

Unity in the Gospel of God

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[0 : 00] Well, please take a seat. Also, just to let you know about the new Bibles, we do have ones, some people ordered some personal copies, so we've got some burgundy-coloured ones available from the office during the week.

Linda has the list there, I believe, or will have if she doesn't. Let me pray for us before we begin. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that you continue to speak to us through it and that what you have to say to us is still relevant for us today. And so we pray, Heavenly Father, that you would help us to understand your word, to heed it, to live it out, and in doing so, bring you great honour and glory. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, it's a fact of life that people have different opinions about all sorts of topics, whether to use lemonade in your scones or not, to whether Essendon is better than Collingwood, or whether the dogs beat them all.

Where's Len? Len's down there somewhere. Or whether cricket is a better code altogether. And while we as Christians agree on core matters of salvation, there are things that even we have different opinions about.

[1 : 14] For example, let me ask you a series of questions and just answer them in your mind as a Christian. Would you as a Christian eat pork? Would you as a Christian drink some wine?

Would you have a beer? Would you regard one day of a week more important than others and do no shopping on that day as a Christian? Would you play the card game called cheat?

You know that old card game called cheat? When it involves, well, cheating. Would you as a Christian smoke a cigar at a friend's wedding? Or not because of Christian values?

I'm talking about things not that you like or dislike, but things you do or not do based on your beliefs. Based on your beliefs as a Christian, would you let your children or grandchildren read Harry Potter books, even though it involves magic?

Would you play a game of poker? Would you watch a horror movie? Here's one. Would you want your children or grandchildren to be baptised as babies? Or do you want them to grow up and be baptised as a teenager or an adult?

[2 : 14] And lastly, do you think that every other Christian sitting in this building this morning would agree with all your answers? We have differences of opinion, don't we, as Christians?

These are real life questions. I grew up in a family of Baptists and then joined the Anglican Church, which of course practices infant baptism. And when I did, it was as though I had joined the dark side of the force.

It's not quite that bad. But my family and I have had quite lively discussions, shall we say, about whether infant baptism is right or not. In fact, for each of those questions I asked you a moment ago, I know a Christian who would say, yes, as a Christian, I'm not allowed to do that.

And another Christian who would say, no, as a Christian, we can't do that. We're not allowed to. It's wrong. And so how do you deal with such differences of opinion on these wide range of topics?

First, we come to Romans chapter 14. We read about differences in opinion between the Christians in Rome over issues of diet and days. So if you've got your Bibles there, it'd be really helpful to have them open because it's quite a long passage and I'll be moving quickly through it.

[3 : 18] But let me just set the scene. Have a look at verse 2, for example. There we start to see what the issue is. Verse 2 says, One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.

So we've got a difference of opinion over what to eat. Or verse 5, have a look down at verse 5. It says, One person considers one day more sacred than another. Another considers every day alike.

You see, these were the issues for the Roman Christians. Diet and days. There was a difference of opinion about these things. Now, before we look at how Paul, and ultimately God, tells us to handle these differences, I want you to note what Paul calls them in verse 1.

Paul calls these matters, or issues, disputable matters. See that in verse 1? That is, the issues here are issues which God has given us freedom on.

You see, there are some things in the Bible where God has clearly said, This is how it is. And so we're not free to choose our own way. For example, we're not free to choose how to be saved.

[4 : 23] God has clearly said, It's only by trusting in Jesus that you will be saved. Because only He died for our sins. And so we're not free to choose other religions, that kind of thing.

We're not free to choose our own sexual preferences, for example, because God has clearly said that sex is for marriage, and it's between a man and a woman, which is quite irrelevant given the recent debates in government.

Even those tricky topics like predestination that Christians don't like to talk about, male-female roles, those sorts of things, God has spoken clearly on in His Word and said, This is how it is. But there's a whole range of other topics where we have freedom to do what we think is right before God.

And it may be different to what other Christians think is right before God. In other words, they are disputable matters. Things like what to eat or what to drink, or whether we baptize as a baby or as an adult, whether we're allowed to read Harry Potter books or whatever it is, what we spend our money on, things like that.

