

Introduction

Today, I'm going to preach about something that all of us do with everyone, including those whom we love the most. I'd like to illustrate what that something is by having you answer five questions. #1 – Should a church accept a large donation of money from lottery winnings? #2 – Should Christians in the United States abstain totally from drinking alcohol? #3 – Should our stage stay as it is now, with the choir chairs in the center and the communion table on the floor? #4 – Should the United States institute a national health care program? And #5 – Should our spiritual life elder Robert Queen and I sing a duet some day in church? Your different answers introduce us quite well to the text I read earlier today, Romans 14:1-15. Turn there in your Bibles please.

When We Disagree

In this text, Paul addressed a problem in the church at Rome. That problem was two disagreements among the Christians there. The first, in verse 2, was about the eating of foods. Some were vegetarians for religious reasons. They believed it was wrong for Christians to eat meat. But the rest believed it wasn't wrong. The second disagreement, in verse 5, was about the observing of days. Some believed certain days should be treated as holier than others. But the rest believed they should not.

This text is critical because it reveals something that all of us do with everyone, including our brothers and sisters in Christ. That something is "disagree." We saw that in the opening questions I asked. Take the first of those. A pastor I know favors the church accepting donations from lottery winnings. His point of view is that it's God getting some of His money back from the devil. I, on the other hand, oppose that. My point of view is that it taints the church with the world. Your answers to that question show that some of you agree with him and some with me. The fact is that even disciples and friends of Jesus disagree. They have contrary points of view about a whole host of issues, all the

way from the vital to the trivial.

Disagreements of course are always threats to unity. Whether it's the church, the home, the workplace, or wherever, disagreements can put people at relational odds with each other. So how do we prevent that? What should we do when we disagree?

Phillip Melancthon tells us. Melancthon was Martin Luther's right hand man. He was a giant intellect who profoundly influenced Luther's efforts. Without him, the Protestant Reformation would not have occurred as it did. Anyway, he wrote something that clearly and concisely summarizes Paul's message in verses 1-15: "**In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity (love).**" That is a penetrating insight and the guideline we should follow when we disagree. It teaches us three things.

In Essentials, Unity

First, *in essentials, unity!*

In verse 5b, Paul wrote, "**Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.**" That means fully convinced about what he believes. Verses 6-9 give definition to that. Notice the repeated phrase "for the Lord." We're fully convinced that we should believe or do something because Jesus has said we should believe or do it – and He is Lord.

That point defines what essentials are. They're beliefs we have that are based on what God has clearly said. We call such beliefs "convictions." A popular motto from the 70's explains it: "**God said it. I believe it. That settles it.**" First, God said it. He has said in His written word, the Bible, what is morally right or true. And second, that settles it. What He has said in His written word is unchangeable and absolute. We call what He has said the fundamentals of the faith. That's what the essentials are. They're the fundamentals of the faith.

God has clearly said, for instance, that intimate sexual relations are morally right only in heterosexual marriage. Because He has clearly said that, it's an essential. There are thousands of such essentials in the

Bible, some of which, like it, are at issue today.

Now that we know what essentials are, let's examine what God requires with regard to them – unity. Notice I didn't say diversity.

Listen to this ad that a Unitarian church in Youngstown put out:
“Yes, we are the Unitarian Universalists. We don't feel that any person, book, or institution should tell you what you must think . . . We have no doctrines and dogma that you must accept. We believe that truth is ever evolving. Does this sound like the kind of church you've been looking for?”

It's clear what the theme of the Unitarian Church is. It's diversity. It illogically tolerates all points of view, including those that conflict with each other and with the Bible. It doesn't really matter what we believe as long as we're sincere in believing it. The Unitarians, for instance, believe that Jesus didn't rise from the dead and isn't coming back again. We believe in contrast that He did and is. But that difference doesn't really matter. What does really matter is that we respect and tolerate each other's views. That's diversity.

Diversity may be their theme but it isn't ours. When it comes to essentials, our theme isn't diversity. It's unity. Essentials are non-negotiable and beyond compromise. So, we insist that others believe what we believe. We don't tolerate contrary points of view. If someone has a contrary point of view, we respond appropriately. We do what the circumstances dictate we should do. We oppose him, don't join him, separate from him, discipline him, or whatever is appropriate.

A Christian was stunned when his Sunday school teacher said that the birth of Jesus may not have been a virgin birth. Matthew and Luke may not have meant that Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit. They may have simply meant that the Holy Spirit was now operative in the world as never before. But the virgin birth is an essential. So the Christian went to the teacher and kindly but firmly challenged what he said. He stood his ground though, whereupon the Christian brought the matter to the pastor and elders. They in turn approached the teacher and eventually

dismissed him from his class.

They were right in doing so. Why? In essentials, unity!

