

## Accept One Another

Towards the end of his letter to the church in Rome, Paul gives us another one-another command to help us be the kind of people we should be. He writes, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” Well, that seems kind of obvious doesn’t it? I mean what kind of church would we be if we didn’t accept on another? Apparently we’d be a lot like the church at Rome. They had a problem doing just that. They disagreed on things that were important to them. Lets begin in Romans 14 where Paul begins talking about accepting one another.

*Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone...You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. It is written: “‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.’” So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.*

It's not hard to know what Paul is concerned about is it? Christians are not accepting one another. They are judging each other. The issue is whether or not they should obey the food laws and ceremonies in the Law of Moses. Jewish Christians felt conscience-bound to follow these dietary restrictions and holy observances. The Gentile Christians felt such restrictions and observances were optional. Paul, whose own thinking was closer to the Gentile position, still considered these things as legitimate issues, honest differences that should be treated with mutual respect.

The Roman church wrestled with the same issue that pretty much all the first century churches did, arguably the most troublesome issue in the infant church, the Jew/Gentile issue. "Must one become a Jew in order to be a Christian?" That sounds strange to us today since we belong to an overwhelmingly Gentile church. But in the first century things were different. Consider the following facts. Jesus was Jewish. Jesus' apostles were Jewish. Almost all the first Christians were Jewish. The Church's scriptures were Jewish and according to those scriptures the Jewish people were "God's elect, God's chosen." Those scriptures contained the Law of Moses given by God to the Jews. Complicating this was the powerful influence of an aggressive band of Jews known as "Judaizers" who strongly advocated that a Christian must follow Jewish teachings.

This issue was even more complex for the Roman church. There were many Jews who lived in Rome; perhaps as many as there were in Jerusalem. Jews had lived

and freely practiced their religion in Rome for almost 200 years. Trading along the Mediterranean coast made for safe and easy travel, and over the years many Jews ended up living in Rome. Undoubtedly there was a strong synagogue in Rome. And like the early days in Jerusalem when Christians generally enjoyed favor with the people, the same was probably the case in Rome. At least at first.

The Roman historian Suetonius writes that a great conflict arose among Jews over one called *Chrestus*. This conflict led Emperor Claudius to expel some 40–50 thousand Jews from Rome in 49 A.D. We learn in Acts 18 that Priscilla and Aquilla were among the exiled. With the Jews gone, the Roman church was almost entirely Gentile and probably less concerned about Jewish food laws and special days. There may also have been some ill will in the church toward the Jews, like there was in the Roman citizenry. Interestingly 50 years later this church will produce the heretic Marcion, a church leader who tried to purge all things Jewish from Christianity.

Five years after their exile from Rome, the emperor Nero allowed Jews to return. It appears there was conflict between the returning Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. They may have met in separate house churches. Paul had never visited this church, but was aware of the conflict probably by correspondence with Priscilla and Aquilla who had returned to Rome. Paul's letter to Rome re-asserts that all are saved by the grace of God, Jew and Gentile alike, and it is on that basis that Christians should accept one another.

The main dispute between these believers was whether or not to continue to observe the various requirements of the Law of Moses. Must the Gentiles begin to obey it to be a Christian? Should the Jews continue to obey it when they become a Christian? Paul's personal beliefs are clear about this throughout his writings. Christians are under the Gospel of Christ not the Law. Paul had been personally selected by Christ to be the apostle to the Gentiles and to specifically assure them that their salvation was by faith in Christ and not by obedience to Moses' law. In Paul's letter to the Galatians he expresses this with great passion. *You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace...For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.* (Gal 5: 4,6).

