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ACCEPTING THOSE WHO DIFFER: LESSONS ON UNITY FROM ROMANS 14 AND 15

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I was recently conversing with a brother from outside the United States about a conference his church was sponsoring. Invited to this conference were people from a broad cross section of Calvinistic Baptist churches. We each noted how difficult it would be to expect such a conference to be well attended in the United States. We grieved together that American churches which have so much in common with one another nevertheless often will hold each other at arm's length over issues that the Bible clearly delineates as matters of "liberty." Are these divisions pleasing to the Head of the church? If they are not, then by what means can unity be pursued?

Often unity is thought to happen by "you becoming like me." Occasionally, one might meet an unusually humble person who seeks unity by "I need to become like you." Even more common, however, are the well-intended efforts to compromise. "Each of us needs to become a bit more like the other." Each of these briefly mentioned attempts at unity fall short. I propose, through the following study of Romans 14:1-15:7, that unity is neither "you need to become like me" nor "I need to become like you." Rather, unity is to be pursued "by each of us becoming more like Jesus Christ."

The diversity we see among churches is often seen within our local bodies of believers as well. How diverse are the people in your local church? In the typical church in our western culture, there are people of various races, ethnic

backgrounds, educational levels, vocations, marital statuses, ages, and communities of residence. Added to these differences are the varieties of "salvation histories" of the church members. Some were saved as children growing up in Christian homes, some saved as teens or college students, and still others saved out of lifestyles of shameful worldliness when older. Now to add even more to the variety, people in the church hold different convictions and preferences regarding style of music, style of dress, Bible translations, etc.

Yet, all the members of the church profess to believe in and follow the same Lord. We all profess to be part of this one body of believers. How can this work? How can such a diverse group of people ever live and function with peace and unity? How can such a diverse group of people ever function as a cohesive body of believers? How can we ever work together in promoting the cause of Christ in our own community and generation? Is it any wonder that some churches experience painful church splits? How has *your* church faced this challenge?

Our churches today are not the first to face this challenging reality. The church of Rome in Paul's day struggled with this issue of unity and acceptance in a church made up of people with very different backgrounds and convictions. What were the issues in Rome? What were the differences that made a mutual acceptance of one another in the local church a difficult goal to achieve? In Romans 14 and 15, the apostle describes two noticeably different "camps" or "groups" within that one local body of believers. Paul writes, "One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only" (Rom. 14:2). Then he explains, "One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike" (14:5). So, the differences with which this church was wrestling centered on convictions regarding *diet and days*.

The one noticeable "camp" in the church had strong convictions about *not* eating certain types of food and *not* doing certain things on designated days. Paul refers to those in this group as those whose "faith is weak." This group of people in the church was most likely made up of people with Jewish backgrounds. "Jewish converts had kept the law of Moses and specifically had observed the Sabbath. When such people became Christians they often maintained such habits. They did not see that justification by faith made them irrelevant."¹ The Christians in this group were having trouble trusting the sufficiency of Christ's fulfillment of the old covenant. They apparently thought that true loyalty to God included the observance of certain old covenant laws. They were having difficulty letting go of their old covenant practices regarding dietary restrictions and observances of Sabbath and other "holy" days. The laws pertaining to "diet and days" were especially important to the people in this "camp" in distinguishing those who were faithful (as Jews) and those who were not.²

The other identifiable "camp" in the local church had strong convictions regarding their liberty to eat any kind of food and to do a variety of things on any given day of the week. Their confidence in the sufficiency of Christ's ministry of fulfilling the law was strong.³ It is quite likely that this group primarily was made up of people with Gentile backgrounds. However, some Christians with Jewish backgrounds were also in this group. Paul was an ethnic Jew (even being trained as a Pharisee!), but counted himself in this latter group (15:1). The apostle asserted in very emphatic language, "I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself" (14:14). Paul refers to this group to which he belonged as being the "stronger brothers."

There were certain things that these two very different groups had in common. Both groups were made up of peo-

ple who were considered genuine believers and who had a sincere desire to please God (14:3, 13). Paul explains, "He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God" (14:6). As John Murray observed, each group was characterized by "an equal sense of devotion to Christ."⁴ Another commonality that Paul mentions repeatedly is that all believers in both camps will give an account to God Himself for their lives (14:4, 10-12).