In Non-essentials, Liberty

Romans 14:1-15 and Melancthon's guideline teach us a second thing. *In non-essentials liberty!*

Notice the word "opinions" in verse 1. That's how Paul described the beliefs I mentioned earlier - about eating foods and observing days. He did so because Jesus and the Old Testament Scriptures had not addressed those issues. That made what the Christians believed about them nothing more than personal opinions.

We can infer from that what non-essentials are. They're beliefs we have that aren't based on what God has clearly said. There are many issues, vital and trivial, that the Bible doesn't explicitly or implicitly say anything *decisive* about. Our beliefs or points of view about them, therefore, aren't essentials. They're non-essentials. They aren't convictions. They're "opinions."

A Christian father and mother disagreed about their daughter dating. The mother believed she should be allowed to date at the age of 14. The father on the other hand believed she shouldn't date until she got out of high school. It's a crucial issue. But God in the Bible doesn't explicitly or implicitly say anything decisive about it. That makes it a non-essential and the parents' points of view about it opinions.

Now, there's a guideline for non-essentials just as there is for essentials and it's this. In non-essentials, liberty.

I came across a catchy little poem titled *The Nitpicker's Creed*:
"Believe as I believe – no more, no less ** That I am right (and no one else) confess ** Feel as I feel, think only as I think ** Eat what I eat, and drink only what drink ** Look as I look, do always as I do ** and then – and only then – will I fellowship with you."

According to verses 3, 4, and 10, some of the Christians in Rome were just what this poem describes, nitpickers. They demanded unity in

non-essentials. They insisted that others have the same opinion they had. And they judged them and held them in contempt if they didn't.

Don't be a nitpicker! It's rare that we should oppose, not join, separate from, or discipline when it comes to non-essentials. We should allow liberty instead! Attitudinally, respect and even consider opinions that are contrary to ours. Behaviorally, negotiate and compromise ours when the greater good requires it. The Christian parents I mentioned earlier did just that. They negotiated and compromised and decided to let their daughter date at 15. Each allowed the other liberty.

Those then are the first two parts of our guideline. In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty.

The difficulty in that regard is identifying which is which. We can make two mistakes. The first is to take an essential as a non-essential, a conviction as an opinion. The second is to take a non-essential as an essential, an opinion as a conviction. Both are serious errors. So how do we avoid them. There's only one way. It's to study and know the Bible through and through. The better we know it, the more competent we are in correctly identifying if our beliefs are convictions or opinions.

Years ago, a Christian asked me if it was okay to house a Jehovah's Witness teacher for two days, while he conducted meetings at the local Kingdom Hall? Her neighbors, who were Jehovah's Witnesses, asked her if she would. I told her it wasn't okay. That Christians shouldn't show hospitality to false teachers in that context. That they're participants in evil if they do. Is that belief of mine a conviction or an opinion? You can't answer that unless you know whether or not God has said anything decisive about it in the Bible. I refer you to 2 John 9-11 in that regard.

My point is that knowing the Bible enables us to distinguish essentials from non-essentials and thus follow the guideline. In essentials, unity. In the non-essentials, liberty.

In All Things, Charity

There's a third thing that Romans 14:1-15 and Melancthon's

guideline teach us. *In all things, charity!*

We see that in verses 13-15. In verse 1, Paul described the vegetarian Christians who believed in days as “the weak,” that is, weak in their understanding of the gospel. They weren’t as knowledgeable about it as the rest were. But notice what Paul counseled the rest to do in verse 13-15, **“walk according to love.”** He also defined what that meant. They shouldn’t eat meat in the presence of the weak Christians if doing so “hurt” or “destroyed” them. They could eat it out of their presence but shouldn’t in it.

“Charity” is an old English word for “love” and that’s what we have here. *In all things, love!* Biblically, to love is to will and pursue the well-being and joy of others. So, we do that in all things. The old axiom, **“Hate the sin but love the sinner”** is our model for this. In the essentials, we hate the dissenter’s belief but love the dissenter. So, we oppose, don’t join, separate from, or discipline him, seeking his good as we do. In the non-essentials, we dislike the dissenter’s belief but love the dissenter. So, we negotiate and compromise with him, seeking his good as we do. What that good is of course depends on the nature of the dissenter, the issue, and the circumstances involved.

Her lesbian neighbor, for instance, asked a Christian to sign a ballot petition legalizing homosexual marriage. She refused to sign and explained why. Her neighbor was miffed but the Christian continued to be kind to her anyway, sharing vegetables from her garden, watching her dog when she was gone, and so on. *In all things, love!*

Conclusion

I leave you in closing with the words of Abraham Lincoln. He spoke them during his second inaugural address, on March 4, 1865, one month before he was assassinated: **“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right.”** That’s what we should do when we disagree. In the essentials, unity. In the non-essentials liberty. *In all things, love.*