

"A Spiritual Perspective to Foster Unity"

Thinking about the children this morning, I wonder if any have read *The Quarreling Book*, by Charlotte Zolotow. It's the story of how a man goes to work one morning without first kissing his wife. This makes her grumpy. That makes the children grumpy with each other. They go to school, and the grumpiness spreads to all their friends until everyone is quarreling with each other and passing on the grumpiness. It's a grey rainy day, and that doesn't help, and everyone is moody and unkind. Everything changes when the little boy in the family pushes the pet dog off his bed. She thinks he is playing and responds with irrepressible playful happiness. That begins a series of mood changes, apologies, and acts of kindness. This children's book reminds us of how a mood can take over and spread. It also raises a question for adults to consider. How can you help to turn things around when everyone is angry?

Its been a stressful summer. Stores usually filled with smiling suntanned shoppers picking up supplies for picnics or beach days have become the sites of ugly feuds over mask-wearing. Covid-19 stress is making people irritable. The upcoming election is divisive. Some, not a few, express frustration and disbelief that fellow Christians do not share the same perspective they hold. How are we supposed to go forward in a time of anger and division? How do we, as Christians, relate to each other? **Romans 14** can help us with all this if – *if* - we are willing to hear it. **Romans 14** is not going to tell us how to vote in the election. I am not either. What it will give us is a spiritual perspective that can help us to foster unity in divisive times.

I have taught on this passage before. The first thing that impresses me in this is the encouraging realization that ...

I. SOME OF THE PAINFUL DIVISIONS WE EXPERIENCE IN THE CHURCH ARE *BECAUSE* OF THE PROGRESS OF THE GOSPEL.

Look at **Romans 14:3**. Notice the words "*despise*" and "*pass judgment.*" Those are strong words. Pressures that were polarizing and painful were threatening the unity of the church in Rome. They were divided over what Christians could eat and when Christians should worship. You read about eating meat and observing holy days, and you might think their issues were trivial, but they weren't to them, and they weren't to the apostle Paul.

The meat issue was a big issue for them because the meat was usually offered to idols in idolatrous pagan ceremonies before being butchered and brought to market. The days were *holy* days. They mattered because it had been branded into every Jew's psyche that the most tragic episode in their history, their defeat, and terrible exile into Babylon had been caused by their tolerance for idolatry and breaking the Sabbath day.¹ The reason this ancient division is in the Bible, and relevant to us all, is because Paul reveals that God's concern was not so much with the issues that divided them but with the division itself and the way they were handling it.

A. One thing that can help us is the realization that differing opinions are totally understandable even for Christians.

Among the Christians in Rome, some people grew up in the Jewish culture. Some people had come to believe out of the very diverse non-Jewish cultures. In Rome, there were people from all over the empire. When these people were tapped on the shoulder by God and drawn to faith in Jesus, they did not all immediately see eye-to-eye. It just doesn't work that way.

It is common today for people to shake their heads in disbelief and despise the perspectives of people on the other side of whatever division is current. But what happened in Rome is what always happens when the gospel spreads. Part of the glory of God and the gospel is that as the gospel spreads, people from all kinds of different backgrounds, with different perspectives and priorities, come to Christ and begin to follow him. Our differences do not disappear when we come to Jesus, but our devotion to Jesus needs to become more important than our differences. I love the fact that when Jesus called the twelve disciples, he called both Matthew the tax collector and Simon, the zealot. The zealots were Jewish nationalist extremists. They were activists who opposed the Romans with violence. Tax collectors were considered corrupt sell-outs to who worked for and supported the corrupt government. For both of them, allegiance to Jesus became more important than their predictable differences of perspectives.

B. As Christians, there are core convictions we should share but also different opinions in the church, which we must accept.

Verse 1 talks about "*opinions*." The word "*opinions*" here is not used for foundational Christian teaching or doctrines about God and Christ,

the gospel, or the Christian life. It is a word used for a judgment that you make based on trying to think an issue through.² So the point is there are things the Bible clearly reveals, and then there are the conclusions we come to as we try to think through the applications to our times. Even on a foundation of Christian conviction, there has to be room for differing opinions on applying the truth of Scripture to life.

The sanctity of human life is a biblical conviction. But there are different opinions true Christians come to on how to best lower the abortion rate and promote respect for the sanctity of human life as well as care for women in crisis pregnancies.

That racism is a sin is a biblical conviction. But there are different opinions on the degree to which it is systemic or not, on the details of whether or not it was at play in a specific story in the newsfeed this week, and how to address the sin of racism and bring healing.

There are Biblical convictions about many of today's issues: respect for law and order, respect for personal property, care for the poor, traditional marriage. The Bible speaks to all these issues but even when biblical convictions are shared; there may be differing opinions on how to achieve the best outcomes for society.