Or what we even do on Sundays, what we're allowed to do or not do and so on. Now, God still has something to say on each of these topics, which should shape our convictions. But we have freedom to choose according to what we think will please Him.

[5 : 32] And that last bit's important. If it's unclear in Scripture, then it needs to be in line with what we think will please or glorify God. But the problem in Rome was that these differences of opinion about diet and days led to Christians judging each other.

It created tension and disunity, such that Paul has even heard about it, even though he's never been to the Roman Church. And so he writes and urges them to be united in the Gospel by firstly accepting, not judging.

Point one, verse one. He says, Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another whose faith is weak eats only vegetables.

The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does. For God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant?

To their own master's servants stand or fall, he says, and they will stand for the law is able to make them stand. Here Paul says we're to accept and not judge.

[6 : 38] The word accept here is, it's more than just accept it if we have to and put up with it. It's welcome them. Treat them warmly as one of the family. And the word judge here means to be judgmental, to look down on them and condemn them, as verse three says.

We're not to do that. There's a different type of judging that we are all to do, which is more like discerning. We're to judge between what is right and wrong and wise. That's right. But this type of judging where we look down on people is not on, he says.

And so that's what was happening between these two groups. Notice Paul describes these two groups as those whose faith is weak and those whose faith is strong. And the weak were probably the Jews who thought certain meats like pork were unclean and certain days like the Sabbath were sacred.

And the strong were probably the Gentile Christians who understood that Jesus had fulfilled the Old Testament law with its regulations about diet and days. And so they understood they had freedom to choose what they wanted to do about these topics.

And I think it's important that it's the understanding of their faith that Paul is calling strong or weak here. Notice he's not talking about whether one Christian is more mature or more godly than another, because they were both mistreating each other, weren't they?

[7 : 56] They're both being ungodly. It's not a matter of godliness here. It's a matter of understanding, the strength of their understanding. As I said, the Gentiles understood if Christ had fulfilled the law, then it doesn't matter what we eat, drink, or what day of the week it is.

But the weak, who were so used to following the letter of the law, did not fully understand it in their hearts, nor could they live it out. And so we have a difference of opinion, which then led to tension. But Paul says to the strong, the strong must welcome the weak and the weak must not judge the strong. Why? Well, firstly, because God has welcomed both. See verse 3 again. It says, The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not.

And the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does. Why? Well, for, because God has accepted them. God has accepted them, so should we accept one another. That's the point. And Paul will come back to this point in chapter 15, but for now he focuses on a second reason, which is that we ultimately belong to the Lord. He's our master who makes us stand. The one we are to please.

[8 : 59] The one in whom we are to give an account to. So pick it up again from verse 4. He says, Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servant, stand or fall.

And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. One person considers one day more sacred than another. Another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.

Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God. And whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone.

If we live, we live for the Lord Jesus. And if we die, we die for the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life, so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

You then, why do you judge your brother or your sister? See what Paul is saying here? He's saying, Jesus died and rose again as Lord of all people, especially of us who believe.

[10 : 02] And so we belong to him. He is our master who enables us to stand before him. And we are his servants. So verse 4, who are you to judge another person's servant?

Paul says. Especially when, verse 6, the person who is doing these things are doing it in order to please the Lord. That's why they're doing it. When I was a school teacher, I taught at a Christian school.

And one day we had a World Vision Day where all the children brought in all the money they'd raised from their 40-hour famine or their sponsorships and so on, raised for World Vision to support the children. And to make this day special for the children, they didn't have to wear their normal school uniform.

It was a mufty day. And they could go a bit crazy with their hair. You know, so the boys put caked gel in and did mohawks and things like that. The girls wore bright-coloured ribbons that they're not normally allowed to wear and so on.

They even got the coloured spray paint. You know, not that permanent stuff. The stuff that washes out at night and they kind of coloured their hair, that sort of thing. But I had one parent who came to me and said, he said, my son is not to have anything done with his hair because, and he said, I believe changing your appearance means you are ungrateful to God for how you were made.

