
Praying for Unity in Diversity

Romans 15:1-6

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Introduction In light of the differences in preferences at Clearcreek Chapel, we need to pray for unity in diversity. As we become more involved in each other's lives and share in candid ways at each other's homes or Flock ministry or on Sunday morning, we begin to see that each of us has opinions over issues like

- Forms of worship
- Integration with culture
- Wine drinking
- Outside employment for a wife
- Sabbath day observance
- TV and movie viewing
- Dress
- Children's education
- Strategies of evangelism
- Places of leisure
- Association with non-believers (who don't act like believers)

These differing opinions are providentially normal and potentially nasty.

When Christians disagree over "gray areas", how are they to live in harmony with each other? Is there any hope for unity in diversity?

Tonight we desire to continue in our series on N.T. praying. Last week we noticed a form of praying. We saw through 1Corinthians 1:4-9 that regular thanksgiving to God is part of the Christian prayer life. We noticed that the fuel for such constant gladness and gratitude toward God is noticing God's grace in each other's lives.

This week we will look at how unity in the church is enjoyed when diversity in the church is prevalent. We will live out this topic as we understand and apply our text for tonight. Turn with me to Romans 15:1-6.

Tonight, I'm preaching to make obvious a particular type or way of praying so that we will leave tonight both informed and inspired to pray like the Apostle Paul prayed.

Our Responsibility

Vv.1-3

To enjoy unity in the church when diversity in the church is common, first we need to become aware of our responsibility for unity in diversity. This is laid out for us in vv.1-3. (Read vv.1-3)

In vv.1-2 Paul points to the fact that in the Church there are both strong Christians and weak Christians. To come to terms with Paul's use of the words strong and weak, Dr. Gary Friesen in his book *Decision Making and the Will of God* wrote these definitions¹.

A WEAKER BROTHER IS a Christian who, because of the weakness of his faith, knowledge, conscience and will can be influenced to sin against his conscience by the example of a differing stronger brother.

A STRONGER BROTHER IS a Christian who, because of his understanding of Christian freedom and the strength of his conviction, exercises his liberty with full peace of conscience without being improperly influenced by the differing opinions of others.

When we read Paul's thought from 14:1-15:13 we come away sensing that Paul is not so much interested in removing the differences created by weaker/stronger brothers as he is teaching how to live with one another amid this type of diversity. Not taking away but living within diversity created by weaker and stronger brothers is Paul's aim.

And this agenda is not a suggestion he has for the church. He calls it an obligation. For us at Clearcreek Chapel to enjoy unity in diversity we must embrace by faith this obligation.

This responsibility is seen in two ways.

On how to live (serve)

vv.1-2

Paul begins in vv.1-2 to talk on a perspective and priorities designed to tell us how we are to live. We are not to live for private pleasures gleaned from liberty in Christ. Our mindset must be for the good of others. We are to live an other-centered lifestyle taking up limitations and restrictions and scruples of the weak in order to build them up. V.2 tells us that each of us is to this value. Each of us is to have a set of priorities which have others clearly in mind. No self-centered pursuits for pleasure are in view here. Feelings of pride and flaunting one's freedom in matters offensive to the weak are not permitted. To live with one another in harmony will take a colossal refocusing of the heart. We must, in light of vv.1-2, be the kind of people who live for the edification of others. Building up each other's faith is how we are to live. And this lifestyle brings us to enjoy unity in diversity.

On how to die (suffer)

v.3

Paul does not stop talking about our responsibility by teaching on how to live. He goes on in v.3 to discuss how to die. Self-denial is the next value Paul highlights. He points

¹ For a lucid teaching on this topic see *Weaker Brothers, Pharisees and Servants*; chapter 26 of his book *Decision making and the will of God*. A copy of his book can be purchased at Chapel Book Store for approximately \$12.00

to Christ and quotes Ps.69 to make clear that this obligation for unity in diversity is costly. Christ did not live with people whose faith was absent or weak without desiring them to change. Don't think that vv.1-2 teach that the strong in faith are to bend to every whim and scruple of the weak. V.3 tells us that if we are to truly live for others, we will look like Christ. And if we look like Christ, we will suffer (and in some cases severely so). Paul uses Ps.69 and Jesus Christ to teach what it takes to enjoy unity amid diversity. We have a responsibility. We have seen that it in how we are to live (i.e. to build others up). Now we see another angle on this responsibility. It is seen in how to die (i.e. self-denial).

A zeal for the house of God may consume you (Ps.69:9; Jn.2:17-22). You may become convicted by the Spirit tonight over how you are to live with each other. You then will start changing by becoming more other-concerned. You will want nothing more than to edify your brothers and sisters when you differ with them over non-moral issues. You will serve them, counsel them, love them, live with them and console them. You will have a zeal for the house of God. And then, you will find that it is costly. In the course of an other-centered, people-serving, self-denying, faith-fostering lifestyle you will suffer. It will consume you! You will be misunderstood and mistreated (cf. 2 Tim.3:12). And you do not have an option. Verse one calls this way of life an obligation for believers.

Here, then, is an outline for what it means to enjoy unity in the church when diversity in the church is common. It is called a responsibility. This responsibility is for each of us. And this responsibility calls us to serve and suffer like Jesus did.

