

BaptistWay Bible Series for November 25: Welcome Christians with whom you disagree

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Welcome Christians with whom you disagree

- Romans 14:1-21

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Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions (14:1). The Apostle Paul anticipates the question of how to coexist with people of different opinions and how to live among those who share dissenting convictions. If you did not already know who Paul was writing to, you might suppose he was addressing a group of Baptists.

One of my favorite responses to the question, “What about being Baptist do you appreciate most?” comes from one of my friends and mentors Bill Leonard. Being a scholar and Baptist historian, he provides a short and snappy answer: “the messiness,” he says.



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Of course, by messiness, he means diversity. This diversity comes as part of our conviction as Baptists that faith, if it is to be genuine, cannot be coerced by any person, institution or government over against another's individual conscience. That is to say if faith is to be heartfelt, it must be free. Since Baptists are a "non-creedal people," theological convictions may vary among congregations who share the name Baptist. Yet what all Baptists have in common involves living in the general tensions between the individual and the community; between conscience and dissent.

Seems Baptists are in basic agreement with Paul that God alone is judge of conscience. In this passage, he helps the Romans negotiate the divergent practices of those who keep kosher diet laws (the weak in faith) and those who believe in eating anything.

Apparently the different practices are not substantial to the point that Paul says "this group is right" and "this group is wrong." Rather than referee what practices are in and what practices are out, Paul instructs the Romans that what matters is the sense of perspective one has, whether one eats meat or one eats vegetables only. He admonishes them to refrain from despising or passing judgment on each other, for God has welcomed both of them (v. 3).

The primary concern is not if someone eats meat or abstains from eating meat. The real question is whether either practice is done "in honor of the Lord" to give thanks to God (v. 6).

Many Christians take up sides in the cultural debates of our own day. According to Paul's instruction, however, whatever position a group or a person takes may be of less importance than the attitudes and actions that support that particular position. Rather than despise and pass judgment on those who share different opinions and practices, Paul directly reminds the Romans it is God who all human beings are finally answerable.

It is the height of arrogance and self-righteousness to anoint oneself the arbiter of God's judgment for those with whom they disagree. Paul warns against imposing one's understanding of certain Christian practices on another when it comes to matters of secondary importance.

How to determine what are matters of secondary importance is debatable, yet even debate over this question leads us away from Paul's primary concern: to reserve judgment to God and refrain from despising another.

Of all places, shouldn't it be within Christian congregations where we can vigorously debate and respectfully discuss the leading issues of our time? Our collective "need to be right" must take a backseat to our collective "need to be in right relationship" to each other. What makes this especially difficult, however, are the ways in which we close ourselves off from what is different from us; whether that is the way others look, or how they talk, or the way they think.

We have gone to great lengths to build our own modern towers of Babel; to build barriers that divide us. Culturally, we are conditioned for it. We divide people into red states and blue states; we label each other a Democrat or Republican, gay or straight. We ask, "do you have a gun or don't you; do you support Jews or Palestinians; are you for us or against us?"

Then, we reflect what's modeled in the media by making a sport of our differences. Suddenly, our differences give us reasons to shout at each other while we try to win arguments instead of taking the time to actually

listen to someone who may have a different opinion or perspective than our own.

Though Baptists have developed a reputation of being fussers and fighters, amidst our messy theology and different spiritual practices, the evidence that supports a conviction of someone who is a Baptist and a Christian is announced in a popular hymn of the church, “They’ll Know We Are Christians By Our Love.”

As we conclude our study of Romans, it may be well to provide a final perspective of what Paul meant from author Garry Wills: “Religion took over the legacy of Paul as it did that of Jesus—because they both opposed it. They said that the worship of God is a matter of interior love, not based on external observances, on temples or churches, on hierarchies or priesthoods.

“Both were at odds with those who impose the burdens of ‘religion’ and punish those who try to escape them. They were radical egalitarians, though in ways that delved below and soared above conventional politics. They were on the side of the poor and saw through the rich. They saw only two basic moral duties—love of God and love of the neighbor. Both were liberators, not prisoners—so they were imprisoned. So they were killed. Paul meant what Jesus meant, that love is the only law.”

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