[11 : 12] That's what he said to me. Now, there's truth in that, isn't there? But where do you draw the line? Does this mean we cannot cut our hair? Because that's changing your appearance. Does this mean we cannot put a rinse in our hair to cover up those hairs we want to cover up?

Does this mean that men cannot shave because that's changing our appearance? There is truth, but where do you draw the line? Now, what this father said might seem a little bit over the top and perhaps even perhaps ridiculous to us, but we're not to judge him or look down on him.

I mean, I felt sorry for the child who kind of missed out and I wanted to show the father that we have great freedom in Christ, but I dare not judge him because he's not my servant.

He's Christ's servant. He answers to Jesus, not to me or anyone else. And so I had no right to judge him. I didn't judge him. In fact, it's not just him, though, who will answer to Jesus, but it's all of us. Have a look at verse 10 to 12. He says, You see, we will also give an account to God.

[12 : 32] And so it matters how we treat one another. Interestingly, by the way, Paul says he will appear before the judgment seat of God. Elsewhere, he says before the judgment seat of Christ.

In fact, he's just called Jesus Lord in verse 9. And then he quotes from the Old Testament about the Lord. In other words, it's a subtle explanation that Jesus is God here.

That's what he's saying. But that's just an aside. The big point here is that we have no right to judge one another because they ultimately answer to the Lord Jesus, not to us. And we need to be careful how we treat one another because we also will answer to the Lord Jesus and give an account. So Paul says, Instead of judging, limit your liberty, your freedom. Point to verse 13. He says, See what Paul is saying here?

He's saying, Limit your liberty. That is, we're to limit our freedom and not use it or not let it cause, be a stumbling block to other people. Paul is convinced that all foods are clean, but he won't use his freedom to eat all things if it's going to upset another person who's convinced that it's wrong.

[14:12] For by doing so, he's not acting in love. Instead, it causes distress and can even destroy that person, verse 15 says. A friend of mine was having dinner one night with his family and they had a guest.

This guest was a missionary back home on furlough for several months. And so they invited her to have dinner with the family and after dinner, they did start playing that card game called cheat. Now for this lady, she'd never played before and she was a little hesitant. My friend thought it was because she didn't understand the rules and so he explained that, you know, it's an easy game. You just get rid of your cards and you, to get rid of them, sometimes you might say, I'm going to put down two fours but I'm only putting down one.

You know, you kind of cheat so you get rid of the cards. It's easy. And as I started playing, this lady went to cheat with her cards and my friend said he could almost physically see beads of sweat dripping down her brow because she couldn't do it.

She couldn't cheat. You see, she thought all cheating was sinful and this was playing havoc with her conscience and so my friend stopped the game.

[15:22] Now it may be no big deal for us. It is an old card game. It's meant to be a bit of fun but it wasn't for this lady. For her, it was sinful. It was wrong. Remember verse five? Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.

This lady was fully convinced that it was wrong. Or verse 14, Paul says, I'm convinced, fully persuaded in the law that nothing is unclean in itself but if anyone regards something as unclean then for that person it is unclean.

Or verse 23, whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat or play a game of cheat because their eating or playing is not from faith and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

See, this lady had strong convictions about this game and if my friend continued it would have become a stumbling block to her. Destroyed her. Because when you encourage people to go against their conscience then they actually start getting used to it.

It sears their conscience, you see. And they get used to going against it and before they know it they're no longer listening to Jesus and going against him as well. And then instead of following Jesus they're headed for destruction.

[16:28] And your action put them on that path says Paul. That's incredibly unloving, isn't it? What's more, our good freedom that caused them to stumble will become a thing of evil.

Have a look at verse 16. He says, Therefore do not let what you know is good your freedom be spoken of as evil. See what it's like?

Our freedom in Christ is great. It's a good thing. But it can become an evil thing if we willingly cause others to stumble or because of it. And so Paul says, Limit your liberty.