Our Response Ability

Vv.4-6

Having noticed our responsibility to please others by building up their faith through a certain way of living and dying, Paul knows that mere description of obligation will not accomplish anything. An ability to respond to this obligation is needed. Therefore, Paul, in vv.4-6, talks about the power and provision needed to perform the obligation of vv.1-3. (Read vv.4-6)

Given through Scripture

v.4

To carry out vv.1-3, we need much help. We cannot serve one another and suffer for each other in our own strength. We need endurance. We need encouragement. We need hope! Where do we obtain such provisions? V.4 tells us that it comes through the Scriptures. When eagerly maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, we will get tired. We will desire to uphold our own freedoms and agendas. We will not want to listen to those who may have a differing view that is not matured. We will be tempted to become impatient and think that our personal peace needs to be preserved rather than the unity of fellowship. As Ps.119:50 makes plain, "This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life", we need to look to the Written Word. We need scour the Bible for precious promises on which to rest and rejuvenate our souls. Verse 4 tells us that the ability to respond to the obligation of vv.1-3 comes through Scripture.

Given by God

v.5

But to think that endurance and encouragement and hope come merely by reading the Bible and then doing what it says misses the mark (greatly). We do not receive anything from the Bible. We receive all we need through the Bible given by God.

Notice what Paul does. He says in v.5, “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you”. But he said in verse 4 that endurance and encouragement came from the Scriptures. And now he is telling us that it comes from the God of endurance and encouragement? Which one is it Paul? Do we get the resources needed to “please others for their good to build them up” by the Scriptures or by God? Here is a classic place to see a “both/and” not an “either/or”. Paul connects inextricably the Scriptures to the Author of Scripture; namely God. The power to cherish the values stated in vv.1-3 comes from God. And He grants this empowerment through the Scriptures. The Bible is the means through which God’s power is given as the reader believes what (s)he reads.

Paul is telling us in v.4 that Scripture is our source for endurance and encouragement. We need this to sustain our hope in the sometimes frustrating experiences of serving each other and denying ourselves for each other. Now here in verse five we come across how this message applies to prayer.

The prayer is that God will give us the ability to live with each other in harmony. This Greek phrase in the NASB is translated “of the same mind” (*to auta phronein*). The phrase hardly points to preferences about forms of worship or integration with culture or wine drinking or outside employment for the wife or Sabbath day observance or TV and movie viewing. Paul is not talking about agreeing upon differing opinions over the non-moral issues. He is telling us that God gives through prayer the same spiritual values referred to in vv.1-3. When he says “in accord with Christ”, it’s the same as Christ’s being given as a model in verse 3. And what is He modeling but the lifestyle of vv.1-2. This is what Paul prays for when he asks that “the God of all endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another”.

Given for God

v.6

Now as we come to the end of this paragraph, we notice its purpose statement. Why are we to maintain the responsibility to care for the weak in faith by building them up through prizing and pursuing the spiritual values of sacrificial love and self-denial? And why does God fuel this obligation through the Scriptures by His power in response to prayer? The answer is a God-centered answer as seen in v.6.

“...that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”.

The banner which flies over everything God stands for and does can be seen in Isa.48:11. “For my own sake, for my own sake I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another”.

Therefore, surprise ought not to be an emotional response when we see this goal in verse 6. God preserves and promotes His glory in the lives of His people. When we care more for the values of vv.1-3 than for our own preferences we glorify our great God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we look to Him for the power and ability to live

in harmony with each other, we make much of Him. When we believe that through Bible reading and prayer He gives us all we need to give to others all He commands, He gets the glory and we get the grace!

Is this not the purpose and power and pleasure we were created to experience in this life?

I'll close this message with three points and an application.

Conclusion

Point number 1

Our liberty must be limited due to love.

We have here at the Chapel a variety of levels of maturity. We see in Scripture much liberty in Christ. We can pursue for His glory preferences in non-moral issues. But greater still is the awesome duty and delight to limit our spiritual freedom in order to love our spiritual family. Point number one taken from this text tells each of us our obligation.

Point number 2

This love is patterned after Christ and will be costly.

To love each other will require cherishing two spiritual values. 1) To do all things to build up each other's faith. 2) To deny self for the good of others. Both these values are not cheap. We will forgo things we personally enjoy. We will sacrifice personal agendas. And we might be misunderstood and mistreated in the very act of love. Point number two taken from this text tells each of us the cost.

Point number 3

The ability to love like Christ comes through the Bible, by God and is ultimately for the glory of God.

As we notice the obligation to live in harmony with each other, as we notice that it will be costly, we come to where God wants us to be. We must hunger for all we need to give to God all He commands. The power to live like Christ comes 1) through the Bible. We must be people of one book. We must be people who read, reflect and rejoice over the book. We must mine the Bible for its precious truths. The power to live like Christ comes through the Bible 2) by God. This observation is key to receiving the resources He gives. We look to Him when reading the Bible. We read the Bible in futility if the Lord does not remove blindness and the self-centered inclinations of the flesh. The power to live like Christ comes through the Bible by God 3) and for His glory. With our Bibles open and our prayers rising, God grants us to live in harmony with each other. He answers the prayer for unity in diversity by making us Christ-like. We care more for the spiritual values of serving others and sacrificing self than we care for our own private preferences. More joy is discovered when we live in harmony with each other than it is

when we pursue personal pleasures of liberty. Point number three taken from this text tells each of us both how and why we ought to live in unity amid diversity.

Those are the three points. Here is an application.

An Application

Let us pray for unity in diversity.

(Tease out some of its implications)