There is something else that was common to both of these groups at Rome. Both groups were being critical of those who were "different." The two groups despised each other, holding each other at a distance except to debate (14:2-3). "The weak tended to regard the exercise of liberty on the part of the strong as a falling down in their devotion to Christ and therefore subjecting them to the Lord's disappointment."⁵ One can almost imagine the weaker brother whispering "bunch of antinomians" under his breath, making sure he kept his distance from that group of "liberals." Equally guilty, the stronger Christian was being critical of his weaker brothers and sisters. It doesn't take too much imagination to hear this church member muttering to his friends about those "legalists" in the church with their scruples concerning diet and days. Apparently there were relational boundaries being erected by people on both sides of this issue. No doubt attitudes were being expressed such as "Why should I fellowship with him? I know I'm right and he's wrong!"

So, what did the apostle direct in this matter of two "camps" in a local church who just weren't getting along? First he wrote, "Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who does, for God has accepted him" (14:3). He also exhorted, "Therefore let us not judge one another any

more" (14:13). Paul made it clear that not everyone would agree on these "disputable matters" (14:1). It is noteworthy in this extended passage that the apostle never commanded nor even suggested that the two groups must ultimately "agree" with one another. He never asked one group to abandon its convictions (though he makes no secret of his own view on these matters regarding "diet and days"). Neither did he call for a "compromise" position somewhere in the middle. But he *did* call for a cessation of criticism and judgment. The responsibility to judge lies with God Himself. In this passage Paul strongly exhorts that Christians should not seek to take over God's role in judging other Christians regarding their convictions on these matters of diet and days. "But you (an emphatic you), why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God" (14:10). As Leon Morris observes, "Both strong and weak should realize that it is God, not they and those who think like them, whose verdict counts."⁶

Instead of spending time and energy seeking to judge the Christian who is "different," the church member is to expend himself on what will promote peace and Christian growth in the church. Paul exhorts every church member, "So then, let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (14:19). Instead of spending my energy trying to promote "my side" or show the "other side" just how wrong they really are, as a Christian I must do my thoughtful best to ask, "Will this attitude, comment, and action promote the unity of our local body? Will this promote the spiritual growth of my brothers and sisters in Christ?" Our goal should not be to "please ourselves" but to patiently deal with our differing brother in a way that will build him up spiritually. This is especially true if one considers himself to be one of the "stronger" ones (15:1-2). "Here [Paul] is concerned that the strong take seriously their

obligation to use their God-given strength in the service of the God who gave it, and therefore in that of their weaker fellows. . . . It means they should 'carry' the weak. The strong are to take firm action to assist the weak."⁷

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An encouraging and revealing word from the apostle in this passage gives a significant clue as to how people in local churches with such differing convictions can live in peace and harmony. Paul offers this blessing upon the church, "Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus [NIV—as you follow Christ Jesus]; that with one accord you may with one voice

glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:5-6). Believers in both camps were assumed to be following Christ Jesus. And what did that following of Jesus entail in this situation? "[Paul] is not looking for unanimity in itself, for people sometimes agree in error. He is praying for the unity that accords with Christ, and that is a unity that God alone can give."⁸ "Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us, to the glory of God" (15:7). The word "accept" is a command "to take another to yourself in an embrace," or "to take someone into friendship." The concept is not mere toleration, but a genuine embracing of the other as a friend and family member in Christ. "The weak are not to be made to feel that they are barely tolerated and seen as second class members. They are to be received with warmth and true fellowship. Christian love demands no less."⁹

Speaking personally, Jesus is the motivation for me to accept my fellow church member who differs with me on these matters. "Here we find Paul's 'bottom line' in this whole issue."¹⁰ When I think about the work of Christ, I realize that *He* has accepted all kinds of people into His kingdom. He has accepted Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor, young and old, people from "morally upright" backgrounds and people from decadent lifestyles. All of these very different people were brought into the kingdom by the same Savior, shedding the same blood and extending the same grace. They were no more "acceptable" than I was when Christ accepted me. When I think of what it cost my precious Savior to accept that differing brother/sister of mine, I should pause and reflect. Look what it cost Him to accept that person. How can I treat His acceptance of others so lightly? How dare I communicate with my words and demeanor, "Well, maybe Jesus accepted that person, but I'm sure not going to!" What audacity to reject someone who was accepted by

