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Romans 14 – 16

“Unity in the Church”

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People attempt to settle their differences in a variety of ways, some of which cause further division. Although the Bible instructs the church to live in harmony and unity, there are some serious differences in the church as whole, as well as individual churches in particular. If you’ve ever been involved in a church dispute, then you know that settling differences in the church can be an extremely difficult proposition.

As Paul concludes his letter to the church in Rome, he calls them to unity. His desire was to have people from different backgrounds, with different perspectives and different convictions about some things, be able to worship the same Lord together.

The church in Rome was a blending of Jews and Gentiles. On the one hand, there were Jews, who had rules and convictions about everything. The Jews were strict and legalistic and they naturally ascribed to a long list of do’s and don’ts. On the other hand, there were the Gentiles, who had no rigid structure of rules, nor did they have much in the way of convictions about anything. They had no feasts and festivals like the Jews; they just came as they were. It’s easy to see the potential for a church split!

Paul was essentially encouraging the believers by saying, “You’re going to have to learn to get along; to tolerate your differences.” ([Romans 15:5–6](#)) The question is where do you draw the line? How much tolerance is too much? When is being too tolerant too much of a risk for compromising truth and/or doctrinal integrity?

Paul is surely not indicating that the church should tolerate someone coming in and teaching a way to be saved other than through Jesus. His letter to the church in Galatia provides the necessary evidence to prove that false teaching should be not tolerated. He couldn’t have said it any stronger than he did when he said, “... even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!” ([Galatians 1:8–9](#))

Paul also didn't mean to say that sin should be tolerated for the sake of unity. The serious issue in the church at Corinth demonstrates that the church was in error regarding their understanding of what should and shouldn't be tolerated. There was a man in the church who professed to be a Christian, yet he was living in open sexual sin with his stepmother! You can almost hear Paul roar when you read **1 Corinthians 5:1-2**: *"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?"*

The point is clear; the church is to judge those inside the church regarding doctrine and truth. Paul said, *"What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?"* (**1 Corinthians 5:12**) This answers the objection that some people have about not wanting to be judged. In **1 Peter 4:17**, we read what Peter had to say on this subject: *"Judgment begins with the family of God."* Jesus said, *"Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment."* (**John 7:24**) In other words, there is a difference between being judgmental and making right judgments. To be judgmental is to question appearances without all of the facts. To make right judgments is to evaluate actions with the truth.

Christians are not to be judgmental, nor are they to throw discernment out the window and tolerate all kinds of sin and false doctrine in the church. When Paul speaks about having a *"spirit of unity"* and tolerating the differences that exist in the church, he's talking about disputable matters, which he addresses in **Romans 14-15**. He's referring to things that are not specifically addressed in Scripture as having an eternal significance or consequence. These are just the good old-fashioned differences of opinion that are common to believers who are trying to figure out what is right and what is wrong for things that are not black and white. In their case the two main areas of concern were diet and days. (**Romans 14:1-6**)

The list in the church today seems to have expanded exponentially! Here's a list that is far less than exhaustive: music, movies, birth control, alcohol, hem lines, long hair, short hair, dating, dancing, smoking, chewing, piercing, and tattoos. If asked, many of us would boldly state our opinion that there are no gray areas in a list like this! The problem arises when people in the church want other people in the church to live by their standards, or when they want to preach their standards. What is the danger here? The danger is in being legalistic about things that God isn't.

The previous list includes the cultural things Christians wrestle with. Consider the doctrinal views that create disunity in the church, such as: immersion, sprinkling, tongues, pre-tribulation rapture, mid-tribulation rapture, post-tribulation rapture, eternal security, eternal insecurity, predestination, contemporary worship, and traditional hymns to name a few! It's no wonder there are so many churches in conflict today.

What are the keys to unity in the church? What can we do to prevent division in the church, and even more seriously, how can we avoid a church split? In this study we'll see that believers must have personal conviction, others consideration and a desire for mutual edification if they're going to maintain unity in the church in general as well as the local church.

Personal Conviction

1. If you have a personal conviction about something and someone else doesn't, don't let that cause you to compromise your convictions; but at the same time, don't be judgmental because they don't share the same convictions.
2. **Romans 14:5** – *“One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.”*
3. **Romans 14:12** – *“... each of us will give an account of himself to God.”*

Others Consideration

4. Our liberties are not more important than our relationships with other people.
5. **Romans 14:13–15** – *“Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.”*
6. **Romans 14:20–21** – *“Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.”*

Mutual Edification

7. Paul goes beyond just asking what we can do to stop doing what will offend others; he asks what can we start doing to build them up?
8. **Romans 15:7** – *“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”*

Discussion Questions

1. Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
2. Read **Romans 14:19–21 and 15:1–7** to provide an overview for this study.

3. If the people in your group didn't hear the Pastor Gary's message, tell the Texas Three Kick Rule¹ joke as a way to "kick-start" a discussion about the different ways people go about trying to solve disputes, both in the church and life in general.