Good Christians can have differing opinions on what matters most. Some will quote **Psalm 139:13**, "*You knit me together In my mother's womb*" and for some, the single issue of abortion and the sanctity of human life outweighs all others.

Some will quote **Proverbs 16:12-13** *It is an abomination to kings to do evil for the throne is established by righteousness.*¹³ *Righteous lips are the delight of a king, and he loves him who speaks what is right.* For them, it is their perception of a politician's core character that matters most. God, they argue, blesses a man, not a program or platform.

Why doesn't Paul solve the issue at Rome once and for all by issuing an apostolic decree that defines the correct opinion? It seems clear God wants us to find our unity not in lockstep agreement on every issue but heartfelt commitment to Christ. The gospel reaches different people and different kinds of people with different backgrounds, which lead to different opinions. The power of Christ and the gospel to reach all kinds of people in all kinds of different cultures is part of its beauty, and it's glory.

I think it was in the summer of 2008 a man called me to make an appointment. He said he needed to come in to confront me about something. So I made the appointment, and he came and said, "You're not doing your job." When I asked him what the issue was, he said the previous Sunday, when he left our parking lot, he saw a couple of cars with bumper stickers promoting the democratic presidential candidate. I wanted to ask him if he thought we should set up a sign out front that says, "no democrats allowed." Should we institute a sort of political segregation or apartheid? We ended up having a good conversation. I listened to his concern that the election between John McCain and Barack Obama was the most important ever and could shape the future of our nation. He felt that everything was at risk. He heard my concern that part of the beauty of the gospel is that it is offered to all, and it reaches all kinds of people with all their differences and like Matthew the tax collector and Simon, the zealot. What we have in common in Jesus has to be more important than the politics that seek to divide us. The unity to which Jesus clearly calls us has to supersede our political and personal differences. Our ultimate identity as Christians is not tax collector or zealot. It is not Republican or Democrat, but a child of God and follower of Jesus saved by grace.

Now, here's a second truth this passage teaches us.

II. WITH EVERY ISSUE, THE ULTIMATE ISSUE IS THAT EVERY INDIVIDUAL IS COMMITTED TO HONORING THE LORD.

Verse 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.

A. Every Christian is to live for the Lord's Honor.

Verse 7-9, say, 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. Sometimes we tell new Christians, "You need to make Christ Lord of your life." The thing is the Bible doesn't so much tell you to make Christ Lord of your life but to recognize his Lordship. Through His dying for our sins and rising from the dead, God has made him Lord and Savior. He is your Lord. With every question, we face living out his Lordship has to be our priority.

The passage follows that with this...

B. Every Christian will give an account of himself to God.

Verses 10-12; *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.* The word “each” appears twice in **Romans 14**. The other place it appears is **verse 5**, which says, *Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.* The two go together. *Each of us must be fully convinced in our own minds because each of us will give an account of himself to God.*

You are not going to give an account for my choices, nor me for yours. We need to respect each other’s responsibility for each of us to be fully convinced in our own minds as to the best way to please our Lord. These verses and principles have been influential in shaping the response the elders, and I want to share with Christ Community Church in an election year. This issue of the election came up at our last elders’ meeting. We prayed, discussed it, and came back to these verses. We believe that for you as a Christian, your conscience is a holy – a sacred - place set apart for your Lord, and for which you alone are accountable to God. For others to try to bind your conscience so that you conform to their opinions is inappropriate and spiritually dangerous. For you to fail to take your conscience seriously, to be careless about it, or worse to knowingly violate it is sinful and dangerous. The last sentence in **Romans 14:23** says this, *For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.* We have to commit to these principles in ourselves and respect them for each other. We each need to act with singleminded God-centered devotion. That is a big part of the spiritual perspective that fosters unity in divisive times. You need to respect my conscience, and I need to respect yours.

And there is a third truth that helps us apply this in the church.

III. WHEN OPINIONS DIFFER, WE NEED TO REFLECT THE WELCOME OF GOD IN OUR RESPONSES TO EACH OTHER.

The word “welcome” is key. It’s the word used in **verse 1** when it says if you consider yourself to be strong in your faith, then *welcome* the one you consider *weak*. *It’s a word that describes a warm and accepting welcome.* **Verse 3** gives us the reason we should warmly welcome each other when it says, *let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.* This is also in **Romans**

15:7 *Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.* In the body of Christ, we welcome each other even when our opinions differ because God has welcomed all of us, and we are all about his glory.

Consider four practical guidelines.

1st Be careful about quarreling. In **Romans 14:1** he says, do not welcome people just to quarrel with them. That doesn't mean we can not have discussions or even debate issues that are important. But how we go about it matters. **2 Timothy 2:23-26** says, *Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. ²⁴ And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.* Even when you confident you are right and passionate about it, this is the way to be.

