

GOD'S WAY PRODUCES UNITY AMONG BELIEVERS

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Churches sometimes allow themselves to be divided over non-moral issues, such as diverse nationalities, youth activities, children's church replacing family church, building decisions, music, clothes, head coverings, and the list goes on and on. Now some of these things may lead to moral issues, but churches can avoid divisions if they follow the instructions that Paul gave in Romans 14-16.

First, he counselled believers to keep the unity of the church in mind as they dealt with the non-moral issues that threatened to divide sincere believers (14:1-15:13). Second, he told how he had ministered successfully among the Gentiles establishing churches in eastern Europe (15:14-33). He led the churches he established in Macedonia and Achaia to raise a monetary gift to relieve the poverty of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. He did this to unite Jewish and Gentile believers. Third, he warned believers to mark and avoid those that cause divisions in the churches (16:17-20).

I. Paul's Counsel about Non-Moral Issues — 14:1-15:13

A. Believers Need a Correct Attitude: Love and Not Judge — 14:1-12

1. The practice expected — 14: 1

14:1 — Paul dealt with the two kinds of believers, the strong and the weak. The weaker ones had not yet realized their full liberty in Christ (cf. 14:14). The issues involved were not against clear Scriptural teaching, like the Judaizers that claimed circumcision was necessary for salvation (Gal 5:2). The weaker brothers embraced doctrines concerning the eating of some kinds of meats and the observing of some holy days. It is quite possible that the weaker believers were Jewish converts but it is not so stated. The problem of the weaker believers was not their salvation, but certain practices concerning their liberty in Christ. The strong Christians were exhorted to warmly welcome these weaker ones into their fellowship as equals without any indication that they were unwanted or inferior. They were not to argue over their opinions. That would be unprofitable.

2. The problem explained — 14:2-5

14:2 — The first example of a non-moral issue that Paul cites is the eating of certain meats. The weaker Christians believed that some meats were unclean, but the stronger Christians believed it was all right to eat pork, rabbit and shrimp. Doctrinally, the stronger ones were correct (1 Tim 4:3-4), but they were not to discriminate against the weaker ones who were still concerned about the unclean meats identified in the Law.

14:3 — Both the weak and strong believers had to be careful to exhibit a Christ-like attitude on this issue. The strong believers were not to despise (be snobbish, look down upon) the weaker ones. The weaker believers needed time to grow in the liberty Christ provided. Likewise, the weaker ones were not to judge (pass judgment on) the liberty that the stronger ones already accepted by faith. That would be contrary to Paul's teaching (8:33-34). He was forbidden to judge because the Lord had received both the weak and the strong.

14:4 — Paul cites the master-servant relationship to illustrate and clarify his teaching in v. 3. Servants are responsible to their own master and, therefore, it is unwise for another to meddle in those affairs. Each member is responsible to the Lord. Contrary to the thinking of the weak or the strong, both were upheld by the Lord.

14:5 — A second example of a non-moral issue is the observance of special days. The weak observed certain days and considered them more holy than others. This probably referred to certain observances of feast days and the Sabbath. The strong believers esteemed each day as a holy day in which they were to worship and serve Christ. The weak did not realize yet that the feast days, as well as the meats, were mere shadows of the body of Christ (Col 2:16-17). Since Christ has come, believers are to focus on Him in their worship of God, not on the days and meats. But it was most important that they honored Christ in the position and loved each other.

3. The principle expressed — 14:6-12

14:6-7 — The principle to be followed in these matters is that believers must live their lives unto the Lord and give Him thanks. Christians are not a law unto themselves, but each one should live to please the Lord. This principle should moderate and control each believer's conduct.

14:8-9 — The reason Christians should not live unto themselves is that they belong to the Lord. Whether they are alive or dead, they are the Lord's. He is the Lord of both the living and the dead. Therefore, Christ is the Head of both the weak and the strong. This important truth should keep the strong believers from despising the weak ones and the weak believers from judging the strong ones.

14:10-12 — It is really presumptuous on the part of either the weak or the strong to judge one another regarding these non-moral issues. Why? Because judgment in these matters is actually usurping Christ's role as Judge (v. 10; Jn 5:22-23, 27). Notice, Paul referred to Christ as God to support his position ("Christ" - v.10; "God"- vv.11-12). So, on these non-moral issues, believers are not to judge one another. Strong believers can lovingly attempt to teach the weak ones, but they must not pressure them to live according to their opinions. Since these issues were not essential to their salvation or sanctification; the strong had to be patient with the weak and the weak had to be respectful of the strong.

