

Welcome One Another  
Romans 15:7  
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America and the American Church are badly divided these days.

Democrat/Republican, liberal/conservative, rich/poor, urban/rural, people of color/white, etc. Our Redness and Blueness is tearing the national fabric. I had a friend who was filling out a religious survey form. When he got to the box that said “Denomination”, he absent-mindedly wrote “Democrat”. Sometimes politics becomes our religion.

Churches are divided too: theologically, culturally, by age, politics and worship styles. A college town church I know was divided by “town and gown”: the university folk and the non-university folk.

Paul was facing a big split in the church at Rome. The dispute was theological and cultural. Chapters 14 and 15 in Romans deal with the division. His over-arching plea was “welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you (Romans 15:7)”. And his words are an important word for the American Church today, and for Grace Baptist. So let’s talk—with Paul as our guide.

Paul was facing the church at Rome which was divided over cultural, religious, theological and moral issues. Differences, I would offer, are often complex. What we argue about is not always what we are arguing about. The two main parties were named the “weak-in-faith” and the “strong-in-faith”.

The “weak-in-faith” were the conservatives. They had been given their name by their opponents, the self-named “strong-in-faith”. The “strong-in-faith” were liberals. The “weak-in-faith” probably took the name handed it and wore it as a badge of honor: “I’m conservative and proud of it”. The “strong-in-faith” had their own measure of spiritual pride: “We’re the enlightened ones, the more highly evolved ones, the ones who really understand the gospel.”

The presenting issue was the Jewish dietary restrictions—what to eat and drink—but the deeper issues had to do with what was morally clean and unclean, and how to make moral decisions.

Are my moral decisions based on rules that dictate what is right and wrong for every situation? Or, are they based on principles that you apply situation by situation. Legalism or “situation ethics”. Legalism asks, “What does the law say”? Situation ethics asks, “What does love dictate?”

Another set of questions. Does the *community* determine what is right and wrong, or does the *individual* determine this in his/her own inward spiritual journey? The issues went deep and grew hot.

Paul saw the fissure between the groups. The “weak-in-faith”, the conservatives, said they needed the law of God for every circumstance. They were not “strong” enough, or wise enough to know what was right and wrong just on their own, so they would continue to follow the laws of God down to the jot and tittle. The “strong-in-faith”, the liberals, said that Christ had freed them from the law, and that they in their personal relationship with God could determine what was right and wrong.

The big problem, however, was not in the differences alone, but that they did not like each other very much and would just as soon not be in church with the other group. The way they *held* their differences was the problem.

So here is Paul’s message to the groups. He himself was in the “strong-in-faith” camp, but he wanted a church that could include both. I will now paraphrase and summarize his argument in chapters 14 and 15, but will substitute the word “conservatives” where the text says weak-in-faith” and “liberals” where “weak-in-faith” and “liberals” where it says “strong-in-faith”. You could also substitute Democrat and Republican.

## II

14:1 Let the liberals welcome the conservatives, but not for quarrels over convictions.

14:3 Let the liberal not despise the conservative, and let the conservative not pass judgment on the liberal, for God has welcomed the liberal.

14:4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? Your brother/sister, whether liberal or conservative, is the *Lord's* servant, not yours. And the Lord helps *both* to stand.

14: 5-9 One person's freedom is in honor of the Lord (on behalf of the liberals). Another person's strict obedience is in honor of the Lord (on behalf of the conservatives). Let it be so for both. Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

14:10-12 Why do you conservatives pass judgment on the liberals? And why do you liberals despise the conservatives? All of us will stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and each of us will have to give an account for him or herself. (You'd think our own accounting would keep us occupied enough without our trying to keep everyone else's books!)

14:14 On behalf of liberals Paul says, "Nothing in itself is unclean! "On behalf of conservatives he said, "But if you think it is unclean, it is unclean!"

14:15-20 Against the conservatives Paul says, “Everything is clean.” But against the liberals he adds: “Do not let your liberated style of life cause your brother or sister to stumble. If you flaunt your freedom and thereby injure another, or wound the conscience of another you are not walking in love”.

