

matter how mature we might think our faith compared to another we are all lost, dying and in need of savior. So, we accept each other out of love for each other because God has loved us.

We move beyond toleration to action. We not only accept one another's differences, but we also consider our own actions and we seek to do nothing that will hinder the faith of the other. Paul is saying essentially it is not worth making your opinion and actions known if it is going to hurt your brother or sister. So, we not only accept each other in love, but also act in love.

Finally, I want to say our acceptance of each other creates room for more. C.S. Lewis describes the relationship of the church. He says that the relationship is not a love affair, but one between friends or neighbors. In a love affair there are two people and they face one another and they hold their hands and they are in a relationship with each other. There is no room for anyone else in that relationship nor should there be. In this relationship you are looking at each other and it is closed and there is no room for anyone else. However, the church is full of friends. Friends stand next to each other and they set their eyes not on each other, but on Christ. Standing side by side they each have an empty hand for someone else to come alongside and hold. In this way... the church is always open, always connected and always looking to Christ.

Acceptance has always been a problem in the church and it remains so today. However, when we fully understand the teaching of scripture we realize that we must accept one another. There are many things that would divide us, but most of it is disputable or things that do not matter. We can still live by conviction and accept another person into the fellowship of the church. We must turn acceptance into the action and attitude of love. After all we are really just lost, dying people in need of a savior. It takes a church... it takes acceptance.



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IT TAKES A CHURCH Acceptance

Romans 14

TRINITY PULPIT



Acceptance has been an issue in the church as long as there has been a church. From the very beginning, the followers of Jesus have struggled to make a place for all who would come and follow Jesus. In the very early days of Christianity, the struggle was within the Jewish community who believed and rightly so, that Jesus was the Christ, the Jewish Messiah. Thus, those outside the Jewish community who were coming to Christ needed to be Jewish or become Jewish. So, the first council of the church we ever find in the Bible is in Jerusalem, and the issue is whether gentiles coming to Christ need to be circumcised as a rite of passage into the covenant with God. The Apostle Paul spends much time in his epistles defending his ministry to the gentiles and not requiring them to observe Judaism as part of following Jesus. In fact, the whole book of Galatians is about the church not being "bewitched" or fooled into giving up their freedom in Christ for a legalistic form of Christianity.

The first conflict in the church is over widows of Greek Jews being overlooked by the church. Again, at the heart of this conflict is acceptance. Is everyone accepted? Does everyone have a place in the body of Christ? There is so much that can divide us in the local church today. However, we must admit that most of our division comes from our unwillingness to follow the commands of scripture. There are the obvious ones like those from Jesus to love our neighbor as ourselves. Here we even have a very particular command from scripture from the Apostle Paul when he writes as plain as he can write "accept the one whose faith is weak." Later Paul says we are to accept one another for this simple reason "for God has accepted them."

What was the problem in the church here in in Romans? There were two issues that Paul mentions that was dividing the church and eroding the fellowship of the church. There was eating of certain foods and then, there were

the keeping of certain days as holy days.

Paul describes them as weak and strong in the faith. This is not to suggest judgment on the faith of either group, but it is how Paul describes them. In this case, there were those who were following Jesus who brought with them their Judaism, and they believed they were to continue to follow their strict diets. They did not eat meat and only ate vegetables. Now this was not for health reasons, we don't have our first vegetarians. Instead, they did not eat meat because of their keeping the Old Testament laws. Now Paul refers to this group as those of weak faith. What he means is that they have yet to embrace the fullness of grace in Christ. They have yet to fully understand that it is not what we do, but what Christ has done that reconciles us to God. Those of weak faith simply are still growing in their understanding of what it means to be forgiven by grace and grace alone. The other group Paul refers to as those of strong faith. They do not find anything wrong with eating whatever they might like. In fact, Paul puts himself in this group. In verse 14 Paul says of himself "as one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself."

