

BaptistWay: Personal preference or the pursuit of harmony?

November 12, 2015

• *The BaptistWay lesson for Nov. 29 focuses on Romans 14:1-21.*

In earlier lessons, we saw how the Apostle Paul is concerned about divisions between Jewish and Gentile Christians within the Roman church. Indeed, throughout the epistle, he expends quite a bit of effort to soften that boundary by making Abraham a Gentile outsider and seeing Jesus as the manifestation of God's faithfulness to the covenant with Israel. In this passage, he shares similar concerns about divisions, but he directs his attention to specific issues that might have prompted disagreements among the Roman Christians—food and holidays.

Food and idols

It is somewhat tricky to discover what particular food issue threatened the unity of the church in Rome. Perhaps it involved meat sacrificed to idols, which would explain why “another ... eats only vegetables” (v. 2). That is, it is possible Jewish Christians who had retained certain aspects of the Jewish legal code eschewed consumption of meat to avoid the uncleanness of pagan meat.

Other believers, understanding idols are powerless, ate anything they chose (v. 2). While we do not encounter this precise question in our culture, it would not be an entirely unusual one for first-century Christians since various religious cults sacrificed meat to their gods and sold the extra in the marketplace. In fact, a similar concern is discussed in 1 Corinthians 8.

Regarding holidays, another Jewish concern could be at the heart of the matter since Judaism had a set of religious observances unknown to Gentile converts to Christianity. Jewish believers, who might have considered “one day more sacred than another” (v. 5), would have been appalled that Gentile Christians saw “every day alike” (v. 5).

Excluding others

Regardless of the source of these disputes, Paul notes these are not simply differences of opinion, but they have been the basis for dividing the community. One side aims to “treat with contempt” the other, while the other reciprocates with judgment (v. 3). In other words, each group is happy to exclude the other from full membership in the church on the basis of their opposing opinions.

While we may not find ourselves confronted with church divisions prompted by food and calendar issues, we do experience divisions within the body of Christ. In fact, we often take these divisions for granted, as though they simply are part of Christianity. Frequently, what has caused such splits, whether between denominations, between congregations or between groups within a congregation, was based on less-significant concerns elevated to paramount importance. Like the Roman Christians, we occasionally view such issues as a litmus test for Christian faithfulness. Those who disagree are judged to be outsiders to the church.

Response to divisions

In light of these similarities, we should observe carefully Paul’s response to the Roman divisions. First, he indicates there is a preferable position. That is, thinking through such issues is important. Note he labels the abstaining believers as “weak” (vv. 1-2). Later, he writes, “I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself” (v. 14). This statement, theologically justified by God’s declaration that each day of

creation was “good” and the whole was “very good” (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), allows Paul to agree with one side of the debate.

However, even though Paul has an opinion in this debate as well, he admits his opinion is not what matters most. In other words, while the disagreement has sparked severe responses, Paul states, “God has accepted them” (v. 3). In other words, God already has noticed such differences and determined they do not, ultimately, make a difference. The Roman Christians, then, are to “make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (v. 19). Therefore, remaining united in the body of Christ is central.

Similarly, we might consider that God has accepted fellow Christians who may differ with us on one issue or several. It is important to recognize Paul situates our judgment of other Christians within the context of God’s final judgment: “You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat” (vv. 10-11).

Let God be the judge

In short, Paul admonishes those who claim to defend Christianity to let God be the judge. We ought to “not put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister” (v. 13). This includes even the stumbling block of church division. Consider that if we participated in dividing the church—or perpetuating those divisions—then we “will give an account of ourselves to God” (v. 12).

The early Christians took this lesson to heart. Non-Christian sources from the first three centuries of Christianity report Christians exemplified love and care for one another and for the marginalized of society. The Book of Acts takes care to describe the early church as “all together” (Acts 2:1, 44; 4:32). May we learn to show this love as well, so we do not live for

ourselves, but for the Lord (vv. 7-8).