To both groups he says, “*Do not make your issues more important than ‘work of God.’* Follow after the things that make for peace; build up and edify one another.”

14:23 To both groups he says, “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin,” that is, as best as I can understand it, you must live out of your personal and faithful relationship with Christ. Do not let your conservative or liberal brother or sister intrude upon that faith relationship. Do not let them stand between you and your God.

There was a third group in the church Paul called “The doubters”. These were the waverers, the ones caught in the middle, the timid moderates. (Is there not always this third group?) They are caught in the cross-fire between Right and Left. Paul says to them “You belong to Christ, not to the Left or Right. Determine in your heart of hearts, in your own relationship to Christ, how you are to live. Live from the *inside out*, not from the pressure of any group.

14:17 I go back to this verse, as Paul summarizes his argument: “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink (liberal or conservative) but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The kingdom of God is in these three. *Righteousness*, what the Bible also calls holiness, right living and right relation. And *Peace*: well being, wholeness, unity. And *Joy*. If there’s no joy around, there’s no God around. Holiness, wholeness, happiness. When these three are happening, the kingdom is happening. If most of what you are doing is arguing over convictions, that’s not the kingdom.

Paul does not want either side trying to conquer or convert the other. *His goal, the Spirit’s goal, is the peace of Christ manifest in reconciled diversity*. Not uniformity, not diversity for its own sake, but unity in reconciled diversity.

15:5-6 Bear with one another in your differences. Live in harmony together so that with *one mouth* you might glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. One voice, one mouth.

15:7 Paul concludes with his final imploring words: “*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*”

Welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you! What a wonderful call.

A church growth expert once asked the question: “How much diversity can a church stand?” The question had a negative implication: “Only so much.” But my answer is this: The church can stand as much diversity as Christ brings to us. Welcome everyone, then, as Christ has welcomed you.

### III

From A to Z we can find issues to divide us

- A. Alcohol, abortion
- B. Birth control, biblical infallibility
- C. Conservatism, conservation, Calvinism
- D. Divorce, denominational politics
- E. Ecology, economics
- F. Feminism, fundamentalism, faith healing
- G. Geo-politics, God images
- H. Homosexuality, hymns we like or don't
- I. Islam, immigration
- J. Jesus' humanity and divinity, justice

K. Kingdom of God

L. Liberalism, Liberation Theology

M. Multi-culturalism, moratorium on the death penalty

N. Nationalism, nuclear weapons

O. Original Sin, opinionated people (*other* opinionated people, of course)

P. Pacifism, Papal infallibility, passing the peace.

Q. Quest for the historical Jesus

R. Red and blueness

S. Spiritual gifts, sexuality, Shoemaker

T. The Trinity, taxes, Trump

U. Universalism, the United Nations

V. Violence, especially gun violence

W. War, worship styles

X. Xenophobia, the fear and hatred of the stranger, one who is different.

Y. Yankees and yellow dog democrats

Z. Zen Buddhism

But what unites us is far greater: Christ and the “work of God”.

### Conclusion

The great preacher Fred Craddock tells the story of a friend and his missionary family under house arrest in China. One day they were told they were free to leave and return to the U.S.. They had 24 hours to pack and could only take two hundred pounds with them.

The parents and their two young children had lived in China for years. How to decide what to bring? They took out the scales and weighed and chose, and chose and weighed until they had exactly two hundred pounds. The typewriter, the vase, essential clothes, a few treasured books. Two hundred pounds to the ounce.

When they met the soldier at the airport, the soldier asked, “Ready to go?”

“Yes”, they replied.

“Did you weigh everything?”

“Yes”

“Did you weigh the children?”

“The children?”

“Yes, weigh the children”, the soldier said.

Suddenly, in a moment everything changed. The typewriter, the vase, the clothes, the books became trash.

You see, we can get all tangled in issues that divide, but what is really important is *one another*. Everything also falls away.

“Welcome one another”, says Paul, cherish one another, as Christ has welcomed and cherished you.