

Lake Cities Community Church
October 5, 2008
Series: Church Unity
Pastor Craig Schill

“Fully Accepted!”
(Romans 14:1-5)

We are going to start this morning with a little time travel back to about A.D. 57. To meet two people (Samuel and Miletus) - let me describe them to you. They are both Christians and they have just been baptized into membership of the same church in the City of Rome. And that is about where their similarities end.

Samuel is an older man – He is a Jewish man, a Roman citizen, and takes his faith seriously. He is greatly respected in the community and his public testimony has given credibility to the gospel. He rejoices in the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. As a religious man, Samuel has always kept the law. He is not a Pharisee - he knows it does not save Him – but he loves the law and has experienced its benefits. For example, he loves the celebrations and festivals. His family looks forward to each one and the time they will spend together. His kids have learned about God and His faithfulness through these feasts. Samuel is also faithful to eat pure foods. He knows that Jesus declared all foods clean – but still he feels that God had great wisdom in forbidding some foods and endorsing others. But it is more than that... you see during the Maccabean War – His great, great grandfather was killed by Roman soldiers for refusing to eat unclean foods. That story is legendary in his family. *And so He is glad* that in the new church he has the freedom (and many other Jews and some Gentiles join him) to continue to celebrate the festivals and to eat or not eat according to their custom.

Now Miletus is a younger man. He is a Roman slave, but he is very sharp – hard working and educated. He is so bright, that even though he is young, he runs all the affairs of his master’s house and does it quite well. He is (you might say) a worldly man – he knows how to get things done in a pagan culture – which has led to his success. He is brash and loud and witty. Before he became a Christian, he often poked fun at the Jews in town, and their odd practices and eating habits. There were many jokes about all their funny rules, and Miletus knew them all. But when his master’s household converted to Christianity, and when he heard the amazing story of Jesus’ love expressed to Gentiles – he found himself being supernaturally drawn to Christ, and it has changed his life. His greatest relief, though (from a practical side), was that the leaders of the church told him that to become a Christian he would not need to be circumcised or to adopt the old Jewish rules about eating and celebrating certain days. What a relief this was to Miletus! Half of his favorite foods were banned by old Jewish laws! But he was told it would not be an issue – so now Miletus is inviting his friends and has become quite a zealous evangelist.

Samuel and Miletus – are both Christians but very different in every other way! Is it even possible for them to attend the same church? How in the world will they get along? *That was the Apostle Paul’s challenge as he sat down to write the book of Romans.* These two were not getting along – rather they were arguing and dividing the church. The church was about to split, not over a false gospel, or heresy – but over gray areas – food, drink and whether to celebrate certain holidays. Paul’s task was to bring a remedy to the problem.

Please take your Bibles out and turn to Romans chapter 14, verses 1-5. Last week we examined how not to handle gray issues in the church – not to be legalistic – not to set up

rules and expect everyone to believe the same way. Well, this morning we look at *how to* handle gray issues biblically. Paul's remedy to the problem! Let's jump right in.

Verse 1 – Biblical Acceptance

Rom. 14:1 Now accept the one who is weak in faith, *but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions*. How do you manage people with differing opinions on gray issues? You **accept them!** Acceptance is the controlling command of chapters 14 and 15. We are to accept one another – because, verse three “*God has accepted him*”. The conclusion, (15:7), “*Accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.*” To accept one another is a command – an imperative, which hints, of course, that our natural tendency is not to accept. In terms of a definition, the word has the sense of extending a welcome, as you would do in receiving a person into your home, with no inner reservations based on different customs. (BDAG 883:4 & TDNT IV:15).

To put it another way - Paul is not *just* calling for toleration. Paul is *not just* saying, “Agree to disagree.” Instead he calls both sides toward one another in loving acceptance of the other person. This is radical, unexpected and really, really hard to do. But, when it is accomplished, there is nothing quite so beautiful. Have you ever felt that kind of acceptance? Have you ever been welcomed without reservation and with loving kindness. We are not talking about ignorant acceptance – you know there are differences – but because they are in gray areas – they don't matter – you are accepted fully. *Paul's answer to gray areas is acceptance.*

Contrast between the Weak and Strong (2-4)

But as I said – acceptance is really, really hard. Sometimes acceptance seems downright irresponsible. To accept someone like me is OK – but to accept someone different – wait a minute –

where is the quality control? Aren't we dropping our standards? Well, Paul knows how tough it can be – and so he sets up a classic contrast between the strong and weak in faith. Follow carefully.

The person “strong in faith” is the one who exercises more freedom in Christ with less restrictions, like Miletus in our opening example. The natural tendency for this person is not to accept – but to poke fun at, or to dismiss what they view as the rigid rules of the other person. So Paul says to them (v3): **“The one who eats (food) is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat.”** Contempt here means, to reject another person, to not take them seriously, to dismiss them. A famous commentator on the book of Romans (Schreiner) said, “Such an admonition is fitting, for those who are more liberal in their preferences are inclined to mock and ridicule those who feel confined...The person free from restraint finds it difficult to understand why others bridle themselves. Since it appears irrational to the “strong,” they are tempted to poke fun at those who are more conservative” (Schreiner, 717). And this happens all the time.

I use all different types of Bible translations, but I have occasion from time to time been around those who believe in the King James only. Well, I admit to have at times poked fun at these people, dismissed them and really held them in contempt because I disagree with their viewpoint. Paul says – you have more freedom – good for you – but accept your brother in Christ – don't put them down – watch your attitude! We are all strong in some areas – where we enjoy liberty and we have a hard time understanding why our brother or sister in Christ is more restrictive than we are.

