

Lake Cities Community Church
September 21, 2008
Pastor Craig Schill

“Shades of Gray”
(Romans 14:1)

It is story time with Pastor Schill and I need a little audience interaction. How many of you grew up reading Dr. Seuss? What were some of your favorite Seuss stories? One of my favorites was *The Sneetches*. Do you remember that book? Here is how it started:

Now the Star-bellied Sneetches had bellies with stars.
The Plain-bellied Sneetches had none upon thars.
The stars weren't so big; they were really quite small.
You would think such a thing wouldn't matter at all.
But because they had stars, all the Star-bellied Sneetches
would brag, "We're the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches."

With their snoots in the air, they would sniff and they'd snort, "
We'll have nothing to do with the plain-bellied sort."
And whenever they met some, when they were out walking,
they'd hike right on past them without even talking.

When the Star-bellied children went out to play ball,
could the Plain-bellies join in their game? Not at all!
You could only play ball if your bellies had stars,
and the Plain-bellied children had none upon thars.

When the Star-bellied Sneetches had frankfurter roasts,
or picnics or parties or marshmallow toasts,
they never invited the Plain-bellied Sneetches.
Left them out cold in the dark of the beaches.
Kept them away; never let them come near,
and that's how they treated them year after year.

Have you ever felt that you didn't have the right star on your belly? I mean in the church?
Maybe you have felt judged because you didn't dress the right way, or look the right way. Maybe
your beliefs seemed out of step with the church – or your family was different from the other

families in some way. *The issue wasn't big – it was really quite small – you would think such a thing wouldn't matter at all* – but it did matter and you were hurt in the church.

This morning we are talking about the gray issues of the church. Some things are black and white – but there are many shades of gray. And when it comes to unity in the local church – gray issues often become the dry tinder upon which sparks of conflict are lit and blaze. But we often do not talk about these things. In Carl Lundquist's book *Silent Issues of the Church* he writes, "The problems discussed here tend to be *silent* issues of the church. Pastors hesitate to deal with them from the pulpit, and understandably so. Every congregation includes people deeply wounded by bad experiences in life" (p7). Gray issues may be small in some respect – but they can do great damage and so our purpose today is to introduce the concept of gray issues with respect to church unity, and to begin to see how to handle them in a biblical manner.

What is a Gray Issue?

So what are we talking about – what is a "gray issue?" Turn with me to the book of Romans, chapter 14. Over the next three weeks, Romans 14-15 will be a frequent text for us, but this morning we only are looking at verse 1: "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters" (NIV). The concept of weak faith and strong faith - we will look at in two weeks, so set that aside for now – the key things for us to observe is that *in the church at Roman, believers were passing judgment on other believers concerning, "disputable matters."* Some had stars on their bellies and others did not.

The Greek word is translated in the NIV as "disputable matters." It is translated in other versions as: "differing opinions" (NET), "opinions" (NASB, ESV, RSV) or "doubtful issues" (HCSB). The word is a plural noun - that indicates there were multiple such issues at work in Rome. The word has a basic meaning of a "conclusion reached through use of reason, *thought, opinion*"

(BDAG, 232). In other words, there were various issues in Rome and people came up with differing opinions about them. On these types of issues, Paul said – “Don’t judge or quarrel with each other.” Different opinions on these kind of issues are OK! Theologians call these issues: *adiaphora* which means, “The range of morally neutral actions, neither good nor bad...things neither commanded nor forbidden by the Word of God.” (Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 25-26.).

And so with that background – here is my definition for a “gray issue” in the church: **A gray issue is one that is either not directly addressed in the Bible, and/or an issue that leaves room for legitimate differences of interpretation based on a sound biblical interpretation.** Synonyms for gray issues that you may hear are secondary issues, disputable / doubtful issues, peripheral, amoral, secondary items areas for Christian liberty / freedom.

As Lundquist said - the truth of the matter is that we seldom talk about gray issues – I would be surprised if you have heard many sermons on this topic. One reason is that some Christians have a very hard time coming to grips with the fact that the Bible does not provide clear answers for every issue. There is a temptation to think that the Bible should be like the old Shell Answer Man – it should answer every question and address every issue with equal specificity. But gray issues remind us that God *did not give us unlimited revelation* – but He gave us just what he wanted to give us and then with limited info – he asks us to have unity with one another.

