

DON'T DIVIDE OVER DEBATABLE ISSUES

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We are living at a time of increasing tension in many churches because of the differing opinions Christians hold on such subjects as the baptism of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, signs and wonders, styles of worship, forms of church government, the role of women etc. We could add to these areas of controversy, matters of Christian behaviour such as drinking, smoking and dancing which have so often led to unhappy disputes and divisions. Sadly these issues have become areas of dry scrub land into which the devil loves to throw a match and start a blazing fire which leaves destruction in its wake and many people feeling hurt and wounded.

Historically we have not been good at handling our differences on secondary issues that are not fundamental to our faith. It is therefore appropriate in our present climate to take a closer look at the principles Paul lays down for Christians to live in peace and harmony when faced with other Christians who have different convictions on some of these debatable issues. The differences that divided the Christians in the church at Rome may not be the same as those that confront us today; the areas of dispute may change but the principles are changeless.

It will be a great test of our spiritual maturity if we can learn to live in harmony with those with whom we disagree on matters not essential to our unity. It is important that we grasp the teaching Paul gives to the Christians in Rome.

THE PROBLEMS PAUL DISCUSSES

He refers to them as 'disputable matters'. (Rom 14:1) It will help us to define what they are not before coming to a conclusion as to what they are.

He is not referring to the truth of the gospel

This is not in dispute. Paul was absolutely clear in defining the fundamental facts of our salvation; they are definite and not up for debate. Paul was quite intolerant of any distortion of the gospel and made no allowance for compromise. His words to the Christians in Galatia are unequivocal and without ambiguity: 'Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you let him be eternally condemned.' (Gal 1:7-9)

He is not discussing clear commands concerning Christian behaviour

In Romans 13:8-14 Paul urges the Christians to 'put aside the deeds of darkness' and to 'behave decently' rather than thinking about 'how to gratify the deeds of the sinful nature.' Paul leaves them and us in no doubt as to what the deeds of darkness are. They include 'adultery, murder, stealing and coveting' (v 9) and 'orgies, drunkenness, sexual immorality, debauchery, dissension and jealousy' (v 13). These are obviously sinful and cannot be referred to as 'disputable matters'. Scripture leaves us in no doubt about those things which are wrong before God and grieve the Holy Spirit.

He is debating differing Christian convictions on secondary issues

There are many matters of personal behaviour where scripture is not specific, so called 'grey areas' where the Bible does not give clear-cut rules. Paul wants everyone to have their own convictions (Rom 14:5) but he wants no-one to indulge in disputes and arguments over secondary issues which, regrettably, have become all too common in many of our fellowships.

Two issues in particular were causing problems in the church at Rome, and Paul addresses himself to them in chapter 14.

Questions of personal behaviour—special diets (verse 2)

'One man's faith allows him to eat everything but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.' The question of meat was a problem that vexed the early church. The eating habits of the Jews were vastly different from those of the Gentiles, and many of the Jewish Christians brought all their past scruples about food into the church. For them the blood of all animals was prohibited as was the flesh of certain animals that did not chew the cud or have a cloven hoof. Animals regarded as clean had to be slaughtered in a certain way. All of this made it extremely difficult for an orthodox Jew to share a meal with a Gentile Christian who did not subscribe to his particular customs.

An added problem was the question of meat bought in the market place that had previously been offered to idols in pagan temples. To some it was only meat and was there to be purchased, eaten and enjoyed. To others it was polluted, and rather than be contaminated and injure their conscience they became vegetarians.

We face similar problems today over issues such as alcohol. There is no clear prohibition in the Bible—only drunkenness is condemned. The Psalmist even speaks of 'wine to make glad the heart of men.' In matters where scripture is neither dogmatic nor clear we need to be careful or we will fall into the trap of making minor issues major points for controversy.

Questions of church observance—special days (verse 5)

'One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike.' The reference could be to the sabbath or to the ceremonial days in Leviticus or other days of great national celebration because of God's intervention in their history. Some, like Paul, regarded every day alike as 'holy to the Lord' while others considered some days as special and more sacred. We know too that the Jews made a tyranny of the sabbath, surrounding it with a jungle of rules and regulations.

