

One of the treats I remember growing up was going to A & W as a family. We had moved to Winnipeg and dad and a partner had opened a service station together. The station was just across the street from Polo Park Mall on Portage Ave. west of the core of the city. We would pull into lot and under the orange coloured carport that extended out from the building. It was fascinating that dad just had to roll down the window and the lady came out to get our order. Later you had posts with microphones and speakers to place your order, but in my memory the lady came out with a notepad and took down your order. Then, after much anticipation my brothers and I would be told to settle down in the back seat and spread out the serviette over our laps. The older three of us in the back seat and my youngest brother in the front with mom and dad. Then the burgers were passed out. We had to eat half of them before we could have the root beer. You can tell we didn't get out much, because that was my idea of fine dining.

The funny thing is, I don't remember any veggie burgers or vegan options on the menu. I don't remember any allergy alerts on the packaging, just a smiling picture of a kid eating a burger. Things have changed a lot! We're aware now of a lot of issues with out diets that were ignored years ago. Things like allergies are real and food intolerances do explain some of our health issues. Gwen's mom thought that having a stomach ache after eating was just the way it was for her. Finding out she's celiac has made a world of difference in her health and comfort. But that can cause some issues when people come to visit.

When Gwen's mom and Darrel and Mary Jane, her brother and his wife, come over for a visit it's a wonderful treat. But it does take some meal planning. Nothing onerous, just thinking some things through that we don't take into account when we've by ourselves. They don't make a big deal of things and they don't require that others need to abide by their restrictions.

But imagine you're on a cattle ranch and had company who were offended that you ate beef or any dairy product - even touching cattle was a no-no. Okay, so maybe you're not inviting them back. But let's say you're a church with half ranchers and half vegans who believe raising animals just to kill them is wrong. How do you get along?

The situation Paul addresses in Rome is similar to this one. Jesus had declared all foods clean, but there was a bigger problem. In the ancient world almost all meat was part of an offering to a god. The idea of sacrificing the inedible parts of an animal with a small portion of the usable meat thrown in as a token, was not just part of Jewish tradition, but also the societies of all the ancient world.

Typically you would dedicate an animal to the god, kill it and divide it up, place some on the altar to be burned and the rest was given to a butcher. Often a sizeable amount was

for the feasts which were part of worshipping in that time. The meat would be served in the hall adjacent to the temple for all the faithful. But often there was plenty left over and that was taken to the market and sold.

The church in Jerusalem had clearly said that the Gentile believers should not be eating meat which had been offered to idols. But Paul taught that this meant you shouldn't participate in the feasts in the temple fellowship hall. But in this letters to both Corinth and Rome he outlined how this was to be handled in the church. There was to be mutual respect between those who were more liberal on this issue and those who were more conservative. The liberals ate bacon and the conservatives would not.

“Paul insisted equally (a) that, since God was the creator, all meat was good in itself and therefore could in principle be eaten and (b) that if someone else's conscience was being hurt, even those who [didn't have a guilty] conscience about eating the food should abstain from doing so. This was especially important because as we read the New Testament the picture of early church worship that emerges is that they met in a home on Sunday to worship, shared a meal together and, as part of the meal, took part in the Lord's Supper (Communion).

Now it's important to remember that Paul is still spelling out what it means to offer yourself to God, stop being influenced by the world, and be transformed into the image of Jesus. He has just said, “Owe nothing to anyone, except the debt of love which can never be repaid.” Loving one another is part of the ‘prime directive’ of the Christian. Jesus said the two commands, two sides of the same coin, which capture everything God has said, are “Love God” and “Love others.” Jesus added a command, “Love one another as I have loved you.”

That's how seriously Jesus takes unity in his body. Unity between Christians is right up there with loving God and loving others. History has shown how the fractures which have occurred throughout the history of the church diminish the church's witness and lead to more division and misunderstanding. So Paul is taking unity just as seriously as he addresses the issue facing the Roman Christians.

Paul writes,

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God (Romans 14:1-6).

“Welcome those who are weak ...” wait a minute, who are you calling weak? One of the difficulties in tackling contemporary issues on the principles Paul outlines here is that both sides think the other side is weak or wrong. Let’s be clear on what Paul meant by ‘weak.’ For Paul, weak does not mean less committed or less spiritual than the other. It does not mean one has a small measure of faith and the other has a lot of faith. He means that some have not come to recognize the full implications of the gospel on their previous beliefs.

He also says, ‘not for the purpose of arguing about opinions.’ Over the history of the church as a whole and in the memories of many people of God we know that people tend to like to find out whose right and whose wrong, as long as they are the ones who are right. Trying to convince others that they’re wrong is usually about as effective as a debate between political candidates.

When we tackle issues that are non-essentials (and what’s essential and non-essential is a debate on its own) we often state our case and enter into debate mode where our whole goal is to prove the other person wrong, not listen to what he or she has to say. Conversations where you don’t acknowledge what the other person says is coming from a place of integrity and sincerity generally don’t go anywhere productive. Whether the issues are political, religious, or personal the person comes before the issue.