2nd Beware the poisonous power of negative emotions. Verse 11 asks the question, *Why do you despise your brother?* To despise, someone suggests emotion and anger. Our emotional state matters. So many people who are angry right now. **James 1:19-20** says, *Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.* Anger often comes from fear. Over and over in Scripture, we are told *not* to be afraid. *God has not given us a spirit of fear* (2 Timothy 1:7) *but of power and love and self-control.*

3rd Be diligent to guard the unity of the Spirit. That's the point. Those words come from **Ephesians 4:1-3** *I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* We have to patiently *bear with one another in love* because so often we simply cannot persuade each other to change our views. Recent polls say that in spite of the political conventions, millions of dollars in advertising, breaking news stories, and personal conversations, the vast majority of potential voters have long ago made up their minds and are not open to persuasion or change. There comes a point when we have to stop trying to bend others to our views and start bearing with each other in love.

Are we as *eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*, as we are to push our agenda and achieve our outcomes? There is no

place in Scripture in which we are explicitly told that part of following Jesus is fighting in the political sphere to legislate for what we believe is good policy. That doesn't mean we shouldn't try to do what we can, but it does mean that we shouldn't neglect we *have been* told to do in the name of pushing for what we haven't been told to do. Scriptures do not tell us that the Kingdom of God will prosper when we have made sure that we have the right people, party, and policies in place. Scripture does tell us the world we know that Jesus has come, and we are his disciples if we have love for one another. Hold on to that.

So this leads to the last practical step.

4th Be loving in all you do. 1 Corinthians 16:14 sums up our calling. It says, *Let all that you do be done in love.* That's not so different than what **Romans 15:7** is getting at when it says, *welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.* God welcomes us in love, like the father in the famous story of the prodigal son. The father falls on his wayward son's neck and kisses him much and welcome him home. Jesus says that is what God is like with you. His love is so rich, so patient, so full of kindness and compassion.

Years ago, an author who had a tremendous influence on me, named Francis Schaeffer wrote a little book titled *The Mark of a Christian*. It is about those words of Jesus from John 13. *By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.* In the book, he tells about a group of churches in which all the people knew each other and worked together before the war. During WW2, Hitler commanded all of the church to come under the authority of the Nazis. This group of Christians divided over the issue. Some accepted Hitler's decree, and some refused to submit. The ones who submitted had an easier time at first, but they were forced to unite with many more liberal churches, and they lost their spiritual vitality withered. On the other hand, the group that resisted remained spiritually alive, but there was hardly a family in which someone didn't suffer and die in a concentration camp. After the way was over, this network of Christians came together and had to face each other. It was very emotional and tense on both sides. And they realized it was not good. So they set aside some time for the elders of each group to meet together in a quiet place to pray and talk. Dr. Schaeffer asked one of the men who was telling him this story, "What did you do?" Here's what he said, Well, I'll tell you what we did. We came together and set aside several days in which each man would search his own heart." This was a big division. "My father has gone to the concentration camp. My mother was dragged away." Schaeffer comments at this point: *"These things are not just pebbles on the beach, they reach deep into the deep well-springs of human emotions. But*

these people understood the command of Christ at this place, and for several days, every man did nothing except search his own heart concerning his own failures and the commands of Christ. Then they met together. I asked the man, 'What happened then?'" And he said, 'We were just one.'" Schaeffer summed up the message: *"This means showing love to our brothers in the midst of our differences – great or small – loving our brothers when it cost us something, loving them even under times of tremendous emotional tension, loving them in a way the world can see."*³

Conclusion

Do you truly know the love of Christ? Look at the cross. By going to the cross to die for our sins, Jesus was saying your sins are so serious and terrible nothing less than the sacrifice of the Son of God can atone for your sins so that you can be saved. At the same time, he was saying, look at how much I love you and how far I am willing to go to save you. That's the greatness of my compassion and love. He paid the penalty for our sins on the cross so that you can be saved through faith in him. Kings, rulers, political parties, and even nations come and go. What Jesus offers is an eternal love, eternal life, and an eternal kingdom. It is yours to receive or to reject. You do not earn it. You receive it. You surrender your arrogance and embrace dependence, and he saves you. If he gave himself in love for you, are you now going to say you won't bear with others for him? Get your heart rooted way down deep into his love for you and let his love free you. Then live for his honor and love others for him.

Amen

Prayer of Response:

Gracious Father, Forgive me when I think too highly of my limited wisdom and shallow understanding. Forgive me when I push too hard for an agenda and judge too harshly those with whom I differ. Deliver me from wimpiness but also from arrogance. Help me to so clearly see my fallenness and your graciousness, my weakness but your sovereignty that I am set free from the foolishness that lives in pride, fear or anger and enabled to guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

¹ Ezekiel 20

² διαλογισμός

³ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Mark of a Christian*, Downers Grover, IVP Classics, 1970, p.p. 53-55