B. Believers Need a Correct Conduct: Love and Not Offend — 14:13-23

1. The principle announced — 14:13-14

14:13 — The strong believers are told to be careful not to put a stumbling block in the way of weaker believers and cause them to fall into sin. How could this happen? If weak believers are pressured to act contrary to their faith, they have stumbled into sin (14:23). Therefore, it would be wrong to try to persuade weaker believers to do something before they are certain the Scriptures give them liberty to do it. Therefore, the strong have a serious spiritual responsibility to deal patiently with the weak regarding non-moral issues. Therefore, strong Christians must have sufficient Scriptural support for their liberty in Christ that they can share with the weak Christians. This will build their faith so they do not sin.

14:14 — Paul is convinced that the strong believers are correct in their understanding of the liberty they have in Christ. Paul declared that no food is unclean in and of itself (cf. 1 Tim 4:4; Col 1:16). However, the food is unclean to the brother who is not convinced otherwise by Scripture.

2. The principle applied — 14:15-23

14:15-18 — Several principles are given in these verses which warn the strong in the practice of their liberty. First, love (charity), not liberty, should be uppermost in their treatment of fellow believers (v. 15). The weak cannot lose their salvation, but their Christian life can be seriously impaired by unloving strong believers. Love causes the strong to build up the faith of the weak. It keeps them from asserting undue pressure on the weak until they are able to grasp the truth in God's Word (1 Cor 6:12; 13:4-7). The task of the Holy Spirit is to lead our minds and hearts to the truth (Jn 14:26; 16:13).

Second, the strong must be careful that their liberty, which is good, does not have an evil effect upon the weak (v. 16). They must not be dogmatic in non-essential matters.

Third, the strong must capture the spirit of the kingdom of God; it is not the food they can eat or the days they can worship God. It is righteousness, peace and joy that God gives to them (v. 17). Righteousness is right conduct, peace is the contentment that accompanies godliness (1 Tim 6:6, Phil 4:7), and joy is the result of a free conscience in the center of God's will. These come as a result of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22, 23). We cannot live for ourselves alone, but we must consider the spiritual lives of other believers. Believers that are led of the Spirit of God will gladly and willingly forego personal gratification for the spiritual gain of all the believers in the local church. The local church needs to function well as the body of Christ.

14:19-20 — Two more principles will guide the strong so they do not offend the weak. First, they need to follow the path of peace in their lives. They should make a decision not to offend those who do not agree with them in non-moral matters (James 3:14-18).

Second, the strong should be concerned with the edification of others in the church, not the gratification of being free. Edification is building up believers by teaching them in a loving manner. That means their love for the weak will limit their liberty in eating all kinds of meat. They must not allow their liberty to destroy the work of God (v. 20).

14:21-22 — The strong should not exercise their liberty when they know it will offend some weak believers. They know that God has given them liberty, but they also know that they will condemn themselves if they use their liberty, when they know it may offend the weak and cause them to fall into sin. However, they will discover true happiness if they sacrifice their liberty to avoid offending the weak.

14:23 — The weak, likewise, are warned not to eat certain kinds of meat with doubt. If they eat without faith they are condemned. This does not mean they lose their salvation and are condemned to Hell. It means that they are condemned by their conscience by eating food without faith in God's provision. The conscience is a judicial faculty that God has put in us. It is intended to help us to make right decisions. If the weak begins to violate his conscience in these non-moral issues, he will soon violate it in other areas. He must act according to his conscience or it is sin. This recognizes the fact that the conscience can be changed as new knowledge is gained.

C. Believers Need a Correct Motive: Love and Edify — 15:1-13

1. The principle explained — 15:1-2

15:1-2 — Strong believers have a responsibility toward the weak, based on their love for them (14:15), to build them up (edification) in the liberty available to them. If the strong care only for themselves, the weak believers will never be able to mature as they should and there will be schism in the body (Gal 6:1-2). The principle: we must not please ourselves, but please our neighbors (12:3, 10; 14:10). Gently work with the weak until they grasp the liberty that Christ offers them.

2. The principle exemplified — 15:3-13

15:3-4 — Paul used Christ as the perfect example to follow in these matters. He willingly took the reproaches of the ungodly against His Father and let them fall on Him (Ps 69:9; Jn 8:29). How much more then ought strong believers be concerned for the weak who are in Christ. Paul indicates that strong believers have some lessons to learn in their responsibility to edify the weak. They can learn two important features found in the Old Testament Scriptures: patience and comfort. Patience is steadfast endurance while comfort rests in the hope of God's promises.

15:5-6 — Paul turns the attention of the strong to the God of endurance (meaning of patience) and comfort. He would enable them to endure in their work with the weak until

they found His comfort in thinking alike as good followers of Jesus Christ. There would be two results by following this procedure. First, they would agree with each other with one mind. Second, they would glorify God together with their mouths.

