

Unity

BELIEVERS PROMOTE UNITY BY ACCEPTING
AND EDIFYING ONE ANOTHER.

While teaching at Golden Gate Seminary, I was interim pastor of a small church in Northern California. One Sunday, a new family who had recently moved from Southern California visited the church. The husband was very friendly, but the wife seemed a little reserved. Eventually, they joined the church. Several months later, I learned why the wife had seemed so standoffish to begin with.

The previous church the couple had joined seemed a good fit for them—friendly, evangelical, Bible-believing, if a little more conservative than they were accustomed to. All went well until one day a couple of the elders of the church asked to meet with them about a “serious matter.” It turned out that the wife had been caught in a public act of sin. She was seen by an elder’s wife wearing slacks in public.

Thinking back, the couple realized that they had never seen a woman wearing slacks at church but had not realized that the church had declared that women wearing slacks at church or in the community was a sin. The wife agreed to only wear dresses at church but continued to wear slacks elsewhere. She saw no problem with it. But some of the elders continued to complain and eventually condemn her publicly. Ultimately, the elders censured the couple and expelled them from the church.

I understand churches encouraging godly behavior. I have more trouble understanding why a church would treat a minor matter as if it determined a person’s salvation. Fortunately, patience with new believers and tolerance regarding matters not central to the faith have been the norm in my Christian experience.

In the passage we will study today, Paul urged the church to avoid making a major issue out of minor matters. Rather than focus on winning arguments, he urged believers to treat others with love, maintain the unity of the fellowship, and find ways to build up one another in the faith. Let’s read what Paul wrote and see how it can apply to our churches today.

Romans 14:1-15:13

Many of Paul's comments in his letters are generic enough that they could be directed to any church. But in Romans 14, Paul addressed an issue that seems to reflect some specific knowledge of goings on in the church in Rome. Apparently, conflict had arisen over the matter of what Christians were allowed to eat and what, if anything, they should abstain from. In some ways this problem was similar to that experienced by the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 8-10).

Christian communal meals, conducted for whatever reason, were complicated by the merging of Jewish and Gentile believers into one body. Some Jews felt strongly about honoring the dietary regulations in the law and in their traditions even after they became Christians (Acts 10:9-16; 15:19-21; Gal. 2:11-14). Also, many Christians, both Jewish and Gentile, debated the proper way to deal with sacrifices and meals held in the temples of pagan gods. Should they completely avoid meals in pagan temples, even those held by their guilds? Did it matter that the temple was just a building to Christians who did not believe in or worship idols? And was food associated with pagan worship and then sold to the public marketplaces polluted and to be avoided (1 Cor. 8:10; 10:25-29)?

The controversies that cropped up in some early Christian congregations related to food were to some extent theological. And Paul addressed the theological realities directly and decisively. Christians do not have to observe Jewish dietary regulations (Gal. 2:14-16), and idols are not real gods so food related to their worship is not tainted (1 Cor. 8:4,8).

Yet not all believers agreed with Paul. And even some who agreed in theory had not matured to the level that they were comfortable aligning their actions with their new beliefs (v. 7). As a result, the problem was not just theological. It was also relational. How should Jewish and Gentile Christians holding to differing beliefs but now in one fellowship treat one another? Also, how should the mature believer and the new and immature Christian (who still struggled with their pre-Christian beliefs and practices) treat one another?

The theology is important. But do differing convictions, especially on secondary matters like food, justify believers judging or ridiculing one another? Disdain for other believers is not consistent with Christian love. Ridicule tears down rather than builds up the fellowship. Paul stressed both theological truth and Christian love. So, let's read what he had to say about this theological/relational problem and its solution.

Disagreement (Rom. 14:5-8)

Christians should love one another. And genuine love should preclude believers mistreating one another (13:8-10). In addition, believers should live according to God's light, not in darkness, fully aware that a day of judgment is coming (vv. 11-14). Thus, mature believers should be guided both by Christian love and by Christian wisdom—especially when disagreements arise in the church.

VERSE 5

One person judges one day to be more important than another day. Someone else judges every day to be the same. Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind.