We face similar difficulties today over Sunday observance. While some would want to legislate about patterns of behaviour others feel

the day is a gift from God and to be freely enjoyed. There is always the danger of worshipping the day rather than God himself who is the lord of all our days.

All of us are affected by our national, ecclesiastical and cultural backgrounds. The homes and types of churches as well as the countries we have been brought up in colour our thinking and shape our traditions. In areas where scripture is silent, tradition has become very vocal turning certain customs into dogmas and obsessions.

What do we do when we find ourselves in a church fellowship with Christians whose convictions are different from ours on some of the issues facing the church on matters not absolutely essential to our salvation in Christ? Do we try to thrash things out until we've brow-beaten our fellow Christian into our way of thinking? Do we divide and start another fellowship with a different emphasis? Paul's counsel is quite different.

THE PEOPLE PAUL DESCRIBES

He puts Christians into two different categories which he calls the 'strong' and the 'weak'. 'Accept him whose faith is weak.' (14:1) 'We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak.' (15:1)

It's a surprise to discover that the 'weak' brother is the one with the most scruples, who has a very tender conscience and abstains from this and that questionable practice. He is 'weak' not so much in believing faith as in the faith which affects his behaviour. He is very conscious of traditional rules and regulations and finds a certain security in observing them. (We tend to think that the man who won't do this or go there is the strong man.)

The 'strong' man is the man who is liberated from traditions and taboos; his 'faith allows him to eat everything'. (14:2) He is completely free from attempting to earn God's favour by doing certain things and abstaining from others. He is secure in his relationship with God and is no longer unduly influenced by man-made regulations. He finds his freedom in pleasing God rather than being influenced by the opinions of men.

The thrust, though, of the whole passage before us is that the

'strong' Christian must consider his 'weaker' brother and not ride rough-shod over his feelings.

THE PRINCIPLES PAUL DELIVERS

Paul was completely liberated as a Christian and enjoyed his freedom to the full. He adapted to the Jewish and Gentile ways of life quite happily depending on who he was with. As someone has put it, 'so completely free was he from spiritual bondage that he was not even in bondage to his freedom'. He knew some Christians were not as emancipated as he was, so he pleads with his readers that they be treated gently.

Accept one another

'Accept him whose faith is weak.' (14:1) 'Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.' (15:7) We are to warmly welcome the person with whom we may disagree on secondary issues. The welcome is to be unconditional, 'just as Christ accepted you' and without prejudice, 'without passing judgment on disputable matters'. (14:1) We are to accept our brother because 'God has accepted him'. (14:3) Charles Hodge stated: 'If God has not made it a barrier to communion with Him, we dare not make it a barrier to fellowship with us'. To refuse to open our hearts to all God's people is to reject those that he has welcomed. How cold and critical we can be towards those who do not dot our ecclesiastical 'i's or cross our traditional 't's. R. C. Chapman used to encourage his people with the words: 'learn to see the face of Christ in those with whom you differ'.

Avoid despising and judging one another

The 'strong' must not despise the 'weak' (verse 3a)

'The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not.' The liberated Christian must avoid the temptation of despising and ridiculing his narrower brother. It is all too easy to regard his views as dated and spiritually immature. No one remains unwounded when what he considers precious and important is

laughed at. It is cruel and insensitive to make a joke of what another man regards as sacred. We will not win our brother in this way; he will only withdraw still further into his entrenched position. We must respect him and welcome him, always remembering to take into account his background.

The 'weak' must not judge the 'strong' (verse 3b)

'The man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does.' While the liberated Christian tends to despise his narrower brother, the stricter brother tends to judge his more emancipated brother. He adopts the attitude, 'I don't do it, so you shouldn't either.' How true are the words of James Denney: 'It is easy to lapse from scrupulousness over one's own conduct into Pharisaism about that of others.'

