

Week 5 Foundation-Living with Differences

Summary

As we strive to be an intentional congregation we want to commit ourselves to living with differences in ways that are healthy for the congregation. Differences that concern our faith and practice can be difficult and sensitive issues for any congregation. One person has strong convictions about one thing while another person has strong convictions about another. As a congregation we want to stand for truth, but we will differ on our views about the truths that matter and those that are matters of opinion. A commitment to living with differences means that we will strive as a congregation to “accept one another.” The key to living with differences rests on two things; theology and attitude.

Week 5 – Living with Differences

Our study of the topic of living with differences will employ an earlier foundation of being grounded in Scripture. A key passage for this week’s topic is Romans 14-15. The church in Rome consisted of Christians from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Despite living in the same country, these two groups had very different ideas about life, values, faith, etc. The Jews were committed to being faithful to God by continuing the practice of the Law and circumcision. Socially most Jews in Rome were considered slaves and alien workers, perhaps akin to migrant workers in the US. Their food laws were considered “odd” by most, their worship of “only one god” was considered weird. The Gentiles were accustomed to idols and aligning with various philosophical perspectives. Gentiles generally occupied the upper classes of society, especially in capital city of Rome. Add to this mixture the fact that each person’s faith was different based upon where they started and how fast they grew. These different backgrounds combined with the strength of each person’s faith presented significant challenges in dealing with the question of what was right and proper to practice. Imagine the challenge of house churches consisting of both Jews and Gentiles gathering to worship, to share the Lord’s Supper which in the ancient church was a meal, to exchange a holy kiss. Simply being in close contact with each other presented a challenge of conscience for some Jews. These matters were more than simple “preferences” they were in fact matters of faith for the people involved and were topics with significant importance. As we study Romans 14-15 we want to pay close attention to how Paul deals with these differences.

Theology & Attitude

Paul makes several key statements in his discussion of “disputable matters.” Some of his comments address our attitudes toward one another and other comments reflect Paul’s theology about the importance of such matters. Let’s look at some of these statements and sort them into the two categories of attitude and theology.

- ❖ (14:1) Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.
- ❖ (14:3, 4) The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.
- ❖ (14:5) ...each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.
- ❖ (14:8) If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord.....whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.
- ❖ (14:10-14) ...why do you judge your brother?....for we will all stand before God’s judgement seat. Stop passing judgement on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way...nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.
- ❖ (14:19-23) Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.....Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God....everything that does not come from faith is sin.
- ❖ (15:2) Each one of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

- ❖ (15:5-7) May the God give you a spirit of unity among yourselves....Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.
- ❖ (15:8) Christ became a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy.

Theology –These passages present several key theological ideas that form the foundation of Paul’s instructions. These ideas are (1) Our salvation is a matter of God’s acceptance of us, not our shared view of what is “acceptable.” (2) Each person is a servant of God’s on the basis of living out their “faith.” This seems to repeat the key idea from our discussion of being grounded in Scripture that “the righteous will live by faith.” (3) The Lord is able to make him stand, even if we don’t think it will. (4) Imitate Christ’s servant attitude toward each other.

Attitudes – In these same passages Paul exhorts the church in Rome to adopt several key attitudes. (1) accept one another, (2) refrain from judging / looking down / condemning each other on the basis of held beliefs, (3) Imitate Christ’s servant attitude of abandoning what is “important” for the sake of others.

Situational – Paul’s instructions on this topic are “other-centered” and asks each of us to determine what would be encouraging for the other. As a result, the practice of one congregation will naturally vary from another congregation. What you celebrate in your home may not be celebrated with the gathered church. The needs of the moment govern the practice. This situational nature of such matters will also vary over time as people grow, cultural sensitivities change, and groups change in composition. Paul asks us to always optimize to edify the other guy.

“Everything that does not come from faith is sin...”

This is a key phrase in dealing with this topic, but one that has several dimensions. Let’s look at two of these dimensions using examples from Scripture. When talking about eating meat sacrificed to idols in 1 Cor 8-10. Paul argues that some people are so used to thinking that the food associated with idol sacrifices carried religious significance that they could not eat it without think they were “worshipping” the idol. This is despite the “truth” that idols are nothing and even when you “think” you are worshipping an idol you really are not. A person who believed this could not eat meat associated with an idol sacrifice “in faith.” In Galatians Paul argues that the Christians from a Jewish background who wanted to continue the practice of circumcision and food laws were changing the gospel because their practice of these things was not on the basis of faith, but on the belief that they were necessary. In order for something to “come from faith” it must be practiced knowing that neither our righteousness nor our salvation depend upon the practice. That is why Paul instructs those who are strong in the faith to accommodate the faith of the weak. Only those who are strong in the faith have the flexibility to practice or not practice.

What is disputable ?

This is probably the most difficult question that arises when discussing this topic. To help think about this question I want to borrow an analogy from Scripture. In several places Paul employs the image of a building to represent the body of Christ (1 Cor 3, Eph 3, Rom 15). The foundation of the building is “Jesus Christ and him crucified.” The walls of the building are held in place by the belief that each of us is considered a son of God on the basis of faith (Rom 4-7, Gal 3-4). The blueprint for the building is Christ and his attitude of serving others (Phil 2:5f). The goal of everyone living in the building is to become like the cornerstone to be “perfect as your heavenly father is perfect” (Matt 5:48) or “holy for I am holy” (1 Pet 1:15) or “imitate God” (Eph 5:1) through the power of the Spirit (Rom 8). These are undisputable.