15:7 — "Wherefore" — Refers back to Paul's original exhortation: "Him that is weak in the faith receive" (14:1). The strong were to receive the weak as Christ received them. They were unclean, hateful, rebellious, obnoxious sinners to Christ, but He invited them to come to Him (Mt 11:28-30). The strong were much worse than the weak believers that they were to receive. Christ received them to bring glory to God. So, strong believers are exhorted to follow Christ's example and receive the weak to bring glory to God.

15:8 — Christ came as a servant of the Jews ("circumcision") to fulfill or to make possible the fulfillment of the promises made to the fathers, especially to Abraham, but also to Isaac and Jacob (Gal 3:16-29). This has several implications. First, it proves that God was intent in keeping His promises to Israel. Second, it was to remind the Gentiles of the privileged position of the Jews in God's plan. Third, it should cause the Gentiles to realize they are the benefactors of the promises made to the Jews until they repent (Rom 11:13-23). Fourth, this should cause the Jewish Christians (probably the weak in this context) to realize that God accepted the Gentiles by their faith in Christ without observing their ceremonial laws, so He will accept Jews in the church without keeping these laws. Hence, the Jew and Gentile believers in Christ should unite as members in His church and no longer be divided. The church is not Israel, so the ceremonial laws of Israel do not apply to the church. The Jewish and Gentile believers need to be one in Christ, destroying all schisms in the church.

15:9-12 — These verses contain a number of Old Testament references to show that God had a plan for the Gentiles as well as the Jews before Christ came. Notice the progression in the elevation of the Gentiles from being subjects of mercy (11: 9; Ps 18:49), to being participants in Israel's blessing (11:10; Deut 32:43), to having a relationship with God apart from Israel (11:11-12; Ps 117:1 and Isa 11:10).

15:13 — Paul expressed his desire for the God of hope to bless all believers. What is this hope? It is the coming of Jesus Christ Who will bless us with joy and peace. How can we receive joy and peace now? It is received by believing Christ is coming to reign over all nations on earth and we will reign with Him (Rev 3:21). This should cause us to abound in this hope by the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us.

II. Paul's Personal Ministry to the Church in Rome — 15:14-16:27

A. His Personal Message to This Church — 15:14-33

1. His commitment to them — 15:14-16

15:14-15 — Paul was convinced about the goodness and knowledge of this church so that its members were able to instruct one another. However, he felt it was necessary to remind them of some of the things he had written earlier in this letter, because he had been given the grace of God to minister to the Gentiles, which included their church (11:13; Eph 3:8).

15:16 — Paul's ministry from Christ was to preach the Gospel of God among the Gentiles. His priestly work was to present an offering to God that pleased Him. This offering is viewed in two ways. First, he gave the Gospel of God to the Gentiles who were sanctified (made holy) by the work of the Spirit. These Gentiles were given as a holy offering to God that was acceptable to Him. Second, Paul gave the Gospel of God to the Gentiles that was done in Jerusalem. Now Paul exhorted the Gentile believers to bless the poor Jews in Jerusalem with a large monetary offering acceptable to God (more details in comments on 15:25-29). It is

noteworthy that this offering was being collected in Corinth when Paul was there writing this letter to the Roman church. Both views are possible, but the second view is more plausible.

2. His work among the Gentiles — 15:17-22

15:17-19 — He gave glory to Christ for the work he had done in his service to God. He would only take credit for what he had said and done to lead Gentiles to obey God. The Spirit had given him power to perform signs and wonders in his ministry.

15:20-21 — It had been his goal to preach the Gospel where people had not heard of Christ as is stated in Isaiah 52:15.

15:22 — His work of preaching the Gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum (northwest of Macedonia), which would include his extensive work among the Gentiles in Macedonia and Achaia. His missionary work kept him from spending any time with the believers in Rome.

3. His plan to visit them — 15:23-29

15:23-24 — Since he had finished his work in Asia (modern day Turkey) and southeast Europe, he planned to visit the church in Rome on his way to preach the Gospel in Spain. He longed to visit the believers in Rome and hoped they would assist him in his journey to Spain.

15:25-29 — Paul was still in Achaia at Corinth when he wrote this letter. He had made his final collection of money from the Gentile believers in Macedonia and Achaia for the poor believers in Jerusalem. Paul wanted to use this gift to heal a division between the Jewish and the Gentile believers. The Gentiles had received the Gospel from the Jews through Paul's ministry and now the Jews could receive a gift from the Gentiles. Paul hoped that this monetary love gift would cause the Jewish believers to love the Gentile believers in return. He was about to start his trip to Jerusalem with a group of men and when his task was finished in Jerusalem, he would go to Rome on his way to Spain. He was certain that he would come to them with a heart full of blessing from the Gospel of Christ. He strongly believed this love gift in time of need and acts of mercy would help unite these believers.

