

How to Deal with Differences

Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 14:1-12

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By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Did any of you read Bob Terry's editorial this past week in the *Alabama Baptist*? I like Dr. Terry and normally find his editorials to be insightful and fair. This week he wrote about a young couple, in their mid-twenties, he said; who joined a Baptist church. It was a normal service. The choir sang. The pastor delivered the sermon. At the closing hymn the couple came forward asking to transfer their membership from a neighboring church. After the pastor presented the couple to the congregation, the young man asked to say a word. The pastor handed him the mike, and the young man explained to the congregation why he and his wife decided to join their church. They knew that it was a church in conflict, he said. He and his wife joined in order to "fight" for the pastor.

You probably know that in many Baptist churches, when someone comes forward requesting church membership, there is a vote right then. You're either in or out right there on the spot. This was one of those churches. When the pastor asked for a show of hands of those who welcomed the young couple into the church, the majority voted "no." The congregation refused to welcome them into church membership. Some left worship that day saying that joining a church is not about "coming to fight" (September 4, 2008, Vol. 173, No. 35).

I assume that is a true story, and fortunately Dr. Terry did not identify the church or the couple. What concerns me the most is not what happened on that particular Sunday with that particular couple. I'm concerned about what had been happening that led up to that particular Sunday. This obviously is a church deeply divided. And here is a young couple that thinks church membership is about joining the fray. Not only did the couple miss the meaning of church membership; the entire congregation seems to have missed an important biblical teaching about how to deal with differences.

For what it's worth, here's what I think. Most churches get a failing grade when it comes to dealing with differences. Differences in beliefs, differences about direction, personal differences—they are inevitable in

every congregation. That is why congregations need some skill in dealing with them. If we don't learn these skills, we tend to retreat to the primal urges of fight or flight. We're either going to join the fray, or we're going to get out of Dodge. What a shame, especially when the Apostle Paul gives such healthy, mature ways of dealing with differences.

That's what Romans 14 and 15 are about, how church members are to deal with differences. Now, it's important to say this. The differences they faced at the church in Rome were about non-essentials issues. These were not the non-negotiable issues of faith. These were issues where, according to Paul, it was okay to allow a broad interpretation. And isn't that true of many of the issues that come up in churches? What color to paint the sanctuary. Churches fight over that kind of thing. The kind of songs we sing in worship. Whether women can serve as deacons? These are not the non-negotiable issues of faith. So Paul gave guidance on how to deal with these kinds of differences.

There were two issues creating division in the church at Rome. These issues divided the congregation into two groups. Paul identifies one of the groups as "weak" and the other as "strong." The first issue was whether or not Christians should eat meat. One group, whom Paul identifies as the weak, believed that Christians should eat only vegetables, no meat. The other group claimed that Christians should feel free to eat anything, vegetables and meat if they wish. Now, don't snicker as if this was a silly little controversy. Underneath this difference was an important principle in the young Christian community. You see, the group that advocated a vegetarian diet likely was coming out of a tradition that held to centuries-old taboos regarding food. They had specific rules about how food was to be prepared, how one was to eat it, and with whom one could eat it. It really wasn't trivial to them. To violate these taboos went against everything they had been taught since childhood.

The other group, the meat-eaters, claimed that in the kingdom of God they no longer lived under the obligations of such dietary laws. They lived under the law of liberty. In Christ, they were set free, so they could eat whatever they wanted. Paul put himself in that group. He and others came to believe that no foods were taboo in the kingdom of God. However, he did not expect everyone to come instantly to that same conclusion.

That was the first issue, eating meat versus being a vegetarian. The second issue had to do with whether some days were more sacred than other days. The weak group claimed that certain days were holy. They were sacred festival days or worship days, and they believed that faithful Christians must honor those sacred days. Again, this group likely came out of a tradition where the Sabbath was a holy day. Other days during the year also bore a sense of the holy. This had been engrained in them since childhood. The other group countered that all days are just alike. Again, they claimed that they were no longer under an obligation to honor certain days and festivals. In Christ, they were set free, and the truly faithful Christian honored God every day, not just a few.