The issues for Paul are the Jewish food laws, Jewish festivals and celebrations, and food offered to idols. That was then, but what about now? What kind of issues divide Christians today and do we simply read them into this passage? Let’s try a few scenarios,

- Some Christians believe they are free to grow beards, while others feel it hides the image of God. Those who grow beards should not despise those who do not, and the clean-shaven should not pass judgement on the bearded. This was something true historically in some denominations. And you could add dancing and going to movie theatres in this category as well.
- Some Christians believe they are free to drink alcohol in moderation, while some believe in abstaining from all alcohol. Those who drink must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who drink. What’s your response to that one?

- Some Christians affirm gay marriage as allowable, while others won't even think of such a thing. Those who affirm gay marriage must not despise those who do not, and those who do not must not pass judgement on those who do. How about that scenario? What's different from the first one? Yes, here the Bible is clear, there are no passages affirming homosexuality and the design taught from Genesis to Revelation is that marriage is to be between a man and a woman. But, that does not mean we don't treat those who disagree with us or who identify as a non-traditional gender with disrespect. We are still called to treat everyone with the respect we would like to receive.
- Some Christians feel it is wrong to go to war to kill others, while others feel it's their duty to serve their country that way. Those who refuse to join the military must not despise those who do, and those who join the military must not pass judgement on those who are conscientious objectors. On this one, Christians have differed since about AD 400, with both sides seeing their perspective as clearly taught in the Bible.

So how do we understand and apply what Paul is saying to our lives today?

First, Paul is using this principle on issues where the differences between Christians would divide their fellowship. Those who eat only vegetables do so to avoid the chance of eating meat offered to idols, lest they dishonour the Lord. Those who eat meat sold at the market without asking questions about its source do so because they want express their freedom in Jesus and honour him. Both groups are legitimately seeking to obey God's will as they understand it.

Those who, in addition to Sunday worship, have certain days of the month and year that they dedicate to God do so to bring honour to God. Those who see every day as dedicated to God are doing so to honour God as well. Both groups are legitimately seeking to obey God's will as they understand it.

Paul's point is that we should not let non-central issues divide us in the body of Christ. Should we break fellowship over speaking in tongues or not speaking in tongues, over whether we should dunk or pour in baptism, over male-only pastors or endorsing female pastors, etc. etc. I'm sure you can think of a couple of different issues that have divided the Christians you know.

It should go without saying that we do not make distinctions in church between rich and poor, between immigrant and local-born, between male and female, between union workers and CEO's, between black and white, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, between those who vote liberal and those who vote conservative. The church is meant to be a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-race family who are united around their allegiance to Jesus as Lord.

Paul emphasizes that we are all accountable to Jesus, and it's before him that our actions will be shown to be from a faithful heart or one where self is still on the throne the majority of the time.

“We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living” (7-9).

So if our life is all about the Lord, and our death is all about the Lord, shouldn't everything in between be about the Lord too? And if we have in our minds our accountability to the Lord, won't we honour Him in our actions and decisions? If we do that, can we not believe the best about our brothers and sisters, that they too are seeking to honour the Lord?

Paul then takes it to the next level and says,

Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written,

‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.’

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Paul sees no contradiction between his statement in Romans 8:1 that “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. He's not talking about being condemned to hell or not going to hell. He's talking about standing before God and giving an account of how we responded to the things that came our way in life. But remember, this is all in the family. We'll be speaking to the Father who loves us and forgives us, and Jesus will be there speaking up for us as well, for we are part of his body.

Paul's point is that each of us is serving Jesus, and it's to our master Jesus that we're accountable. Jesus is the Lord of all, not just those who recognize Him as Saviour and Lord, but the whole universe and all life within it. Paul's not saying that Christians don't look out for each other and point out when another brother or sister is stumbling. But we recognize that not all the measurements we use for being spiritual are actually written in the Word.

When we differ as Christians on any behaviour that is not directly addressed in Scripture we need to have grace with each other. Over the centuries we've created many ways to measure someone's spiritual health that have little or nothing to do with God's key commands of loving Him, loving others, and loving the family of God. We've measured

other people's spirituality by how they dress - head-covering or no head-covering, tie or no tie; where they go - theatres, bowling alleys, pool halls, etc; who they spend time with - sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes; and what they do in church - speak in tongues or not, raise hands or not, sing loudly or not, and on it goes.

Now Paul isn't finished with the subject yet. We'll talk more about this in two weeks time. But there is something I want you to notice. Paul is setting up his argument for something deeper, a foundation belief that these instructions flow from. Jesus is Lord, and that means others are not. Here, Paul clarifies that Jesus is Lord and Judge over our lives and we are not to play the role of judge in other people's lives. But he will come to clearly imply that Jesus is Lord, and that means Caesar is not.