The other side of the coin is the person “weak in faith.” This is the person who has more restrictions – like Samuel in our opening example. This person's natural tendency is to judge those operating with more liberty. Paul said, **“The one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats.”** The person who is weak in faith is tempted to judge those with more liberal views as being

unwise or even in sin. This person takes their faith very seriously and they interpret another's liberty as them *not* taking their faith seriously.

Tammy and I were involved in a parenting class when our kids were young called Growing Kids God's Way. It was very helpful to us and had very specific recommendations for how to handle certain parts of parenting that we found to be effective. And while the program itself was not legalistic, we observed some in the movement came to see it that way. For example, some parents would only let their children play with other children whose parents had been through the class – because they were “likeminded.” They judged other Christian families as not being worthy for their children. These young parents were right to take their parenting responsibility seriously, but they were wrong to let it turn into a judgmental attitude toward others with different views. Just like we are strong in some areas – we are also weak in some areas – and we are tempted to judge other people.

And so what is Paul's answer to the weak and to the strong? It is to **accept one another!** Accept them for who they are and where they are in their journey of faith. Accept them – not for the purposes of changing the other person's mind – not to argue your point, but accept them because Christ has accepted them. End of verse three, “**for God has accepted him.**” Verse four, “**Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.**” You are not to judge in gray areas! Isn't that a relief? God has accepted that person – they are accountable to Jesus Christ and to their own conscious: verse five, “**One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.**” Paul repeats for emphasis in verse 10: “**But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all**

stand before the judgment seat of God.” The message could not be clearer – accept those with differing opinions on gray issues – there must be room for Samuel and Miletus in the same church!

Contemporary Issues / Our Issues

But we don't struggle with the same issues they did in the first century. So now let's revisit the question – what issues are relevant for our generation and which of those are we prone to struggle with at LCCC? Where are our potential dividing lines? The focus of my master's thesis was on this very issue – gray issues and how they impact church unity. I surveyed 175 church leaders – pastors, elders, and staff members in 99 different churches on 25 gray theological and cultural issues. They are listed in your bulletin handout. Things like worship style, role of women in the church, divorce /remarriage, Halloween, alcohol, dancing, tobacco, politics, church governance, parenting philosophies, end times, etc.

Now on the handout there is a middle column. That column is there so that you can check the issues that you feel are potential conflict causers here. Maybe you have experienced conflict on this issue – or maybe you have observed tension. It could just be a small issue, but it is something to watch out for. Go ahead and check your boxes.

Last week I said that I would share with you what issues I think we should pay attention to. And so now I share with you what I think not in a judgmental manner, but rather in the spirit seeking encouraging you and I to seek acceptance with one another in these areas. First, I would put a check by worship style – not a major area thankfully in our church, but something to watch. Also movie ratings. People in our church have some very different opinions about what movies are appropriate and which ones are not – it is something to be aware of – not to ridicule or judge – there is room for all here. Child education will be a challenge for us – we have a majority of families who home school – I am happy to say I have not sensed from you a judgmental attitude toward public or

private school kids. There is a church I am aware of that has just split over home school and public school parents who could not get along. They would not even let their kids play together! The challenge for our home school families (and I say this because you are in the majority) is to be welcoming and accepting of visitors and families who public school or private school. Accept them without reservation into the community. Similar to school choice - is different parenting philosophies – whether it is in the area of family worship, or child discipline. This is an area for us to respect and accept differences of opinions and not to either ridicule or to judge other people.

Listen congregation – it is always easier to split the church than to accept people with differences in gray areas. And that is exactly what happens. The contemporary church - meets over there; the traditional here. The older people go to this church, and the young people to that one – but they don't go to church together. The homeschool families go over here and the public school families over there – and they don't have to deal with one another. Splitting the church is always the easy things, but since when is the easy thing the right thing? Instead let us together seek a church that is rich in diversity of opinions and convictions on gray issues - to the glory of God!

Application:

I have a very special application challenge for us this morning – we may have the opportunity to practice this loving acceptance in a surprising way. We have talked about churches splitting – but what if two churches actually sought to come together? What if the Lord brought about 10 new families to our church all at the same time? Some may be more like Samuel and others like Miletus. Is our church big enough in our understanding of unity, to fold 10 new families into this congregation?

Grace Fellowship Church is at Rowlett Road and Lakeview Parkway. They lost their pastor about a year ago, and have been struggling. Their attendance has reached about 10 families. They

are a hardworking, delightful and godly group of believer - but they are a little worn out and don't know if they can continue their church going. They are at a fork in the road – do they close the church and go their separate ways? Do they continue to try to call a new part-time pastor? But then someone had an idea – what if we seek to merge with another church? Martin Jones had spoke there months ago and the chairman of their leadership team, Allen Johnson, called me a few weeks ago and said, “You don't know me, but I would like to get together with you and talk about LCCC.”

What they are considering and praying about is with unity joining LCCC – coming under our elders and plugging into our ministries. It would allow them to maintain unity in their congregation and instead of closing the church – move the church into a new phase of ministry. The plan right now is for their church to join us here on Sunday 11-2, and for us to hold a joint service with them on November 9. Do you know their greatest fear? Will the people at LCCC accept us? We will be treated as outsiders? We will be welcomed or will this be awkward?

Conclusion

I am going to close with a video clip from the movie Antwone Fisher. It is a powerful movie based on a true story about a young man's search for his family. Fisher's father was killed before he was born, and he was not married to Antwone's mother who gave him to an orphanage – so the family never knew he existed. Antwone's fear in finding his family was – would they accept him? An outsider. I mean they don't even know him – yet he is just going to show up one day? Yet he finds with his new family unconditional acceptance – it is a beautiful visual picture of what we have been talking about this morning.