You know what happens when differences like these surface, don't you? The church members began to treat each other with disrespect. The ones who felt that they were set free and could eat whatever they wanted and honor God on any day—Paul says that they “despised” their weaker brothers and sisters. The NIV says that they “looked down” on them. You know what we call that, don't you? Religious pride. It could be translated “treat with contempt,” or “count as nothing.” That's how one group treated the other. Then the ones who felt that they were under obligation to eat only vegetables and to honor certain days—they “passed judgment” on the others. The NIV here says that they “condemned” them.

So you get a picture of what things were like at the First Baptist Church of Rome. One group was looking down its nose at the other group. The other group was defiantly pointing a finger of judgment back at them.

So Paul stepped into this divided congregation to help them deal with these differences. And this is good. We see Paul at his best here. He comes across like a wise, compassionate pastor. And his advice requires spiritual maturity from both groups. He tells them three things. The first is this: *they must create in their church an atmosphere of welcome for everyone, and the burden fell upon those who were stronger.* Listen to verse one again: “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.” Churches must be deliberate about creating an atmosphere of welcome, not just for newcomers, but also for those with whom you may disagree. That applies to both groups in the disagreement, but especially to the more mature, the stronger. And here's how Paul says that they do it. The group that has been “despising” the other group, looking down their nose at them, treating them with contempt—they must stop that. That is

never an acceptable attitude in church. And the group that has been defiantly pointing a finger of judgment—they must stop that. Again, it is never an acceptable attitude in church. You cannot create an atmosphere of welcome when those attitudes are present. So they had to begin by creating an atmosphere that said that everyone in that church family was welcome.

The second thing Paul says is that *each person must focus on his or her own relationship with God*. This is what Paul says in verse five: “Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.” They needed to stop trying to run the spiritual life of others and focus instead on their own spiritual life. Paul said that they needed to become fully convinced in their own mind of what was right for them. Work that out between you and God, and then leave the other folks free to do the same thing. In the end, Paul says, each one of us must stand before God. God will judge us at that time, so we have no business judging anyone ahead of time. Instead, we must focus on our own relationship with God.

One more thing. And I really like this. Paul says that whatever you do, whether you eat meat or don’t eat meat, whether you observe certain days or don’t, *do whatever you do in honor of God*. Once your mind is fully convinced, be at peace with it and do it in honor of God. Let it come from the innermost recesses of your spirit. Let it issue forth as an offering to God. Though Paul doesn’t say this, I think the opposite of that is true too. If you can’t do it in honor of God, if you can’t in all good conscience give it to God, you may want to revisit whether or not it is right.

All right, I’m going to go out on a limb here and make a public confession. Kelly and I dance. Actually we used to. We square danced, and we enjoyed it. When we took lessons, Kelly was pregnant with Hannah. Just before graduation from the lessons, Hannah was born. When we got our graduation certificate, they gave Hannah one too. She went through the lessons just like we did! Now, both of my grandmothers would be disappointed to know this, I’m sure, because they knew that Baptists don’t dance, especially Baptist clergy. It was not open for discussion a generation ago, and it still isn’t for some. When I was a student at Samford University in Birmingham, a Southern Baptist college, we had dance classes in the PE department, but we didn’t call them dance classes. We called them “rhythms.” That’s how we got away with it.

We snicker about this because most of us believe that square dancing is a non-essential issue. It's not one of the questions St. Peter is going to ask us at the pearly gates: "Did you ever square dance?" I'm convinced in my mind that it is a non-essential. However, there are other Baptists for whom dancing is still a significant taboo.

How do we deal with this difference and other differences that are non-essential issues? Certainly we may fight or take flight. But that would be a shame. Let us hear instead this wise instruction from Paul. Let us create an atmosphere of welcome for each other. That is part of the challenge of being in the Body of Christ. No more looking down our nose and no more finger pointing. Then we each must focus on our own relationship with God and allow others to focus on theirs. And then wherever you come out, do what you do in honor of God.

By the way, I wish you wouldn't say anything about the square dancing. It might get me in trouble.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we are privileged to be part of the Body of Christ. Forgive us when we act like the world. Do your work of transformation within each of us, until we are formed to be like Christ. Amen.