

# Diagnosing Disagreement

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 09 August 2026

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0:00] Well, I'd like us to turn together tonight back to 2 Timothy chapter 2. We're going to read again from verse 22. So tonight, it's still the holidays, so it's always an opportunity to do something just a little bit different.

This evening, I want us to consider a subject that we don't often talk about, but one that we encounter all the time. Our title this evening is Diagnosing Disagreement. And we're going to think about the fact that there are many times and there are many ways in which Christians disagree. And that can happen between individuals.

Two people might have different opinions on a particular topic. It can happen between churches. And, of course, that's happened hundreds of times over in the history of the church. And we see that in our own island, you have different churches, different denominations.

And in some ways, that's something to be lamented. Because we don't want there to be disagreement. And we absolutely don't want there to be division. But at the same time, we recognize that this does happen.

[1:33] And in many ways, it's impossible to avoid this kind of disagreement in a world where we are still, our thinking is still affected by sin.

Disagreement is always going to happen in the church. But one of the crucial things that we've got to recognize is that within that whole category of disagreement, there's a kind of whole range of subcategories from the disagreements that really don't matter at all, all the way through to the disagreements that are actually a matter of eternal life or death.

When it comes to disagreement, so often we'll put our energy into the question, who is right? But above that lies an even more important question, does this actually matter?

And answering that question involves diagnosing disagreement. And using 2 Timothy 2 as our guide, we're going to think about that together tonight under two headings, the right diagnosis and the right treatment.

So thinking first about the right diagnosis. In recent years, theologians have described the diagnosis of disagreement as what's called theological triage.

[2:57] And that was first used by a theologian called Al Molar. He's based in Kentucky at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. And he used that term by borrowing it from the medical profession, because when medical staff examine a patient, they have to assess the severity of their condition.

So is it an emergency? Is it very urgent? Is it urgent? Is it routine? And so they have to make that assessment. And that's that's the process of triage. And so, for example, struggling to hear is probably not as urgent as struggling to breathe.

And so this concept of triage has been applied to theological issues. And as we think about this, I'm going to be using some categories given to us by an author called Gavin Ortlund, who wrote a very helpful book called Finding the Right Hills to Die on the Case for Theological Triage.

And it's a short book and it's a very easy book to read and it's well worth getting. And Ortlund sets out a four-part framework for diagnosing disagreement. And so I've just taken this from him and we'll just explain it together.

He's got four categories. First of all, there's first-rank doctrines. These are things that are essential to the gospel itself. You've got to get these things right. And if you depart from these things, you're at risk of departing from Christianity.

[4:23] Second-rank doctrines he describes as urgent for the health and practice of the church, such that they frequently cause Christians to separate at the level of a local church or denomination.

And this is things that are of high importance. And there can be disagreements between genuine Christians. And sometimes that can lead to division.

There's third-rank doctrines that are important to Christian theology, but they're not important enough to justify separation or division among Christians. And there's fourth-rank doctrines that are unimportant to our gospel witness and ministry collaboration.

And I think these are the really helpful framework that Ortland gives to us. And as I said, he explains much more in the book that's highlighted there on the screen. I want to just explain these in a little bit more detail as we think about making the right diagnosis.

So, first of all, he has what he calls first-rank doctrines. And so this is referring to an issue where disagreement over it is actually raising the question as to whether somebody is a Christian or not.

[5:33] And so this is highlighting the fact that there are core truths that lie at the heart of the gospel that we have to believe. And if we depart from those, then we would be moving into what we call heresy, false teaching that's a departure from the gospel.

And there's lots of these in Christianity. Perhaps the most obvious one is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The whole of Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection of Jesus.

And you cannot be a Christian if you do not believe that Jesus rose from the dead. That's the emphasis that you see again and again and again in the New Testament.

And Paul highlights it in the chapter that we read. He said, remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. That's the first thing he wants us to think about that's at the very center of the gospel.

Jesus is risen from the dead. That resurrection is a fulfillment of what the Old Testament prophesied. Jesus, as risen, is now king overall.

[6:38] He is reigning. He's the offspring of King David. He's the fulfillment of everything that David prophesied. And that resurrection is the message that we preach. It's the message that Christians believe and proclaim.