After addressing the disagreement that the weak and the strong had regarding eating meat (vv. 1-4), Paul addressed the dispute they were having regarding holy days. One party in the debate **judges one day to be more important than another day**. Someone else **judges every day to be the same**. Most scholars assume that Paul had important Jewish days in mind like the Sabbath or any number of other Jewish holy days. Some Jewish Christians did insist that followers of Jesus must observe Jewish law and customs, which would have included the observance of holy days. But Paul saw such teachings as a threat to the gospel and reacted to that kind of legalism much more harshly than we see in this passage (Gal. 4:10-11; Col. 2:16-17).

Other believers, Paul observed, consider *every day to be the same*. This comment need not imply a religious indifference, especially if the person was asserting that every day belongs to the Lord. A believer holding that every day is the same could easily assert that holy days may be observed, but that no day is more sacred than any other, since meaning is not found on a calendar, but in a daily commitment to the Lord.

Interestingly, Paul did not pass judgment on either of the two groups. Rather he asserted that both convictions are acceptable, as long as they are expressions of the individual's commitment to the Lord. Each person, whichever camp they fall into, should act as one **fully convinced in his own mind**. A Christian's behavior should be consistent with his or her commitment to Christ. It should not be rote or routine but a thoughtful and intentional effort to honor God. A person acting with such intent should be appreciated, not judged or ridiculed.

VERSE 6

Whoever observes the day, observes it for the honor of the Lord. Whoever eats, eats for the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; and whoever does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat it, and he gives thanks to God.

Describing his understanding of the actions of the Roman believers, Paul asserted that **whoever** [“the one who,” ESV] **observes the day** and **whoever eats** does so **for the Lord** and **gives thanks to God**. Similarly, **whoever does not eat it** the meat at issue also **gives thanks to God**. While not mentioning the one who considers “every day to be the same” (v. 5), the flow of Paul’s argument assumes that this person too acts as he or she does in service to the Lord.

Again, Paul did not pronounce one act correct and the other an error. He focused, rather, on the intent of the person and their conviction that they were acting in a way that honors God. Such devotion is laudable. Even though Paul himself may have believed that the beliefs of one of these groups were wrong (1 Cor. 8:8), he did not ridicule them, but respected their determination to live in a way that they felt was dictated by their faith.

VERSES 7-8

For none of us lives for himself, and no one dies for himself. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

Believers experience life and death as children of God. Death for the believer is not the end of life and is not a solo experience. We leave this life with our hand in God’s hand as we walk with Him into life eternal. No believer **dies for** [or “to,” ESV] **himself**. For death marks a transition in the believer’s experiencing of God, not the end of their relationship with Him.

Paul drove his point home with parallel statements. **If we live, we live for the Lord**. At the same time, **if we die, we die for the Lord**. Therefore, whatever tomorrow holds, life or death, we belong to the Lord. Given this fact, a person’s devotion to the Lord should shape his or her entire existence. And actions that express that devotion are honorable. Even if we consider the actions of another misguided, when that person is seeking to genuinely honor and serve God we can respect and encourage his or her faithfulness while depending on God to lead him or her into all truth.



Explore Further

Read “Food Offered to Idols” on page 584 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What kind of practices that are not really central to the faith might believers disagree about today, and how should they deal with their disagreements?

Accountability (Rom. 14:9-12)

Judging others in the matters of food or holy days implies the authority to pass judgment. But ultimately the only real authority, and the only one whose judgment matters, is God. Christians may remind one another of what God has commanded and expects of faithful followers. But they should never act as if they are the final authority. For everyone, the “weak” and the “strong,” ultimately must give account to God, including an account of how they have treated their brothers and sisters in Christ.

VERSE 9

Christ died and returned to life for this: that he might be Lord over both the dead and the living.

Paul used the statement **Christ died and returned to life** as the basis for a new argument warning Christians against thinking that judging others was their job. The resurrected Christ, he reminded them, is **Lord over both the dead and the living**.

