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LIVING WITH OUR DIFFERENCES

POLARIZED PEOPLE!

We live in a divided nation with “red states” and “blue states.” Issues abound. Are you pro-life or pro-choice? “Black Lives Matter” or “All lives matter”? Build a wall or open the borders? Want second amendment rights or more gun control? Most of us know which “side” we’re on when these topics come up. It’s enough to make your head spin and your blood boil! We are a polarized people, and it doesn’t look like we’re going to get from “e pluribus” into “unum” any time soon.

That’s not all. The church has its own divisions. There are hundreds of denominations to choose from. Liberal or conservative? “Hard shell” or “reformed” or “fire-baptized” or “charismatic” or “Bible-believing”? Shall we sprinkle or pour or immerse? Shall we have traditional or contemporary worship? Ordain women or not? Offer open or closed Communion? Don’t forget those local dividers! What color carpet for the center aisle? Build a new sanctuary or a new school first? Some people complain about “politics in the church” and leave.

There’s nothing new about all this. Ever since Adam and Eve, people have been trying to fix the blame and pass the buck. It’s “us” versus “them.” That’s what sin does. It separates, alienates and isolates. “Your iniquities have made a separation...” (Is. 59:2). The early church faced a big issue as soon as its mission work began. How would they accommodate



both Jew and Gentile? What were they to do about circumcision? What would be the role of the Old Testament Law for Gentiles? The unity of the church depended on the answers they found.

Paul had to navigate these waters with the church in Rome before he even arrived. In Chapters 14 and 15 he frames the concern around the division he sees between what he labeled “weak” and “strong” people in the church. The tension had progressed into judgment of others. Who were the better Christians? How were they to fellowship with those who differed? That’s still an urgent concern, isn’t it? The “life God gives” must be properly translated into the “life we live,” especially as we learn to live with our differences. That’s what Paul helps us do as we approach the finish line in Romans.

THE WEAK AND STRONG

ROMANS 14:1–2 AND 15:1

For most of the letter, Paul has employed the standard terms “Jew” and “Gentile.” But the lines were not, apparently, so easily drawn in the quarreling that arose in the Roman church. Some differences cut across ethnic lines. In Chapters 14 and 15, Paul employs a different set of labels to characterize the differences he has heard about. There are “weak” people and “strong” people.

The term “weak” he employs in 14:1–2 and again in 15:1. The term “strong” is used only once in 15:1. The meanings of these terms are spelled out in significant detail through the whole of Chapter 14 and into Chapter 15.

The WEAK, very simply, are people with scruples. Their “weakness in faith” is not an absence of trust in Jesus. It is rather that they lack a full understanding of “the implications of their faith in Christ” (Douglas Moo). A good illustration is given in 1 Cor. 8, where the “weak” do not yet realize that since “an idol has no real existence” (1 Cor. 8:4), the “food offered to idols” in Corinth could not really defile anyone. The weak, however, are so burdened with concern that they might be doing wrong that

they cannot proceed with confidence. The STRONG, by way of contrast, are those who are relatively free of scruples. They seem not to be bothered by “indifferent” matters, and they proceed through life with more confidence than their weak brothers. It is clear that Paul sees himself as one of them when he writes, “we who are strong” (15:1).

THE FOOD FIGHT

ROMANS 14:2–4

Paul’s opening salvo in Chapter 14 is directed at the strong. “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions” (v. 1). What were the Roman Christians “quarreling” about? Paul addresses two issues. The first, as in Corinth, is a “food fight”! The strong person “believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables” (v. 2).

Concern over “clean and unclean” foods was rooted in the distinctions God had given Israel (Lev. 11:1–47). For the “weak,” the memory of those food restrictions was still vivid. What’s more, in largely pagan cities like Rome and Corinth, ritually “clean” meat was not easy to obtain, for most meat was ritually offered to idols at temples and then sold publicly at the meat markets. The “weak,” who had scruples about the matter, decided it was just easier to avoid meat altogether. Hadn’t Daniel and his fellow exiles done the same back in the sixth century BC when they refused to eat the king’s “rich food” and opted for vegetables and water (Dan. 1:3–16)?

The strong, on the other hand, held that believers could eat anything they chose to eat since Jesus “declared all foods clean” (Mark 7:19). God had subsequently underlined that truth in the encounter between Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10–11). Peter’s vision of the animals let down in a sheet sealed the matter for him. The distinction between “clean and unclean” foods had been done away with.