What a Gray Issues are Not

Before we look at some examples of gray issues, let’s build some more context and talk about what gray issues *are not*. First gray areas are not Cardinal issues. A Cardinal doctrine is something very clear - central to the Christian faith, such as the deity of Christ, the Trinity and the resurrection. Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson provide this definition: “A belief is considered a

dogma (i.e. cardinal) if it seems essential to the gospel. In other words, if its denial would seem to entail *apostasy* – rejection of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Who Needs Theology, p.73). For example, Regarding the centrality of the Trinity, theologian Scott Horrell states, “Without the Trinity there is no Christian faith, because the specific revelation of God entrusted to us in the New Testament is lost from view.” To deny these types of truths is to leave historic Christianity. This is the historic Christianity I spoke about three weeks ago. These are black and white – cardinal issues.

In addition to cardinal doctrines there are also many **clearly taught matters**. They are not necessarily things that will be in your doctrinal statement – but they are not gray - but very clear teaching of the Bible. For example, the Scripture presents clear prohibition against practice of adultery (Mark 10:19), stealing (Ephesians 4:28), lying (Colossians 3:9), homosexuality (Romans 1:27) and being drunk with alcohol (Ephesians 5:18). These (and many other topics) are not gray areas to debate, but teaching we are all called to obey.

Gray Issues and Church Unity

Let’s return now to further discuss gray issues and now examine how they can impact church unity. The first area gray issues can impact unity is in the area of theology. How exactly should a person be baptized – immersed or sprinkled? When, exactly does the Bible allow for divorce or remarriage? When exactly will Jesus return, and how are those events to be ordered? These are just a few theological issues for which the Bible is not as clear as we might like – people hold differing opinions – they are gray areas.

Let me give you an example from church history. Go back with me to 1529. German Reformer Martin Luther and Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli met for a meeting of great importance. The purpose of the meeting was to unify their two major branches of the reformation. Together they would be able to advance the cause of Christ in ways neither could do alone. However, the theology

of the Lord's Table became a sticking point. Historian Justo Gonzales writes "On most issues there was agreement, but not on the meaning and efficacy of communion" (Gonzales 1:52). In a chapter of his book called "Disaster of Disunity" Historian Peter Hammon writes, "It was one of Zwingli's greatest regrets that he and Luther could not come to any point of agreement on this 15th doctrinal point. Zwingli urged toleration for the difference views." Luther regarded Zwingli's plea for toleration as an indication that the Zurich pastor did not take his own views seriously enough. Gray issues "1". Unity "0". There are many gray theological issues that have the potential to tragically divide people, churches and movements.

A second area where gray areas can impact unity is regarding cultural issues. In the 1950's great debate surrounded Rock-and-Roll music. In the 1990's great debate surrounded Harry Potter. What do we do with cultural issues? How do you apply Scriptural principles to specific questions about culture? Well – people come up with differing opinions – gray issues.

Come back with me in time to Luther and Zwingli again. In the late middle ages there was a great change happening in the area of corporate worship – and with new reformed churches, people were wondering whether they could use contemporary music and contemporary instruments in a worship service. It was a great debate of the time. Sound familiar? If you think worship wars are new – they aren't. While Luther was pretty dogmatic on the meaning of Communion – he was more flexible in the area of music. He would use secular tunes and give them new meaning in his services. He encouraged different instruments – even if they were not "traditional" for that time. "Luther was willing to retain all traditional uses (of music) that did not contradict the Bible." Zwingli, on the other hand, while willing to flex on communion – was not so flexible in the area of worship. His interpretation on Scripture was that if an instrument was not specifically mentioned in

the Bible – it should not be used in a service. Zwingli insisted that all (instruments) that had no explicit scriptural support must be rejected. This led Zwingli to suppress the use of organs in church, for such instruments – as well as the violin, which he played expertly - were not to be found in the Bible.” Differing opinions on cultural issues.