Paul’s statement echoes the resurrected Jesus’s own assertion, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18) and the early Christian hymn found in Paul’s letter to the Philippians (Phil. 2:5-11). Since Jesus is Lord and Judge, Paul’s argument implies believers ought not act as if they have the authority to judge one another.

VERSE 10

But you, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

Since Jesus is Lord and Judge of all, then Paul asked, **why do you [presume to] judge your brother or sister?** This question seems to be

aimed at the weak in faith since they are the ones judging the believers who eat whatever they please (14:3). Paul's second question was aimed at the strong (15:1), **why do you despise your brother or sister?** The temptation of the strong was to "look down on" (14:3) the brother or sister weaker in faith.

Both actions, judging and despising, presume an authority that the believer does not possess. For ultimately all believers will **stand before the judgment seat of God** (2 Cor. 5:9-11). Paul described the target of judgment as *your brother or sister* in the faith. He clearly did not consider the disputes he was addressing as fundamental questions impacting the gospel or an individual's salvation. They were secondary matters which might be meaningful but were not crucial enough to justify fracturing the Christian family.

VERSES 11-12

For it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give praise to God. So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Referencing Isaiah 45:23, Paul reminded the church that **the Lord** Himself asserted that ultimately **every knee will bow** to Him and **every tongue will give praise**. Bowing the knee and giving praise both acknowledge the supreme authority of **God**.

Just as all will acknowledge God's authority, so too they must also **give an account of himself to God**. This judgment refers not to our salvation but rather to a judgment based on our deeds and stewardship of our God-given responsibilities (1 Cor. 3:10-15). Both the judgmental Christian and the dismissive Christian might think they are pointing out the errors of others. But both exhibit a harshness toward others that lacks love, fractures the unity and peace of the fellowship, and fails to build up the church.



Explore Further

Read "Judging" on page 939 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Scripture affirms the need for value judgments but also condemns judging as inappropriate and destructive. How would you distinguish between the two?

Love (Rom. 14:13-18)

Believers ought to act in a way that they believe honors God whom they serve. And when Christians disagree how to do this, they should respect the intent of others to serve God and leave the judging of their actions to the Lord who will judge all (vv. 10-12). But more than simply tolerating others in the church, believers are to love them and treat them accordingly.

VERSE 13

Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister.

Therefore alludes to the teachings just given (vv. 1-12), asserting that believers should **no longer judge one another**. The “weak” had been judging others, condemning others’ actions regarding food and holy days. But the “strong” had also judged the “weak” by looking down on their scruples. Paul urged both camps to stop criticizing one another and start treating others in a loving (v. 15) and uplifting (v. 19) way.

Instead of judging others, believers should intentionally **decide** that they would stop acting in ways that cause problems for others. The word translated *decide* is the same as the word translated *judge*. Paul was using a play on the word to urge his readers to stop judging others and instead judge their own actions.

Christians should judge it improper to place a **stumbling block** or **pitfall** in the way of another believer. The placement of such things implies an intentional effort to cause or catch someone in an error and justify judging them. Such actions are the opposite of welcoming (14:1; 15:7), loving (14:15), and building up (v. 19) others in the church.

VERSE 14

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. Still, to someone who considers a thing to be unclean, to that one it is unclean.

Paul explained that he himself was **persuaded in the Lord Jesus** that nothing which a person eats **is unclean in itself** (Matt. 15:11; Rom. 14:2). The weak genuinely believed that eating meat sacrificed to idols was a sin. And **to someone who considers a thing to be unclean**, then for them **it is unclean**. In other words, if the weak did eat something they

considered unclean simply to please the strong, they would be violating their conscience and violating what they believe to be God's will for them. The strong should not push the weak to imitate them if the weak could not eat with a clear conscience.

VERSE 15

For if your brother or sister is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy, by what you eat, someone for whom Christ died.

For refers back to the argument just made, and on that basis, argues that **if** because of food another believer **is hurt**, then the person causing the hurt is not **walking according to love**.

The strong ignoring or insulting the scruples of the weak is damaging to the weak. And willfully doing damage is not an act consistent with Christian love. **Do not destroy someone for whom Christ died**, Paul urged, for something as relatively unimportant as food.

