

Doubtful Disputations

Romans 14:1-12

Last year, we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, a great movement of spiritual revival that swept through Western Europe. We noted that the Reformation sought to restore many of the ancient teachings of the Christian faith, including what Paul has taught us in the first 8 chapters of the Book of Romans: that God saves sinners by His grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Just as Paul rejected the legalistic Judaism of his day, Martin Luther and the other reformers rejected all the rules and regulations that had been piled up on the Church throughout the Middle Ages. Thus, both Paul and Luther embraced the radical freedom that comes to all Christians.

At the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul tries to help us Christians navigate the sometimes choppy waters of this freedom. Because God has done so much for us through the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, Paul says that our reasonable service is to offer our whole lives to God, loving Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And one of the principal ways we express this love for God is to love other people, embracing the spiritual gifts of other Christians without jealousy, doing good to our enemies, and giving honor to those in authority. Although we know we are not obligated to keep all the dictates of God's law in order to be saved, Paul urges us to obey God from a sincere heart because we have been saved.

And we would like to stop there, basking in the glow of God's grace, living in the light of true Christian liberty. But there's one by-product of this liberty, one occupational hazard of orthodox Christianity, one logical outgrowth of Paul's teaching that we have yet to discuss – the problem of disunity. And unfortunately, the Protestant Reformation unleashed disunity with terrible force, splintering the Christian Church. As a result, there are more than 30,000 Christian denominations throughout the world, and here in Claiborne County there are more than 60 different congregations.

Now, why would disunity be a particular problem for Bible-believing Christians? Well, how did the Church maintain unity in the days before Martin Luther? Bishops told priests what to do, and priests told the people what to do. They didn't allow anyone to translate the Bible into modern languages and insisted that everyone worship according to exactly the same form. And if anyone disobeyed, the Church withheld the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper from them, all the while telling them that if they didn't take the Sacrament on a regular basis they couldn't be saved.

But as Luther and Paul taught, and as today's passage makes clear at least implicitly, there is no room for this kind of coercion or forced uniformity within orthodox Christian faith. After all, if that were the case, this chapter would read very differently. Paul would just say something like this: "I'm an apostle, so you have to do what I say. Many of you are letting the superstitions of your past lives infect your Christian practice. Get over it, and stop worrying about your conscience. Oh, and no one has to observe all those Old Testament rituals about fasting and feasting on certain days anymore, and no one has to worry about the ceremonial purity of different kinds of animals because all that was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Get over all your unreasonable scruples and start acting like Christians!"

But Paul didn't say any of that, did he? And it's not as if he never used such strong language – after all, when the Christians in Galatia were tempted to turn away from the doctrines of grace and embrace legalism, he set them straight in no uncertain terms – "You foolish Galatians, who has

bewitched you?” And when he was arrested by the Jewish Sanhedrin, he even called the High Priest a “whitewashed wall!” And yet, Paul insists on a nuanced, balanced view in this passage, content to urge instead of to insist, seeking to convince instead of to compel. In short, he acts much less like a pope and much more like a pastor.

And he does this precisely because of what he’s trying to teach us in this passage – that there is room within genuine Christian faith for genuine difference of opinion, even over some very important things. True Christianity does not, and never has, insisted on everyone walking in lock-step, doing everything in exactly the same way.

And this goes all the way back to the time of Jesus Himself. In Mark chapter 9, John the disciple comes to Jesus, telling Him that the disciples tried to stop someone from casting out demons in Jesus’ name. And why? Because, John said, “He was not following us.” In short, this man wasn’t one of the twelve disciples, and doesn’t seem to have been one of the multitude following Jesus on a regular basis. Instead, he seems to have heard some of Jesus’ teaching and then struck out on his own ministry of healing those who were demon possessed. John and the rest of the disciples wanted Jesus to put a stop to this sort of free-lancing, to insure some sort of institutional control.

But how did Jesus respond? “Do not hinder him, for there is no one who shall perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. ⁴⁰For he who is not against us is for us.”

In other words, Jesus defined Himself as the ultimate measure of orthodoxy. Jesus said that a right relationship with Himself was the only absolute requirement for citizenship in the Kingdom of God. Those who are for Jesus, those who are trusting in Jesus as Savior and bowing the knee to Him as Lord, are on Jesus’ side and are subjects of His Kingdom, recipients of His pardon and blessing. Those who are against Jesus, those who deny Jesus’ humanity or divinity or atoning ministry are left out.

And so we see, from Luther and Paul and Jesus Himself, that there are some things, some essential tenets of the Christian faith, that are important enough to define the church, to separate true Christianity from false religion, and most of those are found in the first few chapters of the book of Romans. Those who believe and teach salvation by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone are true Christians, no matter what denomination they belong to. In contrast, those who are trusting instead in any sort of personal righteousness, any sort of legalism, any sort of ceremonial observance, any sort of ecclesiastical membership are not true subjects of King Jesus, no matter what they might think or say.

It really is as simple as that – you are either for Christ, or you are against Him. You are either in Christ, or you are still in your sins. You are either saved by Christ, or you are not. All of humanity thus falls into one of two opposing camps, which are all too often in conflict with one another.