Limit your freedom. Don't cause disunity and destruction for this is not what it means to live in the kingdom. Verse 17 he says, For or because the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking or insisting on your freedoms but it's a matter of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval. See kingdom living is about peace and joy. It's not about insisting on our freedoms and rights when they cause divisions and distress.

[17:34] And so we're to limit our liberty not only to love others but also because of what it means as kingdom members of the kingdom. This is what it means to live out kingdom values you see.

It's part of what it means to please God. Verse 18. And so in verses 19 to 23 Paul repeats what he has said so far but then adds a specific warning to the strong and a specific warning to the weak. He says verse 19 let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.

All food is clean but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall. And just in case you're thinking this is an old issue it's not an issue for us today. I know people who won't eat in a Thai restaurant because there is a little statue of Buddha or something in the side and so they think that's wrong.

[18 : 35] And so to invite them out for dinner and to take them there is to make them sin against their conscience. I also know that as Paul says all meat is clean. We can eat whatever we like but I was at a barbecue one time where the Christian man came up to me and said did you know that meat is halal?

You can't eat that. Now I know I can in Christ I have freedom but for the sake of that man I became a vegetarian which was very hard because I love a good piece of steak. But you see what Paul is saying here? If someone has strong convictions about these disputable matters then it's better to limit your liberty to go without for the sake of them for the other person. And so he warns the strong person in verse 22 he says so whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. You know don't insist on them and cause the other to stumble. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves.

That doesn't condemn himself by his own freedom he says. But to the weak he says but whoever doubts is condemned if they eat because their eating is not from faith. That is they're going against their conscience and everything that does not come from faith is sin he says.

[19 : 45] Paul is saying we need to limit our liberty we need to help each other grow and we need to seek peace and unity in the gospel. And in case they haven't got the point so far he says follow Christ's example in this which brings us to our final point point three and chapter 15 verse one he says we who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not please ourselves.

Each of us should please our neighbours for their good to build them up for even Christ did not please himself but as it is written the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through the endurance that taught in the scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. You see Paul knows that getting on with people we disagree with or clash with is not easy.

You know that? I know that. We need encouragement and endurance that scripture gives. The scriptures here refer to the Old Testament and it quotes an Old Testament verse the verse that says the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.

And that Old Testament and scripture of course has been fulfilled in Christ hasn't it? You see Christ did not seek to please himself but allowed the insults of people and the wrath of God to fall on him for us.

[21 : 03] I mean do you think that it would have been easy for Jesus to go through what he went through? Of course not. Do you think he enjoyed hanging on the cross? Of course not. And so we are to pursue Christ's example not pleasing ourselves and insisting on our freedoms but rather seeking to build others up even if we think they're being a bit silly.

Now we need to remember at this point here that the context is about disputable matters not core issues or things that God has spoken clearly on and said this is how it is. If it is a core matter or a clear matter then we need to say something if we can if it's appropriate.

In fact even if it's a disputable matter we can still talk about it with our Bibles open and help them to grow in their understanding. For example I've had discussions with two couples at our 4pm service about whether we would baptise their infant child or have a dedication.

They were keen to have a dedication and I was trying to say that you know I think infant baptism is a good thing it shows God's grace I won't go into the argument now and so I explained it with the Bible open and then I dedicated the child.

They didn't buy it but that's okay it didn't worry me because while it is good to discuss these sorts of disputable matters it's far more important to make sure that they don't cause division or distress because our unity actually glorifies God.

[22 : 24] And so Paul prays for the Roman Christians in verses 5 to 6 he says May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind towards each other that Christ Jesus had so that with one mind and with one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

See what Paul prays that they may have one mind one voice that will glorify God. You see God has worked in history through Jesus to bring us together as one in Christ for God's glory.

And so we have to live out that unity by accepting or welcoming one another. See verse 7 he says Accept or welcome one another then just as Christ welcomed you in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and moreover that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy as it is written Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles I will sing the praises of your name.