Summary: Gray issues are by definition the type of issues that bring out different opinions – because the Bible’s revelation is limited – it does not fill in the blanks for every issue or question. And, therefore, they have the potential of causing conflict in the church. Gray issues are not unimportant issues – they are just debatable issues. Gray issues often generate as much or more passion than cardinal doctrines or clear teaching. Sometimes we are so passionate about gray issues that it is not until the second generation that we get the proper perspective. After Martin Luther died, Philip Melanchthon, who saw all the division became an expert on *adiaphora* and is a model to us. Unlike Luther he was able to bring different people together, “He was willing to accept a compromised confession of faith... on the basis that certain doctrine are of minor importance and may be taught or denied with out damaging the essentials of the faith.” As a church we must be aware of gray areas and we *must handle them very carefully* if we are to have unity in the church.

Name that Issue

So now let’s play a game. The game is called “Name that Issue.” One problem that is very, very common is that we mislabel issues in the church. Sometimes we will accidently put a cardinal doctrine in the gray issue category. Or we will treat a gray issue as a clear teaching of Scripture. So here is how we play - I am going to read an issue and you are going to tell me whether it is (1) a cardinal doctrine, (2) a gray issue, or (3) a clearly taught biblical truth. Are you ready?

1. The Deity of Jesus (Cardinal)
2. Stealing (Clear Teaching)

3. Getting drunk (Clear Teaching)
4. Drinking Alcohol (Gray Issue)
5. Harry Potter (Gray Issue)
6. The Trinity (Cardinal)
7. The Return of Jesus Christ (Clear Teaching / Cardinal)
8. Pre-millennial dispensationalism (Gray Issue)
9. Parent's responsibility to train their children (Clear Teaching)
10. Whether you homeschool, public school or private school your children (Gray Issue)
11. Lying (Clear Teaching)
12. The importance and permanence of marriage (Clear Teaching)
13. Exact occasions under which a person may be divorced and remarried (Gray Issue)
14. Christian's celebration of Halloween (Gray Issue)
15. The Deity of Jesus Christ (Cardinal)
16. Punching your brother in the stomach when he bothers you (Clear Issue)
17. Modern use of sign gifts – such as healing, tongues, etc. (Gray Issue)
18. Style of worship music (Gray Issue)
19. Virgin Birth (Cardinal Doctrine)
20. Gossiping about someone else (Clear Teaching)

As you think about these concepts – and by way of application – let me leave you with three words: For Cardinal Doctrines the key word is **“fight”**. These are worth fighting for – preserving – we dare not give up on them. For clear Bible teaching the Key word is **“obey”** – Just do it – love, serve, share, don't lie, don't steal, don't cheat in school. Obey. Gray issues – Key word is **“Accept”** – Accept the fact that in this area you will have differences of opinion. Accept the fact that some people have stars on their bellies and others do not.

Conclusion:

Let's finish the story about The Sneetches did not accept one another – but they judged one another and became divided. And the story gets worse before it gets better - *A man Sylvester McMonkey McBean* comes to the town and says to the Sneetches without stars – that the solution to the problem is not to keep diversity – but to make sure everyone is the same – for a price he can put a star on their bellies – and he does so – then the Star Belley Sneetches, who have now lost their source of pride want their stars taken off and McBean accommodates them for a price:

All the rest of the day on those wild screaming beaches,
the Fix-it-up-Chappie was fixing up Sneetches.
Off again, on again, in again, out again,
through the machine and back round about again,
still paying money, still running through,
changing their stars every minute or two,
until neither the Plain- nor the Star-bellies knew
whether this one was that one or that one was this one
or which one was what one or what one was who!

Then, when every last cent of their money was spent,
the Fix-It-Up-Chappie packed up and he went.
And he laughed as he drove in his car up the beach,
"They never will learn; no, you can't teach a Sneetch!"

But McBean was quite wrong, I'm quite happy to say,
the Sneetches got quite a bit smarter that day.
That day, they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches,
and no kind of Sneetch is the BEST on the beaches.
That day, all the Sneetches forgot about stars,
and whether they had one or not upon thars.

The Sneetches learned to accept differences within their community – and to not let such a small think divide them – the diversity of opinions that we have on gray issues – we will learn over the next two weeks is not a weakness of the church, but a source of strength – it we handled them correctly. May God empower us to do so. Let's pray.