But let’s not imagine that the conclusion of the contest is in any doubt. For as Paul quotes in verse 11 from Isaiah 45, one day every knee shall bow to the Lord Jesus and every tongue shall give praise to God. On the day that Christ returns in power and glory, full and final victory will be His. On that day, Jesus will set all things right and make all things new, as we read in our Responsive Reading from the Book of Revelation this morning.

But until that day, as Paul recognizes in today’s passage, there remain some important differences of opinion within Christ’s camp, even over important things. In Paul’s time, some of those

differences revolved around what food people should eat. You see, some members of the Church of Rome used to worship all sorts of different gods, sacrificing meat to statues of them, and then eating that so-called sacred meat as a way of expressing their fellowship with those gods. These people had legitimate scruples about eating things that were in their eyes contaminated with the errors of their past life. But however understandable their concerns may have been, it was easy for other Christians to become impatient with them, viewing these weaker brothers as having overly sensitive consciences.

Other members of the Church, like Paul himself, had come out of a legalistic Jewish background. They were accustomed to thinking that certain animals, like pigs, were unclean, and thus unfit for human consumption. They had also grown up within a seasonal rhythm of celebrations like Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles, festivals recounting the mighty acts of God among His people that had been observed since the time of Moses. Even though these Christians from a Jewish background now understood that Jesus fulfilled all those festivals, they didn't see any good reason to discard them. And even though they knew that Jesus welcomed Gentiles into His kingdom, sometimes they tended to condemn those who continued to eat things they saw as unclean and to ignore those special holy days.

The same sorts of legitimate differences of opinion exist among real Christians remain today. Some believe that baptism should only be administered to those who are old enough and aware enough to make a verbal profession of faith. Others express their belief in God's covenant promises by baptizing their children. Some women take Paul's teaching literally and wear their hair and their skirts long. Others put Paul's words into context and embrace a more general sense of proper modesty. Some Christians believe that supernatural gifts such as healing and speaking in tongues ceased with the generation of the apostles, while others believe in and practice these gifts today. Some Christians believe that church leaders are only legitimate if their ordination can be traced back in a chain of succession to the 12 Apostles. Others understand the right of Christians to elect their elders and deacons, measuring the fitness of their leaders according to what they believe and teach, as well as how they live.

So, how are such doubtful disputations, such honest differences of opinion to be settled? We've already seen, both by Paul's argument and his example, that the answer is not coercion. Instead, Paul urges us to receive, to accept all Christians because, as he says in verse 3, God has first accepted them. It's simply not our place to pass judgment on our Christian brothers, or to hold them in contempt just because they don't agree with us.

Now, our differences may prevent all of us Christians from belonging to the same denomination. You can't require bishops or believers' baptism and at the same time say they are unnecessary, so Baptists and Presbyterians and Episcopalians are stuck with our own separate identities. In that sense, Martin Luther's foes were right – embracing Paul's teaching on Christian freedom will involve some unfortunate organizational divisions within the Body of Christ.

But just because we don't all belong to the same denomination doesn't mean we can't accept one another as God has accepted us, as Paul teaches us. Just because we have honest differences of opinion doesn't mean we have to have a censorious spirit towards members of other denominations. After all, Acts chapter 15 tells us that while the Jerusalem Council that settled once and for all the question of whether Gentile believers had to follow the Jewish dietary laws, the same council left Jewish Christians free to follow those laws and observe the traditional festivals themselves. And even our Westminster Confession of Faith, in all of its pages of details explaining God's plan of salvation, is

completely silent concerning the structure of the Church – it has nothing to say about bishops or elders or deacons or presbyteries. It doesn't even say anything about the question of women serving as church officers!

So, surely, we Christians should agree to disagree about some things, right? Or as our own denominational motto puts it, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

But there is one last point that needs to be made. For as we love and accept all sorts of differences within Orthodox Christian belief, we might be tempted to think that such non-essential things aren't really important, that it doesn't really matter what we believe. That's not what Paul is saying at all. No, verse 5 makes it clear that each of us has the obligation to study what the Word of God says about each of these matters for ourselves, so that each of us might be fully persuaded in our own minds. And why? Because whatever we decide to do about idol-meats or feast days, about bishops or baptism, about length of skirts or speaking in tongues, we must do for the Lord. We must not make decisions for our own comfort or convenience, but because we honestly believe that's what the Lord wants us to do.

Now, we know that we Americans are responsible for studying political issues, for electing good and godly public officials and for holding them accountable for the actions they take on our behalf. Well, in the same way, because of this passage and so many others, we Presbyterians understand that we have no pope, no ecclesiastical hierarchy enforcing uniformity of Christian practice on everyone. Yes, we have ruling elders to help us learn how to live a more consistent Christian life, but we all still have the responsibility to exercise the Christian liberty God has given each one of us to be the best servants of God we can be, seeking to learn more of God's Word so we can more accurately determine God's will for each of our lives and to live according to it to the best of our abilities.

No, we're not going to agree on everything. But regardless of our differences, all of us who love and trust Jesus are on the same team, subjects of the same kingdom. As Jesus said, "he who is not against us is for us." Or as the hymnwriter put it, "The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord." So, let's celebrate our unity as we sing that hymn.