What is striking is that Paul, though he is among the “strong,” does not order the weak to “get with it” and adopt the correct understanding. Instead,

he commands the strong to “welcome” them (a full integration into the worshipping community) and to avoid quarreling over “opinions”! There’s to be no “despising” (v. 3), no “passing judgment” (vv. 3, 4, 10, 13, 22). The food issue is not a primary teaching of the Christian faith, but an “adiaphoron” (see below).

DEBATE OVER HOLY DAYS

ROMANS 14:5-9

Paul moves to a second issue, the observance of “holy days.” “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike” (v. 5). At issue here were Sabbath days (Ex. 20:8-11), the Day of Atonement, and various other festival observances (as in Lev. 23). In a number of places, the New Testament proclaims our freedom from the requirement to keep the Sabbath because Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28), has fulfilled it. We no longer observe Passover because “Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7). Those holy days were just a “shadow of the things to come” (Col. 2:17), but Christ was the substance. So what shall we do about holy days?

Remarkably, Paul not only allows for, but defends and even commends the practices of both the strong and the weak (Middendorf). The one caveat is “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (v. 5). His apostolic directive is to allow believers to continue observing the Sabbath and other festivals, as Seventh-Day Adventists still do, so long as they are not made mandatory for righteousness. The observance of holy days is what we still call an “adiaphoron,” a word used long ago by the Stoics to delineate a matter of indifference, something not worth circling the wagons and having a fight about. The *Formula of Concord* uses it to refer to “ceremonies and church rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word” (FC SD X 1). In the case of the Sabbath, what once was commanded has now been abrogated.

For Paul, the heart of the matter is the MOTIVE. Does one observe a holy day (or not) or eat a particular food (or not) “in honor of the Lord” (v. 6)? Is he giving thanks to God? The real matter of life and death is not food or holy days, but whether or not we belong to the

Lord Jesus Christ. “We live to the Lord, and... we die to the Lord” (v. 8). One’s faith in the crucified and risen Lord, and our own death with Him in baptism (6:3-4) are at the center of things. Everything is seen through the lens of the Gospel.

THEREFORE, NO JUDGING!

ROMANS 14:10-13A

Since we both belong to Jesus Christ, how can we “pass judgment” on those who are our “brothers” or sisters (v. 10)? This ought to give pause to all of us as we recall things spoken intemperately in congregational meetings and the hallways and parking lots of our churches. It ought to provoke some soul-searching as we examine the feelings we carry about fellow members (or even the pastor) of our congregation or about groupings in our denomination if they come at things differently than we do.

For those inclined to pass judgment, says Paul, let your minds “fast forward” to that awesome day when we will all “stand before the judgment seat of God” (v. 10). The verb used for “stand before” is a technical term used for people who are summoned to appear in court before a judge, as Paul himself was to “stand before” Caesar (Acts 27:24). Jesus spoke of that day when “the Son of Man...will sit on his glorious throne” judging the nations (Matt. 25:31-32). That throne will be our judgment seat. We can feel the immensity of the moment Paul describes, when “every knee shall bow” and “every tongue shall confess” (citing Is. 45:23 in v. 11), a quotation he uses again in Phil. 2:10-11. How petty will appear so many of the things we quarreled over in this life!

MAKE THEM STUMBLE

OR BUILD THEM UP?

ROMANS 14:13B-19

Having described the “food fight” and the issue of “holy days,” Paul draws inferences about relationships in the body of Christ. His instruction is framed negatively, then positively. What we must not do is to place any kind of “stumbling block” or “hindrance” (Greek *skandalon*) before a fellow believer (v. 13). The right to do as we please is OUT. Concern for fellow believers becomes paramount. Breaking rules is less a concern than breaking people! For when we do what

we choose, concerned only about ourselves, the first result for the other may be that he is “grieved”—bothered to the point of wondering if his relationship to God is all wrong. It may go further, and your actions may “destroy the one for whom Christ died” (v. 15). He may, in his perplexity and doubt, abandon the church and his faith altogether. In other words, we should do nothing that endangers the faith of fellow believers!

Paul is guided by a pair of convictions. The first is the KNOWLEDGE that “nothing is unclean in itself” (v. 14). But knowledge is not enough. He adds immediately a concern for CONSCIENCE that “it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean”! This conviction mirrors what Paul wrote to the Corinthians about food offered to idols, where one must employ both knowledge and conscience (1 Cor. 8:7). It is not simply MY conscience that is a concern, but that of my fellow believer. When we come to matters like drinking or gambling, the issue is not simply “is it right or wrong?” but “how will this affect the other person?” What about his conscience?