In Galatia the Jews oppressed the Gentiles, made them feel like outsiders unless they became Jewish. In Rome the situation was reversed. Gentiles oppressed Jews, made them feel unwelcome. Paul's teaching is clear, salvation is by grace through faith in Christ and not obedience to Jewish Law; still Paul tells these grace oriented Gentiles to back off their traditional Jewish brethren. Paul knew from personal experience how difficult it was for a devout Jew to rearrange the central furniture of one's faith in the "Holy of Holies", moving over the ark of the covenant to make room for the cross. Such holy re-decorating is not done over night. Jewish and Gentile

Christians needed each other to make this spiritual transformation. They didn't need to judge each other because they don't see things exactly the same way.

It's not that there isn't a correct position here. It's not that what one believes about these things doesn't matter. Paul is certainly clear about what he personally believes. Christians are free to eat or not eat; to observe or not observe special days. But he also recognized they were dealing with people's consciences. One man may be free to eat everything, another man may be free to eat only vegetables. But no believer is free to judge or look down on another believer. To Paul some things are more important than being correct. Christ did not accept anyone because he was correct. His standard was both simpler and harder. He expressed his standard to a very incorrect Peter after his three denials. Three times he asked Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter answered, "Lord, you know I love you." Based on those heart felt confessions, Christ accepted Peter. Why should our standards be different. *Accept one another just as Christ accepted you.*

Paul is not saying ignore one another's differences. Hardly. He tells us to exhort one another, instruct one another, admonish one another. We should do this more than we do. But Paul pleads, *Stop passing judgment on one another.* Why? Because, Paul says, only Christ is able, only Christ is qualified to do that. We are not each others' masters; we are both servants to the same master. Christ alone is able to

determine whether or not we can stand. And, as a matter of fact, Paul assures us that we will stand for the Lord is able to make us stand! (14:4)

Frankly I would have been happier if Paul had stopped right here. Don't judge me; I won't judge you. But Paul doesn't stop here. He says, *Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.* <sup>14</sup> *I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.* <sup>15</sup> *If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died* (14: 13b – 15:3).

In other words, don't just leave each other alone, be in a healthy life giving relationship with one another. Instead of just saying "my way or the highway," Paul challenges us to find a way to walk together. Paul says it must start with those whose faith gives them more freedom. Those who are free must be willing to give up that freedom. If your brother is distressed about something, be willing to give it up, unless you think your personal belief or right is more important than unity in Christ's body. Paul isn't giving permission for brethren to commit spiritual extortion. "You have to stop that because it offends me!" That is hardly "making every effort to do what leads to peace" (14:19). But if by expressing our freedom we cause another to do what he believes is wrong, then we must ask ourselves what is more important, our freedom or our brother? Why? Because the Kingdom is bigger than our individual freedom. The

kingdom is bigger than food or drink. It's about peace, righteousness, joy. A community of God's people should never lose its peace, sacrifice its joy or discard its righteousness over matters that are disputable, matters over which good and faithful people can understandably disagree. Don't destroy the work of God's Kingdom to pursue your own personal freedom. Christ didn't do that, he didn't act to please himself, he bore up even under insults even. In the next chapter Paul makes that very point. He quotes Psalm 69 as a Messianic psalm about Christ, saying, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."

Now when someone quotes a verse from the Old Testament it is not just referring to that verse but to the whole context of that verse. In Psalm 69 the servant of God is mistreated unfairly, but he willingly endures the scorn and shame. If the Messiah willingly and humbly renounces his rights and honor for the sake of God's people, then those who are "strong," and aspire to be like Christ, should be willing to give up any freedom if that is necessary for the well-being of God's people. For Paul it's more than avoiding becoming a stumbling block to someone; it's about being a stepping stone. It's more than not offending each other, it's about edifying and building each other up.

Why? Because it's not about you! It's about God. It's about his work. It's about saving a lost world. And to do that the church must have unity. Jesus said it. "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me."

Churches don't divide because they disagree; they divide because they decide that their disagreements are more important than their unity. There are some matters about which agreement is crucial. But Paul is saying to us very clearly that there are also disputable matters that are not as important as our unity, so we should not pass judgment on each other concerning disputable matters.