So resurrection, definitely a first-ranked doctrine. There are many others. You see some of them highlighted in verses 11 to 13. Paul says, a saying is trustworthy, for if we've died with him, we also live with him.

If we endure, we'll also reign with him. If we deny him, he'll also deny us. If we're faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot deny himself. These words are capturing several first-ranked doctrines in terms of the Christian faith.

Central to the gospel is the fact that Jesus died on the cross. And the whole gospel works by the fact that we are united to Jesus in his death and in his resurrection.

So you've got this language of with him, with him. So Jesus died and rose again. And we are saved by being united to him. And as we are united to him, we follow him.

[7:45] And that path of discipleship is going to bring sufferings and struggles we will have to endure. And yet at the same time, the gospel brings amazing promises for our future.

That there's a wonderful future promised for all who trust in Jesus. Also emphasized here is the fact that our salvation is not automatic. And so if we deny him, he will also deny us.

And that is emphasizing that great division that those who reject Jesus and who say, I do not want this, then they will be lost.

And at the same time, though, you have that wonderful emphasis in verse 13 that our security is not actually dependent on us.

So you've got this wonderful balance in this verse where it says, Yes, if you deny him, then he will also deny you. But if you stuff up, he will never let you go.

[8:50] If we're faithless, he remains faithful. And there's such a crucial difference there. In the deny him, deny us clause, you've got the person who actively, consciously rejects Jesus.

In the last clause in verse 13, you've got the person who loves Jesus, but who makes loads of mistakes, which is all of us. And the amazing promise of the gospel is that even though we are faithless, even though we doubt, we struggle, we stumble, and we make mistakes, he remains faithful.

And so all of that's getting to the core doctrines of the gospel. There's also justification by faith.

There's the need for repentance. There's the hope of heaven. The seriousness of sin. The centrality of union with Christ. Christ. All of these are essential aspects of the gospel.

And it's crucial because if we depart from these, then we're departing from the gospel. So if we think that we're saved by our good works, that by us being good enough for God will be enough.

Or if we don't accept the reality of sin, and we think, well, sin's not really a thing. We can kind of do what we want to do, and we don't really need to get too stressed about that. If we think that eternity is a myth, and that this life is all that there is.

[9:56] And if we don't think that we need Jesus, whatever it is that you believe, it's not Christianity. Because these are the core truths that lie at the heart of the Christian gospel.

These are some of the first-rank doctrines. Alongside that, though, we also have what we would call second-rank doctrines. And so these are not issues that will define whether or not you're a Christian.

But they're still very important, and disagreement over them can come between genuine believers, but it can make it very difficult for these believers to be in the same church together.

And so a very obvious example of that will be what we call church government, which is how we believe the church should be organized. It's difficult for Christians who have different views on that to be in the same church.

And over the years, Christians have had different views over what the Bible says regarding the government of the church. There's three main categories. Some believe that each congregation stands on its own and should be governed independently.

[11:04] And so there isn't a formal connection with any other churches. Each local congregation stands on its own, and that's classified as independent or congregational approach to church government.

Lots and lots of churches follow that structure. Some believe that congregations should be connected together and that they should be governed by a hierarchy of individuals, of bishops, archbishops, etc.

That's what we call an Episcopalian form of church government, where churches are connected together and the governance is organized according to a hierarchy of individuals.

And some believe that congregations are connected together across a geographical area, and instead of being governed by a hierarchy of individuals, they should be governed by a hierarchy of what we call courts, which are effectively committees, groups of elders, who govern their church in a local congregation, in a district, and across a nation.

And that government by elders is based on the Greek word for elder, which is the word presbyter, and it's known as Presbyterianism, and that's what we are as a church.

[12:12] Now, across all of these, there are genuine Christians who are in complete agreement about all of them, the first-ranked doctrines. So independents, congregate independents, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, across all of these are people who will be in church, should be over the first-ranked doctrines, but they don't agree in terms of how the church should be governed.

And it can be difficult for them to stay in the same church. There's other disagreements that fall into this category. So some people, Christians, disagree on how the church should relate to the state, and so some want total separation, some want very close integration, and some want something in the middle.

