



Light from the Word

Romans 14 (Part 3) – Biblical Unity

Editor's note: this month concludes a three-part series of teachings from Romans 14.

Theme verse: *“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”*¹

In the previous two parts of our discussion on Romans 14, we considered how true Christian love helps us with the differences of conscience that exist between believers. This final article concludes the topic with a discussion on Biblical unity in Christ's body, the Church. As a quick review from the previous articles, indisputable matters are those specifically addressed in the Word. In the New Testament, these are the timeless and fundamental truths taught by Jesus and the Apostles, and as such are conditions for entering into His heavenly kingdom. Disputable matters are our own preferences, priorities, opinions, and personal convictions. By their very nature, no one should give a pat list of specific examples of disputable matters that apply to all of us. Even if they differ from our own, they are not necessarily wrong, however strongly we might feel about them.

In spite of these seemingly difficult issues, the Church is called to unity as evidenced by Christ's prayer, *“that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me”*². Thus church unity is found in the love and mind of Christ—the very Word of Truth. The proper understanding of biblical truth will align our faith and our lifestyles in disputable and indisputable matters. By doing this, we will be examples to the world, *“...that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.”*³

In order to achieve this level of biblical unity, we must handle disputable matters in the larger context

of the kingdom of God. Paul addresses this by first telling us what the kingdom of God is not—it is not *“meat and drink”*.⁴ That is, it is not preferences and individual persuasions of disputable matters. Rather, *“the kingdom of God is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.”* Similar to meat and drink, disputable matters often depend on individual taste and are subject to the passage of time. On the other hand, righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit have no shelf life—they are key components of God's eternal kingdom. May our *“hearts be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein.”*⁵ In the simplest of terms, we should *“Let brotherly love continue.”*⁶

The New Testament is centered on *“grace and truth...by Jesus Christ”*⁷ with discernment enabled by the Holy Spirit; *“Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.”*⁸ Brotherly love will not take undue personal liberty or impose personal persuasions on a fellow believer. Both of these can lead to self-willed variance within the church family, or worse be a stumbling block for our brother or sister.

In the book of Revelation, Christ gives us valuable insight into how mishandling a disputable matter can become an obstacle for believers. *“But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.”*⁹ At first, the eating of things sacrificed unto idols might appear to be as equally serious a sin as fornication in this scripture. However, when we consider *“all the counsel of God,”*¹⁰ we see there is a clear difference between the two.

We know that the sin of fornication is an indisputable matter as commanded consistently in

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many different scriptures.¹¹ The early church first dealt with the eating of meats offered to idols during the Jerusalem council.¹² Later, the Apostle Paul gave the Corinthians some instructive details behind the directive of the church some years before. Here he acknowledges that the act of eating meat offered to an idol is not a sin if one has a strong faith in the knowledge that there is but one true God and that the idol is nothing but a meaningless object. However, not everyone has such a strong faith, and for them the same act could become a sin. Further, if by taking this liberty one would knowingly offend (create enticement or occasion leading to sin) their brother or sister, both are sinning, *“And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.”* We see then that the willful casting of the stumbling block was the sin of Balaam that Christ was warning us against and not the disputable act of eating meats offered to an idol. The Apostle Paul then summed up the matter

beautifully, *“Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.”*¹³

After considering some of the pitfalls of mishandling disputable matters, one might well ask, How can I properly handle these matters and thus promote biblical unity within the church? Love would have to come at the top of such a list. Peter instructs us that fervent charity *“shall cover the multitude of sins.”*¹⁴ The church at Corinth fell into the dangerous trap of *“comparing themselves among themselves.”*¹⁵ By copying certain individuals and ignoring others, they created much disunity.¹⁶ To counter this, Paul instructed them to examine themselves in the light of the Word.¹⁷ If we examine one another we are likely to create disunity, but if we examine ourselves in the light of Christ we will increase unity. James condenses great wisdom into one verse, *“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”*¹⁸ Being humble enough to confess we are not always right, displaying genuine openness with one another, and sincerely praying for others—including those with whom we differ—will greatly enhance biblical unity.

There is actually a wonderful purpose in resolving disputable matters. The Apostle John asked a question, *“he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?”*¹⁹ Biblical handling of disputable matters not only increases unity, it demonstrates brotherly love, bringing glory to God; *“And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.”*²⁰

(Footnotes)

- ¹ Psalms 133:1
- ² John 17:21
- ³ John 17:23
- ⁴ Rom. 14:17-18
- ⁵ Heb. 13:9
- ⁶ Heb. 13:1
- ⁷ John 1:17
- ⁸ 1 Cor. 2:13
- ⁹ Rev. 2:14
- ¹⁰ Acts 20:27
- ¹¹ Rom. 1:29; 1 Cor. 6:14; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:13
- ¹² Acts 15:29
- ¹³ 1 Cor. 8:4-13; 10:32
- ¹⁴ 1 Pet. 4:8
- ¹⁵ 2 Cor. 10:12
- ¹⁶ 1 Cor. 1:12-13
- ¹⁷ 2 Cor. 13:5
- ¹⁸ James 5:16
- ¹⁹ 1 John 4:20
- ²⁰ 1 John 4:21