So, what is a disputable matter? That's disputable. But here is a general guideline. Is this matter worth destroying the unity of God's people? One of the biggest mistakes in church history is failing to understand that God's doctrine of the unity of the Body of Christ is every bit as important, if not more, as the multiple doctrines over which Christians have divided. Should we destroy the work of God for the sake of our opinion on how and when Jesus will return, or our understanding of how the Spirit works today, or whether Christians should vote or not vote, or whether a Christian can go to war and kill others, or whether or not we understand the Holy Scriptures as inspired or inerrant or infallible in all their various translations or in some but not all of them, or only in the King James Version or only in the original Greek and Hebrew documents? Shall we destroy the work of God, divide his Kingdom over our interpretation about the number of cups to be used on the communion table, or whether the cup we drink is fermented or unfermented, or whether we can serve the supper a second time on Sunday or multiple times during the week? Will we destroy the work of God over our interpretations about the particular arrangements we should make to

teach the Bible to each other, or whether or not we use musical instruments in our worship with one another, or our beliefs about whether or not a church should be led by multiple elders or a single pastor?

I could list more but surely these are enough to upset everyone. All of us have strong feelings about some of these issues and are not much concerned about others. How do we work together with differences? Paul says don't judge or disparage a brother differs with you. Don't flaunt your freedom and unnecessarily offend a brother who doesn't share that freedom. At the same time, don't impose your conscience on others and needlessly restrict a brother. Whenever you can, keep your differences between yourself and God. And do whatever you can to make peace! Does that mean that disputable matters are not important? Of course not! But when equally faithful and devoted brethren cannot immediately see eye to eye on something, what they need most is to fall back on that relationship that is based on what they both see very clearly, the Lord of their faith and devotion.

Not long ago I shared the words of a pioneer preacher from our heritage, N. L. Clark. His words, written in 1937, are still good advice. "That intelligent men can ever agree perfectly on every question that may be raised over religion is a presumption that is not supported by either human nature, human experience, or the limitation of divine revelation. Not a single case is found in Holy Writ where even inspired men were brought together long that they did not differ over something... it is

clear that fellowship in the Lord's work must be based upon a few fundamental things. These things make us babes in Christ and leave us to grow to manhood by feeding upon the Lord's provisions to that end. In this period of growth, the Lord does not feed all exactly the same menu every day... New Testament Christians were disciples... learners of Christ. They were not supposed, even under inspiration, to know all things...[Paul] admonishes Timothy to study, and Peter exhorts brethren to desire the sincere milk of the word that they might grow hereby (1 Pet. 2:2). With such instruction before us, it seems strange so many would insist upon making their ideas of doubtful questions tests of fellowship with others."

Clark is only echoing the wisdom of a forefather in our Restoration Movement, Thomas Campbell who wrote the Declaration and Address, a major document of our spiritual heritage. In it are 13 propositions and the 6<sup>th</sup> proposition expresses the same sentiment as Clark. "That although inferences and deductions from Scripture premises, when fairly inferred, may be truly called the doctrine of God's holy word, yet they are not formally binding upon the consciences of Christians farther than they perceive the connection, and evidently see that they are so; for their faith must not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power and veracity of God. Therefore, no such deductions can be made terms of communion, but do properly belong to the after and progressive edification of the Church. Hence, it is evident that no such deductions or inferential truths ought to have any place in the Church's confession."

I remain persuaded by my father's words, "Nothing that divides us is as important as the blood shed that makes us one." I pray that before we would ever allow any issue to divide us we would make every effort to work out our differences. And if we were unable to do that and like Paul and Barnabas felt we must go our separate ways, it would be with tearful confessions of our ineptness rather than confident shouts of our correctness. I praise God that he has blessed us in this place with a long and abiding unity and a love for one another. Our motto at Quaker comes from our restoration heritage and it is a good one. "In matters of faith, unity. In matters of opinion, liberty. In everything, love." Or as Paul expressed as he closed his letter to the Romans, *May the God who gives endurance & 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. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.* (Rom 15:5-7).