There's churches that disagree about the roles, the distinction between the roles of men and women in the church. Some churches, like our own, will have different roles for men and for women, and other churches think that all roles should be open to all.

And there are some churches that will have different views on spiritual gifts and on things like speaking in tongues. And many of you will have experienced that, and we see that across the church today.

Here, when we think about these second-ranked doctrines, it's very important to note that these second-ranked doctrines are especially important, and they're of greater significance, for people in leadership in a church.

[13:35] And so you could have members of a church who will disagree on these things, and you can still function really well in the same church. You can stand side by side very happily in a congregation.

And that's true here. It's true in, I think, every free church congregation. There are people who actually will have different opinions on various matters, and they serve happily together side by side. But if you take up leadership in a church, your view on second-ranked doctrines becomes a bit more complicated.

So, for example, I could very happily be a member of an independent church. There's lots of brilliant independent churches in Scotland, and I could go there, and I could serve, and I could be fed, and I could be very, very happy.

But if I became an elder in that church, it would be quite difficult, because I would be saying to them, we should be Presbyterian, because that's what I believe. Now, I very much respect the fact that they don't believe that, but I think that Presbyterianism is biblical.

So if I was to become a leader in that church, it would be complicated, because I would be arguing for a position that undermines their leadership. So you can see where the issues can arise, and this is why second-ranked doctrines sometimes lead to separation among Christians.

[14 : 45] That is very regrettable, also unavoidable, and we have to recognize that that is the way it is. Third-ranked doctrines, if I make all that disappear, third-ranked doctrines are still important, but they should not result in separation or division.

And here we're recognizing that this is where we step into the territory where it's very easy to get our theological priorities wrong. And there's lots of examples that fall into this category. So Christians have different views about the creation of the world.

So some people would have the view that the world is young, but it's created with the appearance of age. And that when you look at Genesis chapter 1, and it speaks about creation over six days, it's talking about six literal 24-hour days.

Other Christians believe that those, that framework of days that's set in Genesis 1 is symbolic of a much larger period of time, and that the earth looks old because it is old.

And Christians have different views in that regard. And many wonderful theologians, who I respect highly, fall into both of those camps.

[15 : 59] Other people have different views about the return of Jesus. And this is something that's caused lots of controversy over the years. People have different opinions about what will happen when Jesus returns. Some people disagree about which version of the Bible to use.

And you maybe know that yourselves. Some people have different preferences regarding the English Bible version. Some people disagree about what we should sing in church. Christians disagree about how often we should have communion.

Some want it once a week. Some want it once a month. Some want it less frequently like that.

Others disagree on whether we should have a common cup or individual cups when we take communion. Others disagree on whether the wine that we drink should have alcohol in it or not.

And I'm sure you can think of dozens of more examples. And then last of all, we have what we call fourth-rank doctrines. And these are things that are not actually important to our witness at all, even if sometimes we think they are.

And a good example of that might be the style of your church building. So whether you've got chairs or pews actually doesn't matter. Whether you've got a screen or not actually doesn't matter.

[17 : 04] The colour of your walls actually doesn't matter. And there's many other things like that. One final thing to say about this is that a framework like this can be very, very helpful.

But we also have to recognise that we might disagree as to what belongs in each category. And that's a challenge. So for example, I put what we sing in the third rank.

Other people would put it in the second rank. And that's fine. I absolutely respect and recognise that. I would definitely, definitely put the authority of the Bible here in first rank.

A hundred percent, that's where I would put it. But other Christians would maybe have it in the second rank. Even though I wish very much that they wouldn't. So the key point is just that the boundaries between these categories is not always clear.

The classification is not always obvious. But overall the framework is helpful. And sometimes there's one topic. You might pick one topic.

[18 : 05] And aspects of that topic can actually fit in all four categories. So a good example of this would be baptism. So some people have believed that baptism, in the history of the church, have believed that baptism actually causes your sins to be forgiven.

So that's what we call baptismal regeneration. And so that in order for your sins to be forgiven, you have to be baptised. And other people say, no, baptism is just a sign.

That question of whether it's a sign, a covenant sign, or baptismal regeneration, that's a first rank doctrine, I would say. Because that's a massive difference about how you're saved.

