

Introduction

Strife is running rampant through the streets of the world. Contention has embroiled the nations of Myanmar and Afghanistan. In Myanmar the military has seized control and is brutalizing the citizens who are in their way, including many Christians. Afghanistan is the poster country right now for unimaginable atrocities which arise as the Taliban rough shod over everyone in their way. Strife runs rampant in the streets of cities in America. In our own city murder is almost an everyday occurrence. Conflict abounds nationwide as Americans dispute over who is going to influence government and culture. Most workplaces are marked by contention. In society a fierce battle rages between those who believe everyone ought to be required to be vaccinated and those who think nobody ought to get the vaccine. Contention is everywhere . . . in families, in marriages, in the city, in the country. And where contention rages, there lines of division have been drawn. These lines divide and separate and pit groups against one another. Sadly, very sadly, many churches and Christian denominations have fallen prey to the rupture of division as well. Realistically those divisions sometimes must occur. Yet, very often divisions in the church are shameful and bring dishonor to Christ. With the intensification of contention in the atmosphere of where we live, it is important for followers of Christ to pay fresh attention to what the Bible says about unity among the people of God. Our focal text is going to be select verses from Romans 14 (1-4; 10-12; 17-19).

[Read Text and Pray]

Unity should be among the defining characteristics of every church which identifies itself with the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a matter which we may overlook, especially if we are passionate in our opinions. However, the scriptures point out that Christian unity is highly significant. My aim this morning is to explain and promote the beauty and value of Christian unity and to equip us with knowledge to be able to cultivate and preserve unity in Grace Community Church even while we live in a world that is at each other's throats.

I. God Values Our Unity.

When we look to the scriptures, the Lord makes it clear that the unity of his people is a blessed thing. It pleases the Lord and he blesses in the context of unity. Disunity among his people is destructive and displeasing.

A. Psalm 133 declares:

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!

It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life evermore.

It is pleasant when brothers dwell in unity. That we can well attest. You know it is just a joyful, stress-relieving, and welcoming environment when brothers and sisters in Christ are of the same mind. It is a soothing balm like anointing oil. It is also refreshing. It is as refreshing as the dew. Blessing and life come in the context of unity in the worship of God. Where there is unity there is peace. And where there is peace, there is welcome and there is rest. And when people dwell in this way, it is indeed pleasant.

Week before last, I was kayaking in Door County on the Lake Michigan side. I wanted to paddle over by Cave Point but had not been able to do so previously. A couple years ago Ariail and I took our boats over there and the water was so rough and the waves so high that we did not even attempt it. We would have been far more concerned with flipping than anything else. But Monday a week ago, the water was almost as smooth as glass. And the trip we made to Cave Point was as pleasant as could be. When the water is calm you just hardly realize it is there, you can focus on all the beauty around you. And when relationships are calm and God's people are unified, his beauty among his people is so much easier to enjoy.

But this psalm indicates not only that unity is pleasant but that it is good. It is welcome as opposed to unwelcome, but we could also assert that it is good as opposed to wrong. It is RIGHT for brothers to dwell together in unity. It is WRONG for brothers to fight and quarrel and to be divided against one another. God's design in the church is for oneness. In marriage, two become one. And in the church many become one. There is one body although there are many members. In the Spirit we were all baptized into one body, the body of Christ. Unity is the thing that makes the many work together for the well-being of the whole.

B. Paul states in Ephesians that there is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. This body is built up by equipping the body for the work of ministry that goes on in the body directed at our attaining the UNITY of the faith and of the knowledge of Christ. In other words, our growth in faith and in the knowledge of Jesus is meant to bring us who belong to Jesus closer and closer together in unity. And out of this unity, the body, when each part works properly, makes itself grow and build itself up in love. So, it is pleasant, and it is GOOD when God's people dwell together in unity. So God values our unity.

II. Jesus Died for Our Unity.

Here is how much God values the unity of his people. He gave His Son to bring it about. Jesus died to make it happen.

A. Think about it. The church is this ONE body made of many members. In addition, the church is the bride of Christ. He does not have many wives but only one. And that one wife is a union of many members. This union of many members is the bride for whom Jesus died. You can't separate the unity of the whole body from Christ's sacrificial work. In the great marriage text about husbands and wives in Ephesians, Paul is teaching that marriage is a model of Christ and the church. Wives are to submit as the church is to submit to Christ and husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. How did Christ love the church? He gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. This church is a unified, sanctified whole. And Jesus died to make her that way. This is how he loved the church. Jesus died to bring people from every tribe, people, and tongue together into a single unit to be his bride.

He lived the life none of us could live, completely submitting himself to obey God's law. He died the death none of us could die, to satisfy the demands of justice. And having died for sin under the penalty of God's wrath, he rose from the dead in victory. And all who will forsake themselves and repent of sin and trust in Jesus Christ will be united into the body that is the bride of Jesus Christ. To be in that body is to be rescued from the wrath of God which we all deserve. To be in that body

is to be loved incredibly by Jesus. And to be in that body is to be one of many who come together to be One bride to be joined ultimately to Jesus himself.

