

"When We Disagree About Non-Essentials"

Romans 14:1-12

I get emails from a couple of church health web sites and this one caught my attention a couple of years ago. Thom Rainer's "Growing Healthy Churches Together" asked people to send in the silliest thing that their church fought over. Sadly, he reported that the most repeated thing churches fought over was the colour of carpets or walls. But he also had a list of unusual things churches fought about:

- One church argued about the appropriate length of the worship pastor's beard
- One person reported there was a 45 minute heated discussion about whether they should buy a black or brown filing cabinet and how many drawers it should have
- Another person shared that an argument arose in their church over what type of green beans the church should serve
- Or how a major conflict arose when the youth group borrowed a church crockpot that hadn't been used in years.
- Or how a church argued about whether it was appropriate to serve devilled eggs or not
- Or that a church banned black t-shirts because black is the colour of the devil!

These do seem silly but sadly they weren't to the churches at the time. And if we are honest we can probably think about things in our own church histories where there was division over whether ladies should wear pants or kids should wear running shoes, or more seriously division over things regarding how we worship and what Bible translation to use.

This next section in Romans 14:1-15:13 all has to deal with a disagreement in the church at Rome, primarily between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. It wasn't about silly things like green beans, filing cabinets and clothes; it was about whether a follower of Jesus should eat meat that was either previously sacrificed to idols and then the rest sold at the market for people to buy. While Paul doesn't explain this fully here, this was an issue that the Corinthian church faced as well and he spells it out clearly in 1 Cor. 10. He didn't need to spell it so completely here because everyone understood what he meant.

Every dispute within the body of Christ hinders the growth of the church which will hinder the sharing of the gospel. Satan loves it when we disagree, but God is saddened. How can we work out our disagreements biblically in such a way that we still continue to fellowship, grow spiritually and share the gospel? Paul gives us some wise counsel.

Before we are able to listen to Paul's counsel we have to understand what he means by strong and weak brothers. The strong believer is the one who understands that God is not im-pressed by our attempts to please Him by our obedience, that we live by faith. The strong believer understands that since there are no idols anyway the meat is just meat. God was not disappointed in their eating the meat because they knew to not eat it was not a way to impress God.

The weaker believer was the one who still struggled to understand that faith is more important than trying to please God by our do's and don'ts. The reason they refused to eat the meat was because they were still struggling with the old Mosaic law and still had a mentality that God is more impressed with my law keeping, so I better not eat this meat if I want to please God. It makes more sense when we understand that the weak believers were mostly Jewish because they also believed

God required them to observe certain holy days. So they were still growing in their understanding about how justification by faith changes the way you live for God.

Paul begins by commanding them to . . .

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. ² One person's faith allows them to eat everything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³ The one who eats everything must not look down on the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not condemn the one who does, for God has accepted them. ⁴ Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Paul puts the onus on the stronger believers to lead by example but he commands both groups . . .

Don't Allow Your Different Opinions to Cause Division (14:1-4)

Paul points out that this meat issue is a disputable matter. It's not something that Scripture clearly addresses. We might call it a grey area or a matter of conscience. God can't give us every rule for every situation in life. Then we would all become legalists like the Pharisees became. They thought that by making rules about God's Word they would please God with their 'holiness'. God purposely allows us to work these things out on our own. Surprisingly, no one was right or wrong here. When we make it an issue of right or wrong or a test of "whether one is a believer or not" that is what's wrong. So then, what does Paul tell us to do when we disagree about things the Bible doesn't deal with? Recognize they are your opinions only and don't let your opinion become a cause of division.

You can have your opinion but you still need to accept those whose opinion differs from yours – and you both have biblical reasons for supporting your opinion!

Instead of dividing "*accept the one whose faith is weak without quarreling . . .*"

Acceptance means building a relationship based on the essentials (vv.1-2)

Ask your selves when you are disagreeing with another believer; is this about preferences or essentials? Essentials are salvation by faith alone, the authority of the Word of God alone, the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, the death and resurrection, forgiveness for our sins, imputed righteousness from God. On the other hand, this isn't something silly like green beans and filing cabinets. This is an area in your walk with God that you both feel strongly about, yet the Scriptures don't give us clear direction. However, Paul says if you make it a divisive issue it hurts the church from growing and will hamper your witness to the community.

Some of the stronger brothers were belittling their weaker brothers because they said they couldn't worship God properly if they ate meat that was sacrificed to idols. But the weaker brothers and sisters were judging those who ate meat as those who 'weren't walking with God' because they ate meat. If this sounds familiar its because we've said the same things about believers or churches that only used a certain translation, only sang or didn't sing hymns, never drank alcohol or drank an occasional drink. Some Christians have made these issues of fellowship, lines not to be crossed, emphasizing that god is more pleased with the one than the other. In other words, performance-based Christianity.

Paul says accept one another, welcome each other because . . .

We are all God's servants (vv.3-4)

V. 3 says God has accepted both. Based on what? Faith in Jesus Christ. That's the essential; the non-negotiable. Don't let this issue blind you from seeing you are both sinners saved by grace and are both saved by God's grace to serve together to reach others for Jesus. Not to build your little 'we're the only ones doing it right' church and everyone else is wrong. We answer to God who enables us both to stand before Him. You mean, Paul is actually saying here that both could please God even though they had different opinions on how they observed something the Bible doesn't give us clear guidance on? How can God accept them both?