Behind both their attitudes lies the ugly spirit of censoriousness that Jesus so clearly condemned: 'Do not judge, or you will be judged, for in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.' (Matt 7:1, 2) Our judgemental attitudes will, like a boomerang, recoil on our own heads. How quick we are to jump to hasty conclusions and sit in judgement on our brother's actions. Too many fellowships are unnecessarily torn in two by those with the broader views being contemptuous of those with the narrower views, and those with the stricter views acting in condemnation towards those who are more liberal in their outlook.

'Who are you to judge someone else's servant?' (v 4) The word Paul uses describes a domestic servant. Who am I to find fault with the household servant in another man's home? It is not my prerogative. 'To his own master he stands or falls', because he is under his master's jurisdiction and not mine. 'And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.' If he is honestly and sincerely living out his principles as he sees them, then God will accept him, because the standards of approval are set by the Lord and not by me.

'You then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat . . . each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.' (14:10-13) Only God is able to make an accurate and final assessment in these

matters. He alone knows the desires and motives and circumstances that shape a person's life and decisions. When I stand before God, I will not have to answer for my brother's convictions but I will have to give an account of my critical and censorious spirit. I may feel he is wrong, but my judgemental attitude towards him may well be the greater sin in God's sight.

Let us seek to remove both contempt and condemnation from our hearts and leave the final verdict to God when it comes to debatable matters on secondary issues.

'Be fully convinced in your own mind' (verse 5)

Paul encourages every Christian to think things through for himself and to come to his own conclusions. At the end of the day our actions should not be dictated by customs or traditions but by God-given convictions which are the result of study, thought and prayer. We should not do certain things and behave in a certain way just because it is the accepted thing to do but because we have determined to know the mind of Christ and the will of God. There is a mindlessness about many of our attitudes which is dangerous because it can lead us in two different directions.

Broadmindedness can lead to licence

We can be so broadminded that there is no depth left in our thinking. We can be more influenced by current social trends than the teaching of scripture. As a result we are without deep biblical convictions, which can cause our standards of behaviour to deteriorate.

Narrowmindedness can lead to legalism

We can end up with such a narrow mind that we are no longer open to the opinions of others. Our actions are determined by the pressure and ethos of the group to which we belong. This can lead to making rules about certain acceptable forms of behaviour that will either include or exclude people from the fellowship.

Have your own convictions! Paul nowhere suggests that we should have a woolly tolerance about everything with convictions about nothing. 'Be fully convinced in your mind', but at the same time respect those who come to a different conclusion from your own.

Let your liberty be controlled by the Lordship of Christ (verses 6–9)

Six times in this section Paul emphasises the phrase ‘to the Lord’. We need to acknowledge Christ’s right to rule in every part of our lives. Often we will need to kneel and pray, ‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’ The whole direction of our lives must be ‘to the Lord’, which means we must constantly hold in balance our liberty and his lordship, allowing the former to be controlled by the latter.

It is important to notice that both the ‘weak’ and the ‘strong’ brother are seeking to please the Lord. ‘He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord . . . and he who abstains does so to the Lord.’ (v 6) Each person is seeking to honour the Lord in their actions even though they go in different directions; their real desire is to please him in everything.

Let your liberty be controlled by love (verses 13–16)

Our attitude towards fellow Christians who have different convictions from ours, is to be marked by consideration and not by condemnation. Paul uses some strong expressions in these verses to highlight the spiritual attitude we are to adopt to our fellow Christian. ‘Stop passing judgment on one another. Instead make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.’ (v 13) ‘Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.’ (v 15) We are encouraged to use our critical faculties, not in a negative way to judge and condemn, but in a positive way to look for opportunities to avoid causing our brother to stumble.

We are called to live under two laws, the law of liberty and the law of love, both of which, again, must be held in balance. I am free to do certain things but at times I will surrender my freedom out of love to my brother. My life must be guided by the overriding principle of love, which will mean that I will think less of my rights and more of my responsibility to my brother.’ If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love.’ (v 15) The application of the law of love does not mean that I cease to be free, but it does mean that I will be saved from using my freedom for my own selfish ends. ‘You brothers were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather serve one another in love.’ (Gal. 5:13)

Paul counsels us to remember 'Christ died for your brother' which is a compelling reason for loving him. It also highlights the supreme sacrifice Christ was willing to make for him in comparison to the small sacrifice I am being asked to make for him. This lifts everything on to a higher plane.