There was another practice that was dividing the church. That was the keeping of certain holy days. Some continued the strict practice around the Sabbath and others did not. Some kept the festivals of the Old Testament and others did not. So, again there was the need for the acceptance of each other. In both cases, he does not suggest that one is wrong and the other is right and that everyone should come around to the thinking of the other. Paul instead calls these matters disputable. The word really means "things that do not matter."

What attitude did they have toward one another? Well those who were strong in faith looked down on those weak in faith. Those who were enjoying their freedom in Christ looked down on those who insisted on having such a

strict way of faith and simply judged them as immature. They viewed them as people who “if they knew better” they would be like me. This attitude is the attitude of “when you finally learn, mature, come to the revelation I have, then of course you will act like me and be like me.”

The other side of this debate was those who are described as weaker faith who judged those who were enjoying their freedom in Christ. Robert Mounce writes in his commentary on Romans “A natural consequence of a more restricted perspective is to condemn those who are enjoying greater freedom. What is wrong for me translates quickly into what is wrong for everyone.”

To all of this Paul gives some instructions toward acceptance of one another. I believe with all of my heart that the American church needs to hear this message above every message. One of the greatest threats to the American Church and to the gospel in our culture is not those who are enemies to the gospel, although that exists. Our struggle is that those of us who confess to be followers of Jesus refuse to accept the faith of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We live in a culture that is ever more embracing the extreme and not the middle ground. We witness this on every cultural issue and in the political landscape of our nation. The church within this culture is experiencing the same division. Rarely is the division in the church over the divinity of Jesus and his Lordship.

I don't know if you have ever paid attention to our Church Covenant, but I want to read a section to you:

While we seek to teach our Baptist Heritage, we will regard all believers as the household of faith, the body of Christ.

Every time we read this I want to stop us and ask, do we realize what we are saying? Do we realize the weight of these words? We are saying that although we have convictions regarding the practice of our faith and we embrace the doctrine of our Baptist heritage, we do not regard those who follow Jesus who might not agree with us as those outside the church. We do not regard them as unchristian. Instead, we consider them brothers and sisters in Christ. We not only regard them this way, but also will seek to cooperate with them in ministry of the gospel.

How do we practice acceptance? First, we must remember there are some things that are disputable. Paul states it plainly. Accept one another without passing judgment on disputable matters. We live in a culture where there is a tendency to think there is no gray, but everything is black and white. In his book “Seeing Gray in a Black and White World”, Pastor Adam Hamilton quotes James V.

Schall who writes “The division of the world into liberal and conservative is one of most restricting developments that has ever happened to us. It has to be we are told either this way or that. Such a view makes everything very simple I suppose. But is also reduces our minds to utter fuzziness. We are required to define everything either as liberal or conservative even when the two allowable terms of definition are not adequate to explain the reality that they are intended to describe”

Hamilton adds, “Liberal and Conservative are relative terms except the most extreme among us. We are liberal relative to some people and conservative relative to others.” I might add in the church it all depends on the topic.

Yet, Paul says don't pass judgment on each other in disputable matters. The hard part of course is what is disputable. The word literally means “things that do not matter.” What are the things that do not matter? Most of the time we would say they are the things that do not matter to me, but if it matters to me then it is not disputable.

We might look at these two topics here in Romans and say well, I can see how these things do not matter. What someone eats or if they want to observe a festival or not is not enough to keep us from accepting another. However, it mattered to those in the church in Rome. It mattered a great deal. If you don't think this was emotional, then read Paul's emotional letter to the Galatians to see why Paul's being so kind and generous here in Romans calls those who want to circumcise those who come to Christ. The issue is very sensitive and it is very emotional. Paul is not saying that we don't have convictions, and that disputable matters are not important matters to us. That is not the point.

The point is even in the matters where we have convictions and we feel strongly about the matter, that matter is not the basis of our fellowship or the acceptance of one another.

