

CHURCH IMPROVEMENT: BUILDING A CHURCH THAT HONORS GOD AND LOVES PEOPLE BY ACCEPTING ONE ANOTHER

Romans 15: 1-7

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

In your experience what have been the factors that have kept groups you have belonged to from experiencing unity and camaraderie? When have you most felt like a particular group of which you were a part was truly united?

Jesus prayed in John 17 that we, as his church, would experience the same level of unity that he and the Father experience in the Trinity. The fact that Jesus asked his Father for this means three things. First, it is God's will that each local church experience the unity that exists within the Trinity. Second, the Father is actively working by the Spirit in response to the prayer of the Son to create that unity. Third, experiencing that unity is not natural but supernatural. In other words, left to ourselves we will be disunited, not united.

One of the ways that the Father is working to create that unity is through giving us instructions in his word. Our passage today is explicitly given to overcome perhaps one of the biggest barriers to unity, the differences and disagreements that exist among us. The unity of the church is not a unity that is based upon shared sociological, political, racial, economic or lifestyle characteristics. The unity of the church is in spite of the vast differences that exist among us in these and many other categories. The good news is that God is fully aware that the church is made up of people who disagree with each other and differ from one another in a whole host of ways. Yet the Bible does not think that these differences need to result in division within the church. We have in Romans 14:1-15:13 a thorough discussion of how it is that we who differ from one another on significant issues can still be united in the church. Today we are only going to examine what Paul says in 15:1-7. We are going to see four reasons why it is that the church is to be a place of unity where differences don't divide.

STUDY

1. In v. 1 Paul refers to two groups of people in the church, the "strong" and the "weak". He defines these two groups in chapter 14. Read 14: 1-2, 5-6, 14, 19-20 & 23. How does Paul describe/define the "strong" and the "weak"?

First, the weak are those who are "weak in faith". This doesn't mean they are young Christians or that they can't trust God with their finances or some other part of their life. Rather, their weakness is that they are convinced that it matters to God whether they eat meat or not, drink wine or not and worship God on Saturday. These "weak in faith" were not saying that eating meat would send you to hell. They weren't saying that only vegetarians go to heaven. If that were the case Paul would tell them they are not Christians as he does in Galatians 1: 6-9, 2:15-16 and 3: 1-5. The weak believe that to be a faithful Christian you will not eat meat, not drink wine and worship God on Saturday. If a person who was "weak in faith" were to eat meat they believed they would be sinning. That is the critical point in understanding the difference between the strong and the weak. The weak believe that eating meat, drinking wine or working on Saturday, would be sin for them. The weak are convinced that God condemns eating meat, drinking wine and working on the Sabbath.

Now the strong are those whose faith allows them to eat everything, to drink wine and to worship God on any or every day and to work on any and every day. They know that whether they eat meat, drink wine or work on the Sabbath, or not is a matter of indifference to God. They know that eating meat, drinking wine and working on the Sabbath is not a sin. They know that God has not given any commands regarding these issues and so they are free to either eat or not, drink or not or choose which day to worship on.

2. What are some modern examples of "strong faith" vs. "weak faith"?

There are scores of issues Christians disagree about that the Bible does not condemn or approve. These issues usually end up destroying the unity of the church and the beauty of Christian relationships. All of us have a tendency to view our position as the godlier, the more mature position. Here are three modern issues and the different positions that

Paul would label as being “weak in faith”. Many Christians think it is sinful to send your children to public schools. They believe that sending your children to Christian schools or home schooling are the only two options open to “godly” parents. For them to send their children to public schools would be sin, a violation of their conscience. Other Christians believe that it is sinful to isolate your children from the broader culture. They are convinced we have a responsibility to live in the world in order to be salt and light in that world. Not participating in public education is forsaking our God-given responsibility to influence our culture and other individuals for Christ. For them not sending their children to public school would be a sin. Paul would identify both of these positions as the result of being “weak” in faith. He would argue that whenever you attach the words “sinful” or “godly” to lifestyle preferences that are not clearly commanded or forbidden in the Scriptures, then you are acting as one who is “weak” in the faith. There are Christians who believe it is sinful and ungodly to use birth control. Other Christians believe it is sinful and ungodly to bring more children into a world that is already overpopulated. There are Christians who believe that no godly person would ever be a Democrat and other Christians who believe that no godly person could ever be a Republican. Again, Paul would identify all of these positions as the result of weakness in faith.