4. His request for prayer — 15:30-33

Paul asked the believers in Rome to strive together with him in prayer for three things.

First, that he be delivered from unbelieving Jews in Judea that hated him. Second, that this gift from the Gentile believers would be accepted by the Jewish leaders. Third, that he might come to them with joy by God's will and be refreshed with them.

B. His Personal Matters — 16:1-27

1. His greetings to friends — 16:1-16

Paul had many friends in Rome that he knew by name, even though he had never visited that church. He knew many of them in his evangelistic and church planting work.

2. His warning to believers — 16:17-20

16:17-18 — Paul gives a clear warning to these believers of imminent danger. Some false teachers would attempt to get into their church and with fair speeches teach false doctrine to deceive the unsuspecting believers. They do not serve the Lord, but their own sinful desires (Phil 3:18-19; 1 Tim 6:3-5). These false teachers are to be marked and avoided.

16:19 — These Roman believers had an excellent testimony. No doubt this is why Satan would send them false teachers to destroy their testimony. Paul wanted them to be wise regarding the good, but innocent regarding the evil.

16:20 — Paul assured them that Satan was going to be defeated soon by God's work through them.

3. Greetings from Paul's companions — 16:21-24

Eight men plus the whole church at Corinth sent their greetings to the church in Rome.

4. Doxology — 16:25-27

Paul concludes his letter to the church at Rome with the encouragement that God is able to establish them in their Christian lives according to three means.

16:25 — "According to my Gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ" – The power to establish believers is Jesus Christ. When Paul referred to "my Gospel," he was not arrogant, claiming his Gospel was superior. No, his Gospel was the message God revealed to him that he proclaimed to the unsaved and saved in the churches he planted. The letter to the church in Rome was the message of Christ he preached to deliver the unsaved from death (6:23) and the saved from defeat (7:24-25).

16:25-26 — "According to the revelation of the mystery" – The mystery is not clearly identified, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ is most likely. Paul refers to several mysteries in his letters (truths hidden in past ages are now revealed), but only one other mystery reference in Romans (11:25). This mystery refers the present blindness of Israel to the Gospel, which would continue until the fullness of saved Gentiles has been reached. This seems to be the mystery that Paul had in mind. This does not mean only Gentiles will be saved at this time, but it would explain why so many more Gentiles were being saved than Jews. The nation of Israel will be saved after the Tribulation. Then it will be the nation Christ uses to rule the Gentile nations.

16:26 — "According to the commandment of the eternal God" – Refers to the Great Commission making the Gospel of Christ known to all nations to be obeyed by faith. This also would encourage them to evangelize the Gentiles in Rome by God's power.

Paul concludes his doxology giving three thoughts about God.

16:27 — God is the only One Who is altogether wise. "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God" (11:33). His wisdom and foreknowledge enabled Him to make a perfect plan before He created the world to glorify Himself. To do this, He foreordained His Son to die for our sins before He created the world (1 Pet 1:19-20). By His wisdom and foreknowledge, He allowed sinners to freely receive or reject His Son as their Savior (Jn 3:36) without jeopardizing His sovereign plan because He knew what they would do. He predestined, called, justified, and glorified those that He knew would receive Jesus as their Savior (8:29-30).

God's wisdom and foreknowledge were at work when He called Cyrus the great His shepherd for Israel. God knew Cyrus would be favorable to Israel and let the Jews be free to return to Jerusalem to rebuild His temple. He knew this in eternity past when He put Cyrus in His sovereign plan that cannot be changed. He kept this fact a secret until He revealed it to Isaiah almost 200 years before Cyrus captured Babylon. Isaiah recorded God's call of Cyrus by name to prove to Cyrus that He was the true God (read Isa 44:28-45:6). If we submit to God's amazing wisdom and foreknowledge as revealed in the Scriptures, He will draw believers together.

"Through Jesus Christ" — The Greek text has this phrase directly after the wisdom of God, which shows the wisdom of God is exhibited through Jesus Christ. In Him "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3). Christ can unify us.

"Be glory forever. Amen" — Jesus prayed before He went to the cross that His Father might glorify Him with the glory that He had with Him before the world was created (Jn 17:5). He had emptied Himself of that glory when He left Heaven to become a man to pay the penalty for our sins (Phil 2:7). After His ascension He became the brightness of His Father's glory (Heb 1:3). After His rule of the earth for 1000 years, He will give all glory to His Father (1 Cor 15:24-28) so that "of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to Whom be glory forever" (11:36). Christ's submission to His Father is the submission we need to give each other for harmony in the churches.