To highlight this purpose just a little further, we should turn to Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17. Here is the substance of what Jesus prayed for as he was anticipating the cross. In John 17:20 Jesus prayed for everyone who would believe in him. Here is what he asked for us: "I ask . . . that they may all be one, just as you Father are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us." Jesus later stated again his desire that these who believe in him "may become PERFECTLY one." Our union with each other is also a union with Christ and even with his Father—complete harmony with God; his will our will; his glory ours with no contention! This is what Jesus died for—our unity with each other and with him—reconciled to God by Christ's blood. Jesus died for our unity. That's how important it is!!

III. Our Unity is a Three-fold witness.

I hope you are getting a grasp of the fact that Christian unity is not optional but integral to God's work and purpose for his people in Christ. Our unity fulfills the desire and purpose of God with respect to himself. It is that important! But the unity of believers in Christ is also a critical part of God's purpose for Christ's people in the world. Our unity is a witness to Christ and to the Father and to ourselves.

Still in John 17, right in the heart of Christ's prayer that we be one, is a stated purpose for that oneness. Jesus prayed that those who believe will be one . . . "so that the WORLD may believe that you have sent me." Again he repeated two verses later, "that believers may become perfectly one, SO THAT the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."

Do you grasp what Jesus is saying? He is praying for the unity of his followers because that unity will testify to the world of two things. As Christ's people are in harmony and of one mind and love together, the world will be shown two incredible realities. What are they?

1. The first is that they will be shown that Jesus was not a fraud. The unity of the people of Jesus says to the world that the Father did in fact send Jesus. You see, God has invested testimony to the truthfulness of Jesus's claim in how we as his disciples in one body relate to one another. That is profound. Our unity tells the world Jesus is genuine. Sometimes I am afraid it does not do a very good job.
2. The second incredible reality our unity shows the world is that the Father loved us even as he loved Jesus. You see, unity is good and pleasant! And when the goodness and pleasantness of unity is experienced, we are experiencing something alien to the world, something that can only be enjoyed through the unconditional and profound love of God. Here as it speaks to the world, our unity also speaks to us. Our unity tells us that God truly loves us, even as he loves his own Son! He loved us and sent his son for us to redeem us and bring us together to himself.
3. And so we see that our unity bears witness concerning Christ that he is genuine and concerning God the Father that he loves us incredibly. But it also bear witness concerning us. What is that witness? That witness is that we truly belong to Christ. Love is the binder of unity. In Colossians 3:14, Paul instructs that above all . . . "put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." So see, love is what binds us together in unity.

Now, with that in mind, consider the declaration of Jesus, recorded in John 13:34-35. He said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Love which holds things together in unity is an indicator to the watching world that we indeed follow Jesus. John wrote it the opposite way in his first letter. He said, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it is abundantly clear then, that our unity and the love that binds us together in unity is incredibly important. In fact, we can point to evidence that disunity is particularly reprehensible to the Lord. We see it in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. There the believers had become divided over which early church teacher was their favorite. Some said Paul; some said Apollos; some said Cephas; and some said Jesus. Hear Paul's opening words to them. "I appeal to you brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it is reported to me . . . that there is quarreling among you my brothers." Later he reported that the marks of their divisions included jealousy and strife and fleshly behavior. Rhetorically he asked them, "Has Christ been divided?" Here is the point we are making. Jesus is one. His body is one. And his people should be one, so exhibited by unity arising out of the soil of love which is prompted by the love of God and the work of Christ himself.

With these considerations in mind, we turn now to our focal text in Romans 14. Here we learn how .

IV. Christian Unity Must Persist in the Face of Differing Opinions.

Does Christian unity mean everybody thinks the same way? Does our attempt to keep unified in love mean that we must wage a battle to get everyone thinking exactly like us on every issue? In fact the Bible reveals that within the body of Christ there will be times when believers have opposing opinions about matters that are not clearly stated in the scriptures. These will be matters in which the conscience of equally saved individuals will lead to convictions and actions which are not the same. And thankfully, through Paul, we have clear guidance as to how to preserve Christian unity when this occurs. In Romans 14 four directives emerge to guide Christians in maintaining unity even when they differ on matters of lesser significance.

A. The first directive is WELCOME. "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him." The sense we get here is of a glad reception. There is love, warmth, embrace, and joy when one believer welcomes another. Unity is expressed when we welcome one another and treat each other warmly. A welcome is the kind of reception you get that makes you want to hang around. This is the way it should be in the church. Hearty greetings among believers depict the joy we have in what brings us together. Hearty greetings reflect that we delight in what Christ has done in bringing many sons to glory. Realizing this truth should lead us to make earnest efforts to be warm and joyous as we come together as the body of Christ. WELCOME.