NOTE: It is possible that some will argue that a position I have called “weak” is not a matter of indifference but actually is sinful. The question that must be answered is this: If a professing Christian practices what is forbidden by God and does not repent but continues in this sin, will he or she go to heaven? According to 1 John 2:4-6 those who say they are followers of Jesus but don’t do what he says are liars. Therefore, if it is always sinful to send you child to public school (as an example) then those who do so and yet claim to be Christians are liars and will go to hell.

3. Does it seem possible to you that people who disagree about these sorts of things can live together in unity? Why or why not?
4. Paul is speaking to the “strong” in vv. 1-2. Why does he talk to them and not the weak? Compare with 14: 13, 15 & 19-21.

He addresses the strong because they can adjust their behavior without “stumbling”, “falling” or “condemning” themselves. The weak cannot do other than they are doing as to do differently would be to sin because that is what they are convinced eating meat, drinking wine or not worshipping on the prescribed day would mean for them. The strong can either eat meat or not eat meat, drink wine or not drink wine, worship on Saturday or not worship on Saturday. They are free to change their behavior to accommodate their “weaker” brothers and so promote the peace and unity of the body of Christ, whereas the “weak” cannot do so without sinning.

5. What are the “weaknesses of the weak” (NIV= “failings of the weak”)?

The weaknesses of the weak refers to their inability to change their behavior without sinning. They cannot do other than they are doing because for them to eat meat is a sin. They cannot regard every day alike, they must worship on the Sabbath and on other “holy” days or they will be sinning against God. They cannot drink wine because if they were to do so they would be sinning.

6. What does it mean and not mean for the “strong” to “bear the failings of the weak”, to “not please themselves”, to “please their (weak) neighbor for his good to build him up”?

The strong have to be careful not to say or do anything that will put pressure on the weak to violate their conscience. There is a level of patience and considerateness that the strong must exercise in order to not harm the weak. The strong are not free to simply enjoy the liberty of the gospel, that is to please themselves. They must evaluate what they do and say in view of the fact that their “weak” brothers and sisters are nearby. They are continually seeking to use their freedom to help their weak brothers and sisters. Paul is not telling the strong to simply tolerate the weak. Neither is he telling them that they can just ignore them. He wants the strong to get involved in the lives of the weak to help them because they love them. He wants them to not merely look out for their own interests but also to look out for the good of the weak. He doesn’t want them to act in a condescending way but to work for their good so that they will be built up in the faith.

It is quite clear that Paul agrees with those who say that eating meat, drinking wine and working on the Sabbath is a matter of indifference to God. He does think that the weak are wrong in their views. You can see this in 14:14, 17 and in 15:1 when he includes himself among the strong. He is requiring the strong to get involved in the lives of the weak so that the whole church will grow up in the faith. He wants them to aim at the good of the weak, which is that they would grow in their faith. However, the strong must not do this in an arrogant, condescending way. They must not flaunt their freedom in such a way that the weak feel pressured into eating meat, for then they would be sinning. The strong by their patient love are to help the weak by making sure their weak conscience is not harmed and by using their influence to help the weak become strong.

Those who know that the church is united not by a common sociology but by a common theology live gently with those who want to make sociological choices the organizing principle of the church. *The strong patiently endure the insistence of the weak that certain choices are godlier than others. They refuse to make a big deal out of what others consider a big deal. They are not condescending but respectful of the views of the weak.*

NOTE: According to 14: 16-18, Paul tells the strong to make sure that the weak are not permitted to teach their lifestyle preferences as God's preferences. Bearing with the weaknesses of the weak does not mean permitting the person who believes that it's a sin to eat meat to teach the entire church that eating meat is a sin for every Christian. Rather bearing with the weak has to do with not putting pressure on the weak to do what would be sin for them to do, which requires that the strong often limit their liberty.

The church is to be a place of unity where differences don't divide because love is our rule.

7. Why do the strong bear with the weaknesses of the weak and seek to please the weak, according to v.3?

The reason the strong live like this is because this is how Jesus lived. Jesus laid aside his right to have a happy life here. He chose a life of suffering and so that is what the strong choose, a life of suffering love.

8. How does the example of Jesus both motivate and exemplify the life that the strong, that every maturing Christian must live in relation to other Christians? Paul quotes a portion of Psalm 69 to make his point. Read Psalm 69: 6-9 to see Christ's motive and method.

The great passion of his life is to see the name of God magnified in the world. However, he lives in a world that doesn't like God. It is a world that does not believe that all goodness, life, and happiness are found in God alone. Therefore, Paul says Jesus came into the world with this radical agenda: Hope in God alone. The world heaped its abuse on him, it hated and insulted him and finally crucified him because it hates God. But the suffering that passion for God brought to him did not deter him from his course because, "zeal for God's house consumed him". Jesus was insulted because of his devotion to God, not his devotion to any political cause or lifestyle preference.

