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Accept One Another

It's a Saturday night; the church building is all decorated. The flowers are out. The groom and the preacher are down front. The bridesmaids come in one at a time, beautifully dressed. Then after the chimes are offered, in comes the bride. She's limping, her dress is muddy and torn, her nose is bleeding, and her hair is totally out of place. As she comes down the aisle, somebody whispers where you can overhear: "Can you believe it? She's been fighting again. Surely, he deserves better than this."

That story is a parable of too many local churches. There is nothing uglier than a brawling bride. Jesus Christ deserves better than that, particularly from His bride. Family feud is no game when it comes to the bride or the Body of Christ.

"Accept one another." (Romans 15:7) If your congregation is going to be a healthy and growing body of believers, you've got to learn how to accept one another. That concept is rooted deeply in the very mind of our Lord.

If you knew you were going to die, this time tomorrow, what would you do today? There might be all kinds of answers, but wouldn't you focus on priorities? Don't you think you would spend your time doing the most important things?

On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus' priority was to spend time in prayer and to pray for the unity of His believers. "'That all of them may be one. Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me.'" Listen, "'May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.'" (John 17:21-23)

In the last part of that statement Jesus prayed; I want those who believe in me to be one so that the world may know that you sent me. Unity is the key element in Jesus' master plan for world evangelism. Mankind lives in such disharmony that Jesus knew that the visible oneness of His church would be a convicting testimony that God was in the world, and that He was reconciling the world to Himself through Jesus Christ. Unity is the foundation to world evangelism. You know as the early church got started, that's exactly the way it worked. "All the believers were together and had everything in common." (Acts 2:44) "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts." (Acts 2:46) "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions were his own, but they shared everything they had." (Acts 4:32) The result of that unity was the answer to Jesus' prayer, "Father, if you'll let them be one in me, then the world will know that you sent me."

The early Christians were "praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:47) The principle is clear. Where you have real unity, you have growth. That is why Jesus prayed for it so hard, and that's why the devil fights it so fiercely.

The first century church in Rome was not like the Jerusalem church. The church in Rome was not as homogenous as the one in Jerusalem. No, this church in Rome was a hybrid fellowship of Gentiles and Jews which led to problems.

1. Tension over different ideas people of different cultures brought to the Body. Any time you have a diverse group of people, you're going to have diverse opinions, and that will create tension. Most of the time

throughout history, just as was the case of Rome, it's not so much matters of doctrine as it usually is matters of opinion.

The root of the problem was that the majority of the Christians were Gentiles, and as the majority, they wanted to do things their way. On the flip side the Jews were saying "But we've been God's covenant people for a long time; we should do things our way." Have you ever heard anybody talk like that? Or say "I've been at this church for years. If you don't like the way we do this or that, go somewhere else." That mindset is a prescription for a very, very small church. Now that's what is going on in Rome. It's not a tension over major doctrine.

They're not arguing about the divinity of Christ like they were in Colosse. They're not talking about the sufficiency of atonement. They're not arguing about the authority of apostles like they were in Galatia. They're not arguing about the role of baptism. They're not talking about the abuses or neglect of the Lord's Supper like in Corinth. There is just tension over different ideas that different cultures have.

The following shows how trivial some of these ideas were. "Accept him whose faith is weak without passing judgment on disputable matters.

- a. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.
- b. 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. He who regards one day as special does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God." (Romans 14:1-6)

Do you see the two issues they're disagreeing about?

- a. Should we eat meat? Apparently, the context indicates the meat might have been sacrificed to idols. Should we just not touch any meat then and go ahead and eat vegetables?
- b. Can we observe certain days as special days that we just want to celebrate as holidays as holy days? They argue and tension builds over, "I think I can eat this." "No, I don't think you can eat that." "I think we can observe this day." "No, I don't think you can do that."

The issues are not very important. What is important is the unity that Jesus prayed for could be destroyed by the Roman Christians if they don't learn to live together in peace. So after they understand the problem Paul gives them the principles to live by. These are the same principles he wants us to live by. "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." (Romans 14:13) "Let us therefore make every effort" (I've underlined that in my Bible) "make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." (Romans 14:19)

That's easier said than done because the devil is going to keep things stirred up. He'll use weapons like competition, jealousy, suspicion, and distrust. He's going to make it awfully difficult, not just for the church in Rome, but for any church to keep from judging one another and sniping at one another. How on earth are we going to live by those principles? How are we going to quit casting judgments on one another about petty

things, about things going beyond the Word of God, simply my opinion verses your opinion? How on earth are we going to make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification?

2. Be of the same mind or heart. The only way that we are going to maintain unity among Christians is to be of the same mind or heart. "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus." (Romans 15:5) "So that with one heart (the New American Standard says "with one mind" which is the same difference) "with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (v. 6) "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." (v. 7)

Paul told the Corinthians the same thing "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be" (look at this) "perfectly united in mind and thought." (1 Corinthians 1:10)

Can you imagine the chaos if your body had more than one mind? Can you imagine having two brains up there, one saying "I think I want to eat?" The other one saying, "No, I don't want to eat." One says, "I think I want to get up and exercise." The other one says, "No, I'm tired. I think I'm just going to sit here for a little while." Can you imagine? The question is how can we have one mind? How can we be "perfectly united in mind," when we know that we've got different opinions, judgments, preferences, and even different personal convictions?

The one mind has to be the mind of Christ. "Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus." Do you remember? You say, "Well, what mind was that?" (Philippians 2:5) He went on to tell us, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped (held on to), but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:6-8) That's the mind.