Get your priorities right (verses 17–21)

'For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.' (v 17) Whenever we get drawn into disputes about secondary matters we need to ask the question, 'What really matters?' So much time and energy is dissipated on relatively unimportant issues and the only one who makes any mileage out of these controversies is the enemy who seeks to destroy the work of God.

Major on 'righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (verse 17) 'Righteousness' speaks of being right with God. 'Peace' speaks of being in a right relationship with others. 'Joy in the Holy Spirit' is only experienced when there is nothing in my life to grieve him. The quality of our churches would be transformed if we concentrated on these things rather than the trivial matters we so often argue about.

Concentrate on 'what leads to peace and mutual edification' (verse 19) 'Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.' We ought to avoid at all costs unnecessary strife and bitterness over those things that are not fundamental to our faith. 'Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.' (2 Tim 2:23)

We will, as Paul says, need to 'make every effort', if we are to major on what 'leads to peace and mutual edification'. It won't be easy or be a natural disposition within us. As Paul wrote in an earlier chapter, 'if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone'. (Rom 12:18) We must take the initiative to reach our estranged brother with whom we may have been at odds, and seek to build him up in his faith in an atmosphere of peace.

Determine not to destroy God's work over secondary issues (verse 20) 'Do not destroy God's work for the sake of food.' How many different words we could insert in that sentence in place of the word

'food'. How many fellowships have been divided and then destroyed not on doctrinal and fundamental issues but on debatable and sometimes trivial matters. Let us be careful not to make an issue of something God's word is not clear on. How tragic to be involved in helping the devil to destroy the work of God.

Keep your convictions on controversial issues private (verse 22a)

'So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.' This is an important statement when considered in the context of disputes over secondary matters. There are times when we don't need to air our views or brandish our liberty. Often a dignified silence is more helpful than unnecessarily upsetting others who have a different viewpoint from us. Don't deliberately provoke others over controversial issues; it isn't worth it. Some seem to take a distorted delight in needling others. Have your own convictions, yes, but at times it will be best to keep them private. The wise preacher in Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is 'a time to speak and a time to be silent'. (Eccl 3:7) If our speaking is going to be helpful, then let us speak, but if we sense our contribution to the debate is going to engender further misunderstanding and hostility then it is best to remain silent.

Keep a clear conscience in everything (verses 20b-23)

The principle in these verses could be summed up in the words, 'If in doubt, don't.'

The '*strong*' brother is advised 'not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall'. If there is a possibility that by flaunting his freedom before a weaker brother the more liberated Christian might lead him away from Christ, then he ought to forgo his freedom and consider his fellow Christian. Paul is quite clear: 'All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.' (v 20b) It would be on his conscience if his actions tripped up another Christian.

The '*weak*' brother is counselled not to change his convictions if it will offend his conscience. 'Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith, and everything that does not come from faith is sin.' (vv 22b-23)

He must only reject his previous scruples under the pressure of personal conviction. He must not change his position because he feels in the minority, or fears he may court ridicule. He must not be influenced by the fact that many others are free to do what he abstains from. If there is still a question mark in his mind he must hold to his present ideals until God shows him differently. If he is in doubt and acts without conviction his conscience which is very tender will feel condemned.

Follow the example of Christ (15:1-4)

True to style, Paul concludes by pointing to the example of Christ. Three things stand out in this paragraph.

'Even Christ did not please Himself' (verse 3)

What an amazing sentence! If anyone had the right to do as he pleased then it was the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet he voluntarily chose to please God and serve others. He was totally free from the taboos and conventions of men and yet equally concerned to bear with the weaknesses of others. He put the will of God first, the needs of others next and his own personal interests last. If he had done otherwise and lived to please himself he would not have given himself to death on a cross—his final and supreme act of self-sacrifice. The whole direction of our lives is to be to God and for others. This is the way of freedom. Christ is our example and inspiration.