Jesus at the cost of His own precious blood! As John Murray pointedly wrote, "If God has received a person into the bond of His love and fellowship and if the conduct in question is no bar to God's acceptance, it is iniquity for us to condemn that which God approves. By so doing we presume to be holier than God." "Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died" (14:15b). "Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food" (14:20a).¹²

Jesus is also my model in accepting others. "A powerful incentive to this kind of conduct is that Christ is our example."¹³ Paul wrote, "Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us" (15:7). Think about the life of this Savior whom I am following. He never sought to please Himself. He put the interests of others ahead of His own. In fulfillment of Psalm 69:9, He was willing even to take the insults that other people aimed at God (15:3). Like my Lord, I am to "die to myself"— to my own preferences. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus" (2:3-5). And out of a loving concern for my brother who is different from me, I am to reach out humbly with open arms and draw him close to myself. My own Lord drew people to Himself who were considered by many to be "unacceptable." Into His circle of followers He called tax collectors, women and children, prostitutes, even some Pharisees. He even accepted the likes of you and me! Christ's kingdom has breadth when you consider the variety of races, ethnic backgrounds, social and economic statuses, and ages of people for whom He died to make His own. Following the example of my Lord, I too must accept believers who are from a variety of backgrounds, preferences, and convictions. If I claim to be a true

Christian, I must "walk in the same manner as He walked" (1 John 2:6) in this area of accepting other Christians who don't share all of my convictions on these matters. It might not be comfortable, and it might not be popular. It certainly wasn't for Jesus when He accepted these people.

And what is the ultimate *purpose* of following the example of my Lord in "accepting others?" Paul writes that doing this is to bring glory to God (Romans 15:7). He continues to explain that God deliberately chose to put His glory on display by saving people from all kinds of backgrounds and forming them into "one new man." Jesus Christ came and ministered His grace to both Jews and Gentiles. It was always part of His plan.

For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments, contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity (Eph. 2:14-16).

The apostle later added, "in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:10-11). God deliberately saves people of diverse backgrounds so that He can put His own glorious power and wisdom on display. He wants everyone to be impressed by how He can form one "new man" out of people of diverse backgrounds. Accomplishing this in the church brings Him praise and glory. When we choose to exclude from fellowship those whom Christ has chosen to include, we are undermining

His goal of displaying His glory in His church. Christians must not erect barriers that the Head of the church never erected.

Jesus chose to accept undeserving sinners of “differing stripes” so that He could bring praise to His Father. He is making something entirely “new.” He wants everyone to be impressed with His wisdom and ability to bring diverse people together. Why then would I choose to run counter to His purposes by excluding from fellowship brothers and sisters in Christ who happen to have convictions that differ from mine on these “disputable matters”? I must accept my brother “to the glory of God” so “that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:7, 6). The church should be filled with people who don’t necessarily see all the details the same, but who nevertheless accept one another just as Christ has accepted them to the praise of God the Father.

“Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever! Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21).

Author

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Notes

1. Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 477. Also see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 828-31 and 836.
2. James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 38B: Romans 9-16 (Dallas: Word, 1988), 800-801. Dunn has a helpful explanation on the identity of these “weaker” brothers.
3. Moo, 831.

4. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 179.
5. *Ibid.*, 177.
6. Morris, 479.
7. *Ibid.*, 496-97.
8. *Ibid.*, 501.
9. *Ibid.*, 478.
10. Moo, 838.
11. Murray, 176.
12. Douglas Moo includes a caution against those who would promote “unity” unthinkingly. “In the interests of guarding against an illegitimately broad application of this principle, it is vital to stress that Paul commands us here to receive those whom God has received. In other words, Paul limits his plea for tolerance to those who can rightly claim a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ, involving all those doctrinal and practical requirements that Paul and the NT elsewhere insist must be present for such a genuine saving relationship to exist” (p. 839, n. 52).
13. Morris, 498.