This does not mean one should sacrifice his convictions and let what is “good be spoken of as evil” (v. 16 – the verb is literally “blasphemed”). It does mean that we see that the highest good is the enactment of life in the “kingdom of God.” That kingdom is not matters like “eating and drinking but... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (v. 17). The aim is to serve Christ. Now comes the positive directive: “let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (v. 19). He gives the same instruction to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 14:12). We can truly say that “building you is good for me,” for us all!

THE ROLE OF FAITH

ROMANS 14:20–23

Most of this chapter has been addressed to the “strong,” probably because the majority of the Roman Christians were Gentile, and most, accordingly, came at things as Paul did, with a sense

of freedom from the strictures of the Old Testament Law. In vv. 20–23, Paul repeats his advice and gives both groups food for thought.

Once again he reminds that the brother’s faith is a matter that outweighs any particular “issue.” “Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God” (v. 20).

Once more he refers to the importance of conscience, which he puts into different words in v. 22: “the faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.” It is well if one does not have to “pass judgment on himself for what he approves.” When Martin Luther stood before the “judgment seat” of Emperor Charles V at Worms, he said, “to go against conscience is neither right nor safe.” We begin, then, with a check of our own consciences, to see if we have “doubts” (v. 23).

The chapter closes with a surprising and thought-provoking definition of sin that seems aimed at the “weak” in particular. “Whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith” (v. 23). Something Paul himself regards as acceptable may in fact be “sinful” for the person if that person acts against what he believes is right. Now the definition: “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” The primary matter of my faith in Christ is the issue — not the Law, not the rules. That faith may not be fully mature, not well-informed. What matters is whether or not my behavior is in accord with the light I have.

Dear brother or sister, how does the Word of God address you personally in this chapter? To what degree does your behavior flow from your conviction that you are Christ’s servant? Do you consider, “How will this behavior please Him?” To what degree are you aware of and concerned for the other — that brother or sister for whom Christ died? We who place such questions before ourselves will be well equipped to “live with our differences.”

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 15:1-21

Lord God, as I study Your Word, equip me to live in such harmony with my fellow believers that together we become a song of praise that glorifies Your holy name! I ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

For review:

1. Summarize your understanding of the “strong” and the “weak.”

2. What were the two issues at Rome that Paul addressed as divisive?

Romans 15:1-7

3. Paul continues his address to the weak and strong in Rome. His general directive in v. 2 is “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good.” A modern-day point of contention in many churches is the issue of “worship style.” In this area, how may we seek to “please our neighbor”?

4. What OT verse is Paul citing in v. 3 (see footnotes)?

5. In v. 4 Paul asserts that what was written in the Old Testament was intended to encourage us in our hope. What’s the most “hopeful” thing in the Old Testament for you?

6. How is living “in harmony” (v. 5) different than total agreement on issues? Do you see such harmony in your congregation just now? If not, what do you think is still needed?

7. Paul urges his readers to “accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you” (v. 7 NIV). What conditions do most people attach to “acceptance” of others?

What difference do the last four words make for us?

Romans 15:8-13

8. Did Jesus minister primarily to Jews or Gentiles (v. 8)? What reasons does Paul give for this? (vv. 8-9)

9. The Old Testament citations in vv. 9-12 demonstrate that the scope of Jesus’ ministry also included Gentiles. What Gospel stories can you recall in which Jesus made contact with and brought mercy to Gentiles?

Romans 15:14–21

10. In v. 14, Paul compliments the believers in Rome. Compare the list of “positives” here with those in 1 Cor. 1:5 and 2 Cor. 8:7. What word is common to all three?

11. In v. 16 NIV, Paul says his ministry is a “priestly duty.” He is not doing Levitical service at the temple. How does the rest of the verse explain what he means?

12. In this section, Paul now writes extensively about his own ministry. Why do you think he makes this shift?

13. Recall some of the “signs and wonders” associated with Paul. Which ones are listed in Acts 14:8–10?

Acts 16:16–18?

Acts 20:9–12?

14. Where is Illyricum (v. 19)? How far is it from Jerusalem?

15. What’s Paul’s special “ambition” (v. 20)?

16. Have you encountered anything surprising in these past few lessons?

Memory Verse Challenge for Chapter 15

Rom. 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.*