiveness you need yourself. In a little while you will meet in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts and though you may find it necessary to oppose his errors, view him personally as a kindred soul with whom you are to be happy in Christ forever.”

So whatever you do, do anything you can to avoid feeling smug and superior to the critic. Even if you say to yourself that you are just shrugging it off and are not going to respond to the criticism, you can nonetheless [I so do this] conduct a full defense and refutation in the courtroom of your mind, in which you triumphantly prove how awful and despicable your opponents are. But that is a spiritual trap. Newton's remarks about this are very convicting.

“The best of men are apt to be pleased with such representations that hold up our adversaries to ridicule and by consequence flatter our own superior judgments. Controversies, for the most part, are so managed as to indulge rather than to repress his wrong disposition. I hope your performance will savor of a spirit of true humility and be a means of promoting it in others.”

I pray for a spirit of true humility in my own heart and in your heart, a humility that compels us—whether in our words or in our minds—never to disparage a brother or sister, but always to build him or her up. That's the language here in the Bible. Build your relationship with others on what is clear and essential in God's Word. Romans 14:19 states, “*Let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.*” What a great exhortation! Pursue, look for, opportunities to foster peace and build up

others. The only way to get there is by focusing on Jesus and what is clear and essential to our unity in Him.

There's a famous axiom that has often been used in the church: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." That's what we're dealing with here—a situation where followers of Jesus have convictions about a particular issue that is not clear and essential in God's Word—whether or not to bring the President on stage in the gathering of the church. We have different opinions, even strong opinions. The problem then is when we expect everybody else in the church to have the same opinion as we do and we're upset that they don't. It actually makes me wonder if the core problem in the church at this point is not disunity, but idolatry.

Some people in Romans 14 and 15 were prone to exalt their opinion to the level of that which is most clear and essential in God's Word. We need to all ask the question—myself included—"Have we at any point let our politics or our opinions become idols in the church today, in such a way that we love our politics or our opinions as much as, or more than, we love Jesus and what He has clearly and essentially said in His Word?"

This is why, Lord willing, we'll pick back up in our Bible reading next Sunday, because this Word drives everything we do. I love God's Word for how it leads and guides us in all that life brings us.

That leads to the last thing the Bible says here about loving one another amidst disagreement. Although to be honest, I would think the Bible would stop before this one. Realize there are differences in the church, listen to and respect each other, focus on what unites us. This all sounds good; let's call it a day. But God takes it one more step here and I believe this one is the hardest of all. Amidst our differences, God says to look for opportunities to please others in the church who have different convictions than you.

Listen to Romans 15:1-2: *"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up."* That is interesting. We usually think of being a people pleaser as a bad thing, right? And it is, in a sense, because we're supposed to live to please God above all. But what do you do when God says to live to please others? Not just anybody, but specifically those in the church with whom you share fellowship in Christ. And not just anybody in the church, but specifically the brothers and sisters in the church who have different convictions than you.

You know those people in the church with whom you strongly disagree? Look for opportunities to please them. This just took things to a whole other level. The specific application here in Romans is this: When a brother who feels freedom to eat meat is around a brother who doesn't, because that brother believes not eating meat is most honoring to Jesus, then the brother who normally eats meat puts it aside whenever he's around his brother who doesn't eat meat.

This brother doesn't compromise his conviction; he holds it fully. But in love, he looks for opportunities to please those who have different convictions than him. There are so many applications of this in our church, but I want to point out one that I've thought about a lot this past week. Here in Romans, I'm not sure exactly which group in the church was larger or smaller—the carnivores or the vegetarians—but I can imagine that if one group was larger than the other, then there might have been a tendency for that group to take over. So let's say there were more meat eaters. Wouldn't it be tempting for them to say, "Listen, the vegetarians can just learn to adjust. They celebrate all these holidays, but we in our group know we don't have to. So they'll learn to submit to us." Paul says, "Don't do it. We have an obligation not to please ourselves, but to please our brothers or sisters for their good of building them up."

I can't help but think if we're not careful in our church, we can talk all the time about unity as a church, saying, "Yes, we unify around the gospel—the essentials—and in non-essential convictions we have freedom." But then what happens in practice with those things that are not essential is that our fellowship in Christ in practice may end up leaning toward whatever most people prefer. If you're not in the larger group, you find yourself constantly having to yield.

So one application, among many, of Romans 15 is for any one of us to really think about what is good for our brothers and sisters in the church who believe differently than us, no matter what group we're in, the larger or the smaller, but especially when we find ourselves in the larger group on an issue, where the Bible doesn't speak clearly and essentially like we've discussed.

All this to say, as I look back at last week, I was faced with a decision and I think I chose what many, if not most, people in our church would have chosen. I don't believe that was sinful. I really believe I did it to honor the Lord, but I also know that it was not good for some people in our church which is why my heart is still heavy. I really do love every member of this church on both sides of this issue and a number of other issues. I really want to learn to look for opportunities to live for the good of Bible-believing, Bible-obeying brothers and sisters in our church who have different convictions than mine.

You say, "What? That's crazy. What kind of world are you living in? It's so weak. Why would you do that?" Because of Romans 15:3: "*For Christ did not please himself.*" Christ laid down His life to please me and you. This is the gospel of the God Who gave His life for us and this gospel compels us to live very differently, other-worldly really, as the church. Where God has spoken clearly and essentially, as we've discussed, we will not be moved. And where God has not spoken clearly and essentially, we have convictions that we hold on to strongly, yet we look for opportunities to live for the good of our brothers and sisters whose convictions are different than ours. Honestly, I don't know what all this means in the

past or the future, but I do know that if we would learn to love in this way, the gospel would be a lot clearer to a watching world, particularly here in Washington, DC.

The pastoral encouragement to us moving forward:

McLean Bible Church, let's live in Christ-bought harmony. This is straight from Romans 15:5-6: *"May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."* Jesus has bought harmony for us with His life, so let's work hard for this harmony. Let's not let anything in this world steal it from us. Let's show grace to each other and have patience with each other, just as Christ has done for each of us.

Let's live in Christ-bought harmony with God-glorifying hope. Verse seven tells us, *"Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."* Then jump to the last verse we read, Romans 15:13: *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."* God has given hope to us. What is our hope? We belong to another Kingdom according to Romans 14:17.: *"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."*

We love our country. Truly, we love our country. But we are living for another country. Can we honor our President as God's Word tells us to? Yes, we honor our President, but we do not hope in him. President Trump is not our hope, neither is any President in the past or in the future. Our hope is in a coming King. One day, you and I are going to wake up in the morning and we're going to have no idea what's going to happen later that day. We're going to have no idea who's going to make a surprise visit. We'll be going through our day, business as usual, when all of a sudden, instead of a voice calling you or me from backstage, we're going to hear a trumpet boom from the sky above. And in a moment we have waited for all our lives, we're going to see the face of our King. You and I won't have any problem making a unified decision that day. For all who put their trust in Jesus, from every nation, tribe and language, we will fall on our faces in adoration, as we enter into eternal joy under His rule and His reign over all!

So we pray, O God, please, please, Jesus, be the center of McLean Bible Church. Be the center. Grant us grace to work together for unity. Help us to love one another well, so that the world might know that Jesus Christ is King. We pray this together with one voice, in Jesus' name, and all God's people said, "Amen."

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