What is not disputable? What is the matter that cannot be compromised? Paul tells us in verse 9 “for this reason Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and living. Here is our basis for acceptance of one another... Jesus is Lord. Jesus died and rose again and is Lord and we are all accountable to God. That is basis of fellowship.

Jesus addresses the Pharisees who wanted to make sure everyone practiced faith like them and said to them in Matthew 23 “ woe to you for your tithe your mint and dill and cumin but you neglect the weighty matters of

the law; justice, mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting others. You blind guides! You strain a gnat but swallow a camel.” There are disputable matters and then there are the matters where we cannot compromise.

If we think of both the Old Testament and New Testament, there are some of those verses that stand almost as summary verses for those who want to know what is it really about. Micah gives us one “what does the Lord require of you? To love justice, practice mercy, and walk humbly with God.” When Jesus is asked what is the greatest commandment “Love the Lord God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” Paul writes “accept each other without passing judgment on disputable matters.” And Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification.” Here is the most important one “For God so loved the world, that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever would believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Are there matters that we consider indisputable? Yes, there are sins and transgressions that are stated plainly in the scripture. We would contend that these are indisputable. However, there are other matters, which are not plainly stated and require discernment, prayer and wisdom. There are disputable matters. We can be sure of this... there is two matters which are indisputable and they are:

Jesus is Lord and God calls us to love each other.

Paul also reminds us that we are to live with conviction. Now that might sound opposite of what I have just said, but it is not. Paul is not suggesting we don't have convictions or that we live by those convictions. Paul even gives us his convictions about eating in this passage. Paul writes in verse 5 and 6 that each person considers things this way or that way, but each person should become convinced in their mind on these matters and live them out accountable to God. Later Paul writes what you believe about these things keep between yourself and God, but for the one who has doubts is condemned by his eating if his eating is not from faith. For that which is not from faith is sin.

Paul wants us to spend the time we need to spend and the mental energy that is needed to come have convictions of faith that guide our thinking and our living. Although we accept others who come to different conclusions on

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certain matters, that does not mean that these matters are unimportant and don't need our attention when it comes to us living a life accountable to God. I am not accountable to your view and considerations on certain matters... you are. You are not accountable to God for my convictions... I am. Even though we give each other the freedom that comes in love to disagree, we still are held accountable by God to let the Holy Spirit give us understanding and apply the scriptures as we are guided to do so. In the same way, I trust God to do that in your life. Since I am not your master and you are not my master and I am not your judge and you are not my judge... we can release each other to the work of the Holy Spirit. So,

I not only agree that some things are disputable. But I also agree that I am going to live my life with conviction.

The acceptance of our brothers and sisters in Christ means we need to have attitudes and actions of love. Notice that acceptance in this passage is not toleration. We accept one another on one basis and that is God has accepted the other. I do not accept you and you do not accept me with the hope that you will come around to my way of thinking. We accept each other on this basis alone... God has accepted us all.

In addition that acceptance has some action connected to it. It is not toleration. This passage is not tolerating each other because God tolerates us. It is accept each other because God has accepted us. We speak a lot about toleration in our culture especially when it comes to religious expression. We allow someone. We tolerate differences. The majority tolerates the minority. However, in the church there is not majority and minority. We are not tolerating each other we are accepting each other.

Pastor Donald Barnhouse tells a story about three men who were out at sea miles and miles from any land and the boat capsized. In the moment, one man claimed he was an expert swimmer. The other man said he was a competent swimmer, while the other said he was a beginner swimmer. The expert swimmer began to tell the others how to swim and how to stroke and how to tread water, but it really did not matter says Barnhouse. What they needed that day was not swimming lessons, but a savior... a boat. What did it really matter if you could tread water for 10 minutes or 10 hours? You were going to drown. No they all were in the same condition. They were lost, dying and in need of a savior.

So it is for all of us. We do not tolerate each other because we do not have anywhere to stand above the other. No