⁵One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

If I wanted to, I could make a compelling Scriptural argument that would suggest everyone should get up early in the morning to spend time with God. But if I'm honest, I could also come up with Scriptural principles that could argue for a 3 times a day meeting with God or an evening time with God. I could present a compelling argument with Scripture about why I don't drink alcohol. But, if I'm honest I can also show you from Scripture that it is not a sin to have an occasional drink. I have an opinion based on Scriptural principles and you can have an opinion based on Scriptural principles and neither of us are necessarily wrong when it comes to some issues. Now, Paul will address the stronger believer in Ch. 15 that he needs to be careful not to abuse his freedom that will hinder weaker brothers. But we'll deal with that in Ch. 15.

When we come across an issue that we feel strongly about, Paul says

Make Sure Your Preferences are Based on Scriptural Principles **(14:5-9)**

What he means by "fully convinced" is make sure you've come to that conclusion based on Scripture not by our own personal likes or dislikes. How do I know that's what he means? Because in vv.5-6 he gives the parameters. Do it . . .

So we can glorify God (vv.5-6)

That's how he uses 1 Cor. 10:31; its in the immediate context of eating meat sacrificed to idols.

³¹So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

But Paul expands it to 'everything we do'. Am I glorifying God in my allowing this into my life? Or, would I be glorifying God by not doing this? Paul adds a subject here; sacred days. The Jews were saved out of the Mosaic Law which commanded you to keep Passover, Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, every new moon, etc. But those were under the law. Do we have to keep those laws now? No. Can we observe them if we want to? Yes. As long as God is glorified and you don't use it as a test of fellowship between you and other believers.

I've heard Christians say 'We shouldn't observe Christmas as Jesus' birthday because Dec. 25th was a day used to worship the sun god?' If they feel strongly about it and can defend themselves from Scripture and glorify God then that's fine. But, if others feel strongly that since there are no other gods and our culture identifies it with Jesus' birth, then let's glorify God by celebrating the incarnation on that day.

So here's where we show whether we are maturing in our walk with God. Does this practice that I'm doing or not doing glorify God and can I . . .

Trust God with this paradox (vv.7-9)

. . . that both of us who feel strongly on either side of the issue can trust God who accepts both of us and our positions? This is what Paul is saying here and he uses an obvious but interesting example.

⁷For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

We're both doing it for the Lord who is our Master. Jesus accepts us based on faith alone in Him. And when we both die we'll both be with the Lord. Our differences don't change the fact that we're both saved by grace through faith! Can we glorify God while we're alive? Yes. Can we glorify God when we're dead? Yes. So just as we can glorify God at both extremes so is it possible in certain issues that even though we disagree on these non-essentials, we can still both glorify God. And we can both live by faith rejoicing in that crazy paradox!

But notice he tells both parties to become fully convinced for yourself. Paul says, make a stand one way or the other. Don't be wishy-washy. Don't hide your head in the sand and pretend there's not a disagreement. Because that doesn't glorify God. It will result in double-mindedness. For the sake of "peace" you'll say nothing or just agree with both sides when you're with them. Does that glorify God? No.

Remember We Will all Answer to God **(14:10-12)**

¹⁰You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you look down on them? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.'" ¹²So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

Paul says, the reason why God can accept both is because He's the final judge and He desires us to live under the umbrella of grace not law.

God accepts us by grace through faith (v.11)

We all come to God by the same way; not based on performance but whether we have bowed the knee and confessed with our mouth Jesus is Lord. People who believe their good works will save them believe in essence that they are the lord and they can get in their own way. But there is only one way, by grace through faith in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So remember when we are disagreeing with a brother or sister about a non-essential, that we're both servants of God and recipients of grace. And that . . .

We still are accountable to how we used our life (vv.10, 12)

Paul's purpose here is not to give us a theology about the judgment seat of Christ (he does that elsewhere) but just a general reminder that we're not the judges of anyone. That's God's job. And God's going to assess how we lived our life for Him, resulting in rewards and responsibilities that we'll enjoy on the new earth or loss of the same (see 1 Cor. 3:10-15).

When we judge one another based on their preferences over ours, we play God. Ironically, we do a bad job because Paul says God accepts us both not on our choices of the non-essentials but on our choosing Jesus and that we desired to glorify God even in the non-essentials of the Christian life.

If we grasp this, it can be liberating for us enabling us to grow spiritually as individuals and as a church. All of us can look back at our own life and say 'Man, I can't believe I used to be so stubborn about that non-essential area, thinking that I was the one pleasing God rather than the other one. Thank you Lord that I've grown and have developed closer relationships with my brothers and sisters in Christ because I have understood the difference between the nonessentials and the non-negotiables.

Perhaps God's Spirit has nudged us about our own personal preferences that we have made issues of fellowship or even salvation when we realize that's not true. We need to confess our sin and ask forgiveness and reconcile if necessary. Or maybe we've convinced ourselves wrongly that a black and white command is a non-essential and we weren't glorifying God. We need to correct course and obey the Word.

And possibly we've been trying to walk the fence on an issue that we are convinced one way over the other and we just avoid it for the sake of 'peace' but in reality, we have no inner peace about it. Lord, help us to glorify you and make healthy choices that encourage each other even if we don't always agree.

When we wrestle with these things let's ask ourselves, how will I best glorify God? How can I build up my brother/sister in Christ and what will help us both advance the gospel?

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at olivet@rideau.net