But, what does it mean to be of the same mind with one another? It means to have the same selfless sacrificing mind of Christ that puts others ahead of self even to the point of death. That's the command.

How many things would we argue about if the very foremost part of our mindset was: I love you so much that I will gladly die for you? Do you suppose that might dilute trivial arguments? I love you so much I'd die for you. Unity is not the result of total agreement on every opinion. They never arrived at that in Rome, some of them still celebrated those days and some didn't. Some of them still ate vegetables and others ate meat. It's not the result of total agreement on every opinion. Unity is the result of two people putting each other's interest ahead of their own, and that's the only way it will ever happen. "You be of the same mind" doesn't mean you have to be of my mind or that I have to be of your mind. It means that together we share the very mind of Christ. Our convictions on the side issues will not always agree, but the Christ who unites us is bigger than the opinions that divide us. The convicting testimony of Christian unity is not that we are all alike but that we are one even though we are not all alike.

The reason that the church grew so well in the first century is not by making all the Gentiles become Jews so that everybody would be alike. What was incredible about the church, particularly churches like the one in Rome is that the Jews stayed Jews by culture, the Gentiles stayed Gentiles, but for the first time in history, they treated each other not just with civility. They treated each other like family. That caused the whole world to stand up and say, "What on earth is going on with those folks?" The answer was: Jesus came from heaven and changed their lives. What Jesus prayed for is right. Real unity is the greatest testimony for Him and the very basis for evangelism. God's church so desperately needs to learn that principle and that power source.

Most of us grew up hearing, if you ever had a matter of disagreement, that really there are just three possible scenarios. You can either both be wrong, that's possible, or one of you can be right, and the other one wrong. But if you're disagreeing, then the two of you can't possibly both be right. After all, you're disagreeing. Paul said, "Hear me church, if it does not violate God's Word, let both be all right." He asked the Romans, "Do you want to observe this special day? That's all right. You don't want to observe that other day? That's all right, too. Do you want to eat meat?" That's all right. You don't care about eating meat? That's all right, too." He concluded by stating "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." (Romans 15:7)

There are a lot of things, not everything, but a lot of things in this world where you can be different and you can be all wrong. That's important to learn. Romans 15:7 says, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you."

Three practices:

1. Use God's standards to bind the body.

I want to be clear on this because I know I've emphasized the acceptance because that's the nature of our command. Someone might incorrectly assume that I'm promoting kind of a laissez-faire (deliberate abstention from direction), a let-everything-go attitude that never challenges sin, never challenges false teaching—WRONG! ABSOLUTELY, UNEQUIVOCALLY WRONG! A major function of God's Word is to protect us by letting us know those things are neither opinions or optional. There's never been a time when God doesn't expect obedience from His people. But, let's be careful not to bind on others what's beyond the teaching of God's Word. That's exactly what the Pharisees did. If you haven't read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John lately, go back and read them because Jesus' most scathing remarks were for the judgmental, hypocritical, narrow-minded legalism that went beyond God's Word. Jesus said on more than one occasion, "You're making a mockery of God's Word."

The great danger facing God's people in any generation is gradually accumulating a system of "dos and don'ts" that often times goes beyond God's Word. It is more cultural than Biblical. For example, before the days of air conditioning, the windows were open to help cool the building. This allowed flies to enter. A cover, a big white cloth cover, was placed over the bread and fruit of the vine to keep the flies off. As time passed the building was air-conditioned, the windows were closed and flies ceased to be a problem. Someone asked "How come we've still have that tablecloth over the table?" Someone replied "I don't know. Why don't we take it off?" There wasn't any argument about the elements of the bread or the fruit of the vine, or about how often it was to be taken. But great concern about the tablecloth with some contending it was not scriptural to not have the bread and the fruit of the vine covered while others contended that the cover was totally insignificant. The disagreement became so great they could no longer meet together. They ceased to have the mind of Christ. They were no longer united in the mind of Christ.

The same thing could be said about dress styles, hair lengths, types of songs to sing, and a hundred other things. You're allowed to have your convictions on those things. But if they are beyond God's standards, then bind them only on yourself. That's exactly what Paul said, "Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves." (Romans 14:22)

2. Your greatest right is your right to forego your rights. Jesus Christ called us to be free. "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32) But if you have opinions and they're distinctly opinions that you can't allow any room on without being miserable, you're not free but a slave to your

opinion. Romans 14 teaches that a mature Christian will give on an opinion, a practice, or a conviction not designated or bound by God for the sake of harmony for the body. The refusal to do this is a catalyst for disharmony.

"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves." (Romans 15:1) The number one thing that brings disunity in any church is selfishness. I want it my way no matter what! Paul says, "Don't let that characterize you." The truly mature Christian realizes he or she has the option, in fact the privilege, of giving up his rights, for the rights of others.

3. The key to unity is discipleship.

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves" (notice) "as you follow Christ Jesus." (Romans 15:5) Jesus said, "Take up your cross and come and follow me." People who carry crosses don't fight. They don't fight because they've got something far more important on their minds.

If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ, you're daily dying to self, and if self is dying, then you do not quibble over petty issues. "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you." It would amaze us just how united we could be if our focus was on Christ and sharing Him with the world that doesn't know Him. Dying to self daily will let Him live in us more each day. Discipleship really is the key to unity.

If you're not united with Jesus, you can't be united with everybody else. But if you are in Christ, then you can have the mind of Christ, and that will allow you to be of one mind then with all the other believers in God's church, wherever it may assemble. There is only one way to be united with Christ, you must die to sinful self and be buried with Him for Him to raise you to the new life and add you to His Body, His church. Amazing Grace #1309, Steve Flatt, April 13, 1997

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