Again it says Rejoice you Gentiles with his people and again Praise the Lord all you Gentiles and let all the peoples extol him and again Isaiah says as we heard this morning The root of Jesse will spring up One who will arise to rule over the nations in him the Gentiles will hope.

[23 : 47] See what Paul is saying here he's saying Christ has accepted both Jews and Gentiles brought us all together Why? For God's glory that God might be praised That's what all those Old Testament quotes are about some of which we heard in our first readings God has always been on about bringing Jew and Gentile together for his glory You see our unity brings God glory and so we are to keep the unity by accepting one another A church that judges and bickers and causes distress and disunity over disputable matters cannot bring God glory In the end these disputable matters actually won't matter in heaven will they?

And that's why I think Paul finishes with a prayer to remind them of their heavenly hope where disputable matters just won't matter So he says in verse 13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit Paul prays that they might be filled with hope that they might remember where they are headed and put these disputable matters into perspective and instead of causing division and distress over them instead accepting welcoming being unified on the core issues and helping each other grow in Christ help each other to heaven where those disputable matters will no longer matter So we are to accept limit and pursue there I noticed by the way as I was looking at the outline accept not judge limit your liberty pursue Christ I'm not trying to make a political statement ALP but if it helps you remember so be it where does all this leave us though?

Well firstly and quite clearly we are to accept and welcome one another just as Christ has accepted and welcomed us if we believe in him of course if you are here this morning please know that God wants to welcome you into his family in fact he gave his son to make it happen if you would but believe in him you believe in him God welcomes accepts you warmly into his family and for us who have believed in Jesus who are part of God's family then we are to accept and welcome one another even if we have differences of opinion because we're family God's family my brother loves Holdens right always has done holding cars doesn't really like Fords I don't know why he just doesn't okay in fact he used to say to me you know what Ford stands for F-O-R-D found on rubbish dump I always thought Fords were pretty good actually but in the end who cares it doesn't matter does it it's not a core issue is it and it's certainly not something that we that should stand in the way of us being brothers being unified as family members well so too with disputable matters among Christians we're not to let them cause issues amongst us because we are family in Christ and on the whole can I say I think we do this pretty well here at HTD I mean we have lots of Baptist people here some of whom who will stir me about infant baptism but it's all in good fun I just pray for you all you know I'm glad you laughed it is a joke it doesn't matter does it it's not a core issue and so I thank God that we are united on the core issues we are united on those core issues it's terrific and on the things that are clear in scripture it's terrific and it gives God glory so thank you let's keep doing it but secondly this unity is to never be at the expense of truth you see these issues were disputable issues weren't they and so if it's a core issue then we may we may have to break unity there are churches in our city who promote things that are contrary to scripture for example that all roads lead to God

Jesus is not the only way to be saved and so I cannot in good conscience partner them in the work of ministry or events and so on at that point I have to break unity you see we cannot use the reason of unity as an excuse to ignore truth which Christians are doing more and more these days actually they want to avoid disputes as do I but if the issue is a core one or it's clear in scripture and we have to work hard at reading the Bible to make sure it is clear it is core then there may be times when we'll have to break unity but never ever over a disputable matter instead we're to accept or welcome one another and thirdly our ultimate reason and goal for doing all this is God's glory you

see as verse 7 said Christ has accepted us in order to bring praise or literally glory to God as I said our unity brings him glory and this is God's ultimate purpose to bring praise and glory to himself as he deserves and one of the creeds from the Presbyterian church says this the chief end of mankind is to glorify

[28 : 50] God and enjoy him forever that's right isn't it not because it's from the Presby church it's from the Bible this is our chief end that's God's ultimate purpose and it needs to be our ultimate purpose in life and so says Paul welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you in order to bring glory to God let's pray that we'll keep doing that let's pray merciful father give us wisdom to know what matters matter and what matters don't and on those matters that don't help us to welcome one another as you have welcomed us in Christ may you the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us the same attitude of mind towards one another as Christ had so that we here at Holy Trinity will with one mind and one voice glorify you you the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ it's in his name we pray Amen Amen