VERSE 16

Therefore, do not let your good be slandered,

Paul's follow-up exhortation, **Do not let your good be slandered**, may be understood several ways depending on what *good* we think Paul meant. If the *good* is the liberty of the strong, then Paul was asserting that they should avoid forcing it on the weak and causing a critical reaction. But if Paul's comment was addressed to both groups, then the *good* could be the commitment each group holds that is *slandered* by the other group as the dispute rages on. Some also argue that the *good* could refer to the gospel which is slandered by non-Christians as they observe the conflict disrupting a church which supposedly teaches love.

VERSES 17-18

for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever serves Christ in this way is acceptable to God and receives human approval.

Paul next reminded his readers that in addition to love, believers' behavior should be in accord with the principals and priorities of **the kingdom of God**. Judging others, demeaning others, and engaging in conflicts to justify oneself and prove others wrong on minor matters may be the way

of the world, but the people of God ought not be known for such behavior. God did not call His people together so they could argue about **eating** and **drinking** without regard for the impact of their bickering.

The people of God should be known for **righteousness, peace, and joy** inspired by **the Holy Spirit** who indwells them all. The person who **serves Christ** by exhibiting Christian love, by doing what God declares is right, by promoting harmony in the church, and inspiring joy rather than anxiety and conflict **is acceptable to God**.

Such Spirit-inspired, Christ-serving, God-pleasing behavior also properly **receives human approval**. Paul had already warned the church that judging and demeaning one another (14:3) risked causing their “good” to be “slandered” (v. 16). The slander came because of the critical and unloving way they expressed their disagreements. But by acting in accord with the values of the kingdom of God their actions would please God and also receive the respect of people observing them.



Explore Further

Treating others in a loving way can be a challenge, especially in the midst of a disagreement. Pray about how love behaves when it is offering instruction, when it is exercising tolerance, when it is seeking peace, and

- when it desires to build up others rather than simply win an argument.

Edification (Rom. 14:19-20)

Disagreements over matters like food or holy days may seem inevitable in a church made up of converted Jews and Gentiles. But such disagreements ought not lead to behavior that harms others and displeases God. Rather than cultivating a critical spirit, believers should behave in ways that reflect a Spirit-inspired love for God and for others.

VERSE 19

So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another.

So then likely points back to the truths about the kingdom of God (vv. 17-18). Kingdom values, not human quibbling, should characterize

Christian actions. So, Paul urged the church, **let us pursue what promotes peace**. *Pursue* is a strong word implying intentional, rapid, and decisive action. *Peace* in this context focuses on the harmony that should exist between believers. Paul also urged the church to *pursue* that which **builds up one another**. Church members should stop tearing down one another and their church by judging or looking down on others in their fellowship. Believers should seek to help one another grow in the Lord, not just win arguments. Thus, in light of their common faith, Paul was urging believers to work toward maintaining healthy and positive relationships with others in the church, even with those with whom they have disagreements.

VERSE 20

Do not tear down God’s work because of food. Everything is clean, but it is wrong to make someone fall by what he eats.

Do not tear down God’s work because of food. Don’t fight and fracture the fellowship over things that are not really all that important. God is at work in each Christian, and unnecessary criticism or ridicule from other believers could sidetrack his or her growth. God is at work in the church, and argumentative, critical spirits can harm both the church’s fellowship and its reputation.

Everything is clean alludes back to the assertion that no food pollutes a person (v. 14). But even given this truth, **it is wrong to make someone fall by what he eats**. *Fall* is the same word used for a “stumbling block” earlier in Paul’s argument (v. 13). Some understand this as a prohibition against the strong causing the weak to *fall* or stumble. But *what he eats* seems to point to the actions of the strong. They were the ones who were eating the supposedly unclean food. The ambiguity in the sentence likely means that Paul intended the teaching to apply to both groups.



Explore Further

Read “Edification” on page 459–460 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Edifying others implies that some behaviors are constructive and other actions are destructive in the church. Reflect on examples of each that you have seen, and pray about how to edify others even in the context of a disagreement.