Maturing Christians have the same zeal that Jesus had, the glory of God. It is the consuming desire of maturing Christians that the greatness and goodness of God be seen and felt by all. He or she knows that God is most glorified when people are most satisfied with Him. So, they love to help people to discover what a treasure God is. They do not believe that the greatest source of joy in life is to have others agree with them on every lifestyle choice but to find Jesus to be the satisfaction of their souls. Mature Christians, while they must make choices about how to live do not make those lifestyle choices the center of their lives. Our lives are to be organized around the sufficiency and greatness of God, not the greatness of our lifestyle choices. We are zealous for the worship of God, not zealous for home schooling or fighting global warming or our right to drink wine or electing politicians from one party or another.

What is shocking about this verse is that Paul equates the suffering Jesus endured for the sake of God with the suffering that the strong must endure when they do not please themselves but seek to please the weak. In other words, Paul equates Jesus' suffering the abuse of God's enemies with the suffering that we must endure if we are going to love other Christians. He is not saying that the weak are the same as those who hate God. He is saying that if you are going to love other Christians for the sake of God, then you are going to suffer hardship. You will not be able to freely live your life as you want. You will have to deny yourself legitimate pleasures. You will be misunderstood and probably insulted. The unity of the church and the growth of the church in faith require that at least some of us suffer the loss of earthly pleasures and gladly endure mistreatment by other Christians so that the whole church grows to love Jesus more.

9. What are some ways you are suffering hardship because you are engaged in pleasing others? Is there any suffering in your life due to your commitment to love another Christian?

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10. What does v. 4 tell us about the purpose of the Bible in our lives?

Paul has quoted the OT in order to encourage the strong to bear with the failings of the weak to endure the suffering of loving the weak. This verse gives the general principle that God's word is given to us for the purpose of filling us with hope so that we will endure. The Bible was written to teach us about God and how he saves his people. This instruction gives endurance and encouragement to us so we find our hope to be in God and not in ourselves or our abilities to find happiness in this world. The word of God causes us to hope in a future world. We do not expect to be fulfilled here because this isn't home. We're on our way to our home and when we get there it will be better than anything we can imagine here. Therefore, we can deny ourselves legitimate pleasures here and work for the good of the irritating people who make up the church.

11. Why does Paul feel the need to tell us this at this point in his argument?

He knows that all of us have opinions about things that God is not really all that concerned about. He also knows our tendency to justify our own position by trying to get God on our side. For a Christian, the way you get God's endorsement of your particular lifestyle is to be able to show the Bible says so. He has just told us that mature Christians aren't interested in winning arguments but are passionate, like Jesus, for the glory of God in the salvation of his people. He has just quoted the OT to support his position. In doing so he has not only shown us the why and how of living for the good of others but he has also shown us how God intends for his word to be used. His word is to be used to point people to a greater hope than what this world offers; not to win arguments about issues that don't matter.

Now, a mature Christian in his or her desire to build up another Christian will use the Bible to confront a sinful behavior or sinful thinking. But this kind of careful and compassionate instruction is a far cry from petty bickering about issues that are not central to Christian doctrine and living. You can know if you are misusing the Bible by what your intention is. Are you trying to win an

argument or are you trying to win a soul? Are you trying to justify your lifestyle choices or are you trying to increase your friend's hope that to have heaven is far greater than to have the passing pleasures of sin in this life?

The church is to be a place of unity where differences don't divide because God's word is our hope.

12. In v. 5 Paul prays just like Jesus prays in John 17 for the unity of this local church. According to vv. 6-7 why does it matter if the church is united, if we accept one another?

The glory of God and of the gospel of Christ is magnified when God's people are united in spite of their differences. When people who are vastly different from one another and who do not agree about every lifestyle choice gladly worship Christ together and accept one another the only explanation is the power of God's love at work in the world.

13. What then is the ultimate motive for why the strong bear with the weaknesses of the weak and all of us accept one another as Christ accepted us?

We are so taken up with the glory of God and with the wonder of his love that we delight to love others so that his glory is seen by others. , Paul believes that when God works in a community of people all the differences will be set aside in the amazed wonder and worship of our God and Father. What Paul is saying is that the work of Christians in each others lives is to help us see that Jesus is so desirable and his salvation so glorious that we are so caught up in loving and adoring him that the things which make us different are seen as trivial and minor and unimportant.

14. Have you ever experienced this unity? What is one thing you can do this week promote this unity of spirit?

The church is to be a place of unity where differences don't divide because God is our joy.