Other believers agree that it's a sign, but they disagree as to who should get the sign. And so some say it should be believers only, which often means adults or certain children of an age to express their faith themselves.

And others believe that the children of believers, as infants, as babies, should also be baptised. That would be a second rank doctrine. Others disagree as to whether baptism should be done by immersing someone in water or by sprinkling and pouring water over them.

[19 : 22] That's a third rank doctrine. And others might disagree as to whether it should happen in the church building or at the beach. That's a fourth rank doctrine. Now again, people might not agree with that ranking.

That's okay. That's again part of it. At the very least, being able to express what level you consider something to be will help clarify the discussion with the person that you disagree with.

All of this is highlighting two immensely important points that Paul raises in 2 Timothy 2 in this whole area. He says two things.

He says you must avoid false teaching. He says you must avoid false teaching. And he says you must not get embroiled in pointless arguments. And so verse 16 to 18, he gives the warning against false teaching.

Hymenaeus and Philetus have been guilty of doing this. They were undermining a first rank doctrine. And Paul is saying you must be on guard against that kind of false teaching.

[20 : 25] But then in verse 23, Paul also says, Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies. You know that they breed quarrels. And this has happened again and again in the history of the church.

Far too often Christians have fallen out over stuff that is only third rank or fourth rank. Things that do not matter and yet foolish, ignorant controversies have caused so much trouble.

We will always face disagreements. Always. It's very important and very wise to be able to diagnose just how serious the issue really is.

And so that's the right diagnosis. We also need to think about the right treatment. And 2 Timothy 2 offers us some really helpful teaching in this area.

And in 10 minutes, we are going to race through five lessons that Paul gives us. Number one, quarreling is never the right answer. Verse 14, remind them of these things and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good but only ruins the hearers.

[21 : 38] Now, we need to note the strength of the language that Paul uses here. He says, quarreling does no good and it only hurts people. And that is so important for us to remember because very often we think that we are pleasing God by fighting.

And it's never true. And the danger is that very often quarreling can feel good. And we get into a fight and we argue over something and we feel good when we're doing it.

But that does not mean for one second that quarreling is doing good. And so we need to see the strength of the language that Paul is doing. It does no good.

It only ruins the hearers. Now, never quarreling doesn't mean never standing up for what's right. But it must be done in a way that makes our discussion a fight over someone's words.

It mustn't be a fight over someone's words. Instead, it needs to be a concern for someone's heart. And so often we get that wrong that we just want to win the fight over words.

[22 : 52] And in it all, we can fall into the trap of forgetting the importance of someone's heart. We can think that a theological quarrel is like boxing.

That, you know, if you land your blow, you defeat your opponent. But it's much more like two cars racing through a busy town.

And one of them forces the other off the road. And when you do that, you might have got past your opponent. But you have very likely hurt a lot of bystanders in the process.

So quarreling is never the answer. Lesson number two, teaching is crucial. Paul emphasizes this, verse 1 to 2, verse 15. What you've heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust you faithful men who will be able to teach others.

Do your best to represent yourself to God as one approved, a worker who's no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. Here Paul is reminding us that the remedy to false teaching is not quarreling.

[23 : 56] The remedy to false teaching is just good teaching. And if we face disagreement over issues, and if somebody has maybe got their opinion wrong in some aspect of theological triage,

the answer is not to defeat them.

The answer is to teach them. And it's reminding us what we said earlier on, that the path of Christian discipleship is always a journey of learning. And that's why we must always be ready to listen, always ready to learn.

Teaching is impossible without teachability. And we want to be ready to learn. And of course, being ready to learn means being ready and willing to be wrong and to be corrected.

And central to that process of learning is listening to what God is teaching us through his word. And we want to hold on to that, even if everybody else around us thinks that we're wrong.

Teaching is crucial. Lesson number three, we need to guard our hearts. Flee the passions, the youthful passions, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

[25:01] This is such a fascinating verse in the context of the chapter, because Paul's been highlighting that there's false teachers that Timothy needs to be aware of. But his command to Timothy is not, sharpen your arguments and prepare your defense.

No. In the midst of all this disagreement and all these false teachers, what does Paul say to Timothy? He says, guard your own heart. Flee youthful passions.

Pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace. I think that sometimes we live as though things like righteousness, faith, love, and peace are fourth-rank doctrines. I don't think Paul would agree with us at all.

And it's so important for us to remember that disagreements can be so powerful at provoking sinful responses in our hearts. So frustration, envy, resentment, prejudice, slander.

It's so easy to do these things in response to somebody that we disagree with, in response to somebody who we think is wrong. And yet Paul is warning us against all that kind of behavior.

[26:06] And I love the language that he uses. He says, flee and pursue. It's such a beautiful contrast there. Flee means to run away from something quickly. Pursue means to run after something quickly.

And there's just that beautiful contrast. Paul often describes the Christian life as a race. He describes Christians as athletes. And as we run that race, as we continue on that path, we need to flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness.

And as we guard our hearts, we do that side by side. It's along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. All of this is something to be done together.

So number one, quarreling is never the right answer. Number two, teaching is crucial. Number three, we need to guard our own hearts. Number four, we want to set the right example and have the right objective.

Verses 24 to 26. The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance, leading to our knowledge of the truth.

[27:13] And they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil after being captured by him to do his will. That example that God wants us to set, it involves kindness, patience, gentleness, all these things that are highlighted here.

Being kind to everyone, being patient, being gentle. In other words, it's the opposite of quarreling. And that's one of the most basic lessons of disagreement.

Whenever we as Christians disagree with somebody, they should always be able to walk away from our conversation knowing that we love them, even if we don't agree with them.

And that's so, so important for us to remember. And the objective in it all is the restoration and the discipleship of the person who's got things wrong.

In other words, in our disagreements, we have got to have the right definition of victory. And this is where we so often get it wrong.

[28:16] Because victory in God's eyes is not when we crush our opponent's argument and prove ourselves right. Victory in God's eyes is when a person turns to Jesus.

The angels in heaven do not rejoice when a Christian wins an argument. The angels in heaven rejoice when a sinner repents.

So number one was, quarreling's never the answer. Two, teaching is crucial. Three, we need to guard our own hearts.

Four, we need to set the right example and have the right objective. My watch just beeped for seven, which takes us to the last one. We've got to be willing to suffer. Paul speaks about that. He says, share in the sufferings as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. And he goes on to speak about his own suffering as he's bound with chains as a criminal.

[29:17] Sometimes people will not agree with us. Sometimes people will want to quarrel. And sometimes it might be impossible to have a civil conversation. In those situations, it's so important to remember that our calling is to endure suffering, never to inflict suffering.

And again, Christians as individuals and the Christian church has so often got that the wrong way round. Our calling is never to inflict suffering. It is only to endure suffering.

And, you know, maybe social media is where you see this so prominently today. It's an environment where disagreements are rife. And so often, the urge in disagreements is to get them back when people say things that we don't like.

But Paul is reminding us that the great principle of the gospel is never to get them back. The great principle of the gospel is to take the hit. And that, of course, is exactly what Jesus did.

So these five lessons are really helpful for us to remember in the face of disagreement. Quarrelling is never the answer. Teaching is crucial. Guard your own heart. Set the right example. Have the right objective. Be willing to suffer.

[30:28] The amazing thing is that all of these things are actually just taking us back to the very heart of what the gospel is all about. Because all five of these are modelled perfectly in the ministry of Jesus.

Because he didn't come to pick a quarrel with us, even though he had every reason and every right to. He came to teach us. And despite being tempted more than we will ever experience ourselves, he kept his own heart utterly pure.

He set the perfect example. He pursued a beautiful objective. And to make our salvation possible, he was willing to endure the most horrific suffering.

And although there's lots that we will disagree on, and even in our own congregation here, there'll be stuff that we disagree on, I hope all of us can agree that Jesus is utterly amazing. And we need him more than anything else.

At the very start, we said that in disagreements, sometimes, you know, we gravitate towards the question, who's right? But above that lies a more important question.

[31:37] Does this actually matter? And as we conclude a short summary about theological triage, all of us need to do a wee triage of our own position.

And our own thoughts of Jesus. And in terms of your relationship to Jesus, the question that you need to ask is, can you see just how much this matters?

Because that's the first-ranked doctrine of the highest order that Jesus is calling you, and all of us need to respond.

Amen.