4. Spend time talking about the make up of Cornerstone Chapel.
 - a. What percentage of people do you think come from a Calvary Chapel background?
 - b. What percentage of people do you think come from a Catholic, Baptist, Methodist or other denominational background?
 - c. What percentage of people do you think come from a cult or non-Christian background?
 - d. What percentage of people do you think have no church or religious background?
 - e. Pastor Gary said there has never been a church split or major disagreement at Cornerstone.
 - i. Why is that the case at Cornerstone?
 - ii. Do you think the reason is because of a specific philosophy of ministry or church government structure?
 - iii. Encourage the people in your group to read the book *Calvary Chapel Distinctives* (available for free as a Word document). Everyone who attends a Cornerstone Chapel Orientation Class receives this paperback book, in addition to Pastor Gary's overview of the philosophy of ministry, ministry teams and church organizational structure at Cornerstone.

5. Read and discuss **Romans 15:5-6**.

6. Do you think "tolerance" has become an obsession in our culture?
 - a. What are some of the issues that elicit an outcry of "you're being intolerant"?
 - b. Can too much tolerance lead to a compromise of truth or doctrinal integrity?
 - c. Review and discuss the article about a couple in England who were arrested for talking about Christianity with a Muslim woman who complained to police that she was the recipient of hate speech, etc. The article indicates, "[t]hey have been charged under public order laws with using 'threatening, abusive or insulting words' that were 'religiously aggravated.'" ²

¹ Texas Three-Kick Rule – A big-city California lawyer went duck hunting in rural Texas. He shot and dropped a bird, but it fell into a farmer's field on the other side of a fence.... As the lawyer climbed over the fence, an elderly farmer drove up on his tractor and asked him what he was doing. The litigator responded, "I shot a duck and it fell into this field, and now I'm going to retrieve it." The old farmer replied, "This is my property, and you are not coming over here." The indignant lawyer said, "I am one of the best trial attorneys in the U.S. and, if you don't let me get that duck, I'll sue you and take everything you own." The old farmer smiled and said, "Apparently, you don't know how we do things in Texas. We settle small disagreements like this with the Texas Three-Kick-Rule." The lawyer asked, "What is the Texas Three-Kick-Rule?" The farmer replied, "Well, first I kick you three times and then you kick me three times, and so on, back and forth, until someone gives up." The attorney quickly thought about the proposed contest and decided that he could easily take the old codger. He agreed to abide by the local custom. The old farmer slowly climbed down from the tractor and walked up to the city feller. His first kick planted the toe of his heavy work boot into the lawyer's groin and dropped him to his knees. His second kick nearly wiped the man's nose off his face. The barrister was flat on this belly when the farmer's third kick to a kidney nearly caused him to give up. The lawyer summoned every bit of his will and managed to get to his feet and said, "OK, you old coot! Now, it's my turn." The old farmer smiled and said, "No I give up, you can have the duck.

² <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1214666/Christian-hotel-owners-hauled-court-defending-beliefs-discussion-Muslim-guest.html#ixzz0RwXqodX9>

7. Read and discuss these quotes.
 - a. "Peace if possible, but truth at all costs." Martin Luther
 - b. "It is better to be divided by the truth, than united in error." Charles Haddon Spurgeon

8. Spend time talking about the difference between being judgmental and right judging.
 - a. To be judgmental is to question appearances without all of the facts.
 - b. To make right judgments is to evaluate actions with the truth.
 - c. Read and discuss these Scriptures: [1 Corinthians 5:12](#), [1 Peter 4:17](#) and [John 7:24](#).

9. Read and discuss the list of potential areas of conflict in the church regarding cultural differences.
 - a. Music, movies, birth control, alcohol, hem lines, long hair, short hair, dating, dancing, smoking, chewing, piercing, tattoos, etc.

10. Read and discuss the list of potential areas of conflict in the church regarding doctrinal differences.
 - a. Immersion, sprinkling, tongues, pre-tribulation rapture, mid-tribulation rapture, post-tribulation rapture, eternal security, eternal insecurity, predestination, contemporary worship, traditional hymns, etc.

11. One study determined that from 2000 to 2005, an average of 3,707 churches closed each year in the United States.³ The study doesn't reveal the reasons why churches close.
 - a. What percentage of churches do you think close each year due to splits over doctrine?
 - b. What percentage of churches do you think close each year due to other areas of division?

12. Allow the people in your group to share a personal conviction they have.
 - a. Spend time discussing the importance of keeping their personal convictions from the Lord.
 - b. Encourage the people in your group to avoid judging others because they don't hold the same convictions.

13. Read and discuss [Romans 14:13–15, 20–21](#).
 - a. Encourage the people in your group to recognize that their individual liberties are not more important than their relationships with other people.

14. Read [Romans 15:7](#) and discuss ways that Christians can build up other Christians.

15. Close your time by allowing everyone in your group to: (select a volunteer to read [Romans 12:18](#)) do their part to be at peace with all people; to recognize and accept our differences so that the enemy would gain a foothold and create division and discord in relationships in general as well as relationships in the church.

³ http://www.churchcentral.com/blog_page.php?id=180