B. The second directive is REFUSE TO QUARREL. Welcome the one who is weak in faith but not to quarrel over opinions. The word "opinions" tells us that the differences of which he is speaking are not matters which divide the true followers of Christ from the lost or from false converts. Rather these are opinions. The scriptures are not definitive on these matters. Thus what we hold in respect to our beliefs are called opinions. And Paul says our welcome of one another must not be for the purpose of disputing over opinions. I must admit that as pastor I have experienced a number of attempts through the years where people have spoken to me with warmth and admiration only to try

to lure me into a conversation by which they would be trying to tell me I am wrong. Their "kindness" is shown to be a sham. No, to preserve unity Christians must welcome one another with the focus on what unites us rather than what might potentially divide us. Our goal in welcoming a brother who is weak in faith must be for loving them as a brother or sister, not for the purpose of arguing with them.

C. The third directive is REFUSE TO JUDGE. Paul is speaking in this context of the weak in faith and the strong in faith. The specific context is meat sold in the market. Since it may have been offered to idols, some believers (the weak in faith) were averse to eating it. Others (the strong in faith), however, recognizing that in reality an idol is nothing, since they are not participating in the offering of the meat, eat with a clear conscience. Those who were free to eat were tempted to scoff at the tender conscience of the weak and seek to argue them into eating. Those who were unable to eat with a clear conscience were tempted to pass judgment on those who did. Paul says, "NO!" Passing judgment in this way is despising your brother. Ultimately, we do not answer to one another on these matters; we answer to God. All of us answer to God, whom we serve. We as brothers need to leave these matters there.

D. The fourth directive is to PURSUE WHAT MAKES FOR PEACE. We accomplish this directive by protecting one another from the temptation to violate conscience. Whatever is not from faith is sin. Do not do what might cause your brother in Christ to stumble. Regard his conscience and grant him freedom to live accordingly. For these matters are outside the main scope of the kingdom of heaven, which is concerned with righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

E. For us in this day when meat is not offered to idols, some might wonder about where the principles might apply. Certainly one area is whether or not one drinks alcohol. Another is Sabbath observance. Paul speaks about that in verses 5-9. Yet another matter currently before us is the vaccine. Pressure from a number of directions is mounting toward those who are not vaccinated against COVID. But there is also a strong pressure from those who resist vaccination, in some cases holding it against those who are being vaccinated. A number of months back, the elders were asked to speak to the vaccine and we published a paper which basically urged everyone to make their own decision in this area with the fullest information they could. That is where we remain. Here is one of those matters where opinions ABOUND. And the opinions are strong. But they must not be allowed to disrupt our unity in Christ.

A helpful article was published a couple weeks ago by Benjamin Purves, one of the pastors at Occoquan Bible Church in Woodridge, VA. In this article, he took a look back in history at how the church responded in the 1700's to the smallpox epidemic. It was a true crisis that resulted in 844 deaths out of the 11,000 citizens who populated Boston, Massachusetts. When the epidemic broke out, so did a controversy as to whether one should receive the smallpox inoculation. The inoculation appears to have reduced the death rate from 15% to 2%. But there were strong voices on either side of the matter. One of the voices in favor of inoculation was a name you might recall, Pastor Increase Mather. He even resorted to calling those who opposed the inoculation "children of the wicked one." Other pastors were equally zealous, accusing folks who took the inoculation of not trusting God. Both sides based their case on the commandment, "you shall not kill." Other leaders called for a cessation to the vitriol and hostility and advocated that each person should be allowed to exercise freedom of conscience in whether or not to be inoculated.

Thirty-seven years later, a well-known American pastor was seriously considering whether or not to take the inoculation. He sought godly counsel and came to the conclusion that the inoculation was

both an act of wisdom and trust in the Lord. He and several of his family took the inoculation. Ironically, two of them died as a result. One was the pastor himself, Jonathan Edwards, and the other was his daughter Esther. He highlights the fact that though the inoculation reduced the death rate, there were some who died as a direct result of the treatment. It all points up the fact that a measure of risk was involved whatever decision was made.

Christians in this very day face similar circumstances. Risk and wisdom and faith are all factors involved in a context of conflicting information and claims. The emotion and challenge is intensified by some of those who think taking the vaccine is the answer to FORCE others to do what they think should be done. It is challenging. How do Christians show ourselves to be the church and bring glory to Christ by preserving the unity of the body? It is more important to welcome one another without reference to a position on the vaccine than whether you actually take the vaccine or not.

That we welcome one another and love one another and refuse to quarrel with or judge one another is itself far more important than whether we take the vaccine or not. I am not saying we should not talk about it. I am not saying we should not be reasoning carefully through the decision. I am not saying we should not have an opinion on it. I am saying that whatever decision to which we come must be held as an opinion, not as a point of division, not as a point of judgment, and not a point of shaming or blaming, but as a point of how God has led you and how you will live before God in faith.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, do not allow even the most volatile of subjects to darken the testimony our unity is intended to bear before the world. In our zeal for one another and in our welcome of one another, even when we have opinions which differ, let the world behold that we are people of a Great God with a bonafide savior who is Christ Jesus the Lord. To whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Prayer

Benediction

Brothers and sisters, remember that the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking and inoculations, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding and for the glory of God. And may his face shine upon us as we do.