We ought 'not to please ourselves' (verse 1)

Instead, we 'ought to bear with the failings of the weak'. (v 1) When Paul speaks of bearing with the failings of the weak, he uses the same word that is used of Christ bearing his cross (*bastazein*) which suggests that we too are called to the path of sacrifice, to surrender our freedom when necessary and to face the cost involved. This cuts right across the desire of our old nature which says, 'you please yourself and don't worry about anybody else'. Paul takes this further in the next phrase and encourages positive action on behalf of our brother.

We 'should please our neighbour for his good, to build him up' (verse 2)

Our actions towards him are to be influenced, not by what he wants but by what we know will be for his ultimate good, which is further

explained by the phrase 'to build him up'. To flaunt our freedom and ignore his sensitive conscience might hurt and hinder him as a Christian, in which case Satan has scored another victory through our selfishness and thoughtlessness. To sacrifice our freedom in order to strengthen and encourage another 'weaker' Christian is the way of blessing and progress. If we ridicule and condemn him for his narrow and limited views we will destroy any possibility of fellowship with him. If, on the other hand, we actively choose to surround him with love and concern, and major on the things that will build him up, we shall not only please him but also edify him.

Aim for unity and the glory of God (15:5-6)

'May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' This surely is our ultimate objective in every fellowship: to enjoy the unity Jesus prayed and died for, and to bring glory to God in everything. Jesus prayed, 'may they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me.' (John 17:23) How God is dishonoured and the Spirit of God grieved by our petty differences and unnecessary divisions. The increasing fragmentation of the church creates confusion amongst Christians and unbelief amongst those outside the church. As Thomas Manton, one of Cromwell's chaplains put it, 'divisions in the church create atheism in the world'.

God will give the 'endurance and encouragement' we need as we 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Eph 4:3). It will require on our part, the need to be 'completely humble and gentle; and to be patient, bearing with one another in love'. (Eph 4:2) If we are to be 'likeminded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose' then we must ensure for our part that we 'do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain deceit, but in humility consider others better than [ourselves].' (Phil 2:2-3)

This does not mean that there will not be differences of opinion amongst us as Christians, nor does it mean that we will not engage in earnest and vigorous debate. It does mean, however, that if we work through and work out the principles Paul enumerates in this passage then we will have solved the problem of Christians living

together where their convictions vary on issues that are not essential to our faith.

We must never forget that the Christ who unites us as members of his body is far greater than all of the secondary differences that threaten to divide us. Our unity is to be found in Christ, not in theological debate in disputable matters of Christian behaviour.

In the midst of all our controversies let us remember and take to heart the motto of Richard Baxter, the Puritan divine, 'in necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity'.

PARTNERSHIP: WHAT DOES IT OFFER?

A Growing Range of Publications

These include: *Christian Brethren Review*; *Occasional Papers*; *Newletters*; *Booklets*. A series of booklets is planned to provide brief treatments of topical issues for general readers.

Seminars in London and Elsewhere

London seminars are held twice a year. Recent topics include prayer (1986), worship (1985), pastoral care (1984) and world mission (1983). A seminar programme normally includes addresses, discussion of case studies in small groups, an open forum and an epilogue.

Regional seminars have been held in Bournemouth, Bristol, Cardiff, Bangor, Birmingham, Martlesham and Northampton. Seminars are planned for other locations. Enquiries are invited from anyone interested in the possibility of arranging a local seminar.

Tape recordings are available of most of the addresses given at seminars.

Surveys

A survey of church growth was undertaken in 1978. An analysis of the results was published by Paternoster Press under the title '*The Brethren Today—A Factual Survey*' (ed. G. Brown and B. Mills).

A survey of resident full-time workers in local churches was conducted in 1984 in preparation for a consultation held in 1985 and the publication of *Servants of God* (Christian Brethren Review No. 37).

Projects

Among the projects already in operation or in preparation are the following: Student ministry; World mission study/action group; Inter-church contacts; International contacts; Information and resource services; Training courses.