

## VIVE LA DIFFERENCE

### Romans 14:1-5

#### INTRODUCTION

About 600 years before Christ, a Greek slave named Aesop developed a reputation for wisdom. His stories of birds and beasts - with the inevitable moral at the end of each tale - have continued through the centuries to educate men and women about themselves. One of Aesop's fables uses a Peacock and a Crane to teach a lesson much needed by the church today.

##### A. The Parable of the Peacock and the Crane

1. The Peacock and the Crane happened to meet one day and the Peacock spread his beautiful tail, and minced around and looked with contempt at the Crane as though it were just an ordinary creature and not worthy of his proud notice.
2. The Crane didn't like this insolent, haughty behavior, so he said, just loudly enough for the Peacock to hear him, 'Peacocks would be fine birds if fine feathers could make them so, but it must be terrible not to be noble enough to fly up above the clouds.' Then the Crane flapped his large, strong wings and sailed away, leaving the Peacock below not half so pleased with himself as he had been before.
3. **The Point** - It is foolish to insult others because they are not like us. In many ways they may be much better than we are.

##### B. The Tension between Unity and Uniformity

1. It is certainly important for us to stress the necessity of unity in the body of Christ.
  - a. Most Christians struggle with "dying to self" and with "considering others better than yourself."
  - b. We have a great deal to learn about being "group centered" rather than "self-centered."
2. In our eagerness to promote the oneness of the body, however, we must overlook the differences that exist between people.
3. So long as the church is made up of people, diversity will be an inescapable fact of life in our congregations.

##### Transition:

The same God who made the Peacock and the Crane made a Peter and a Paul, a John and a Thomas. In the church, as in the fable, it is foolish to condemn others because they are not like us. We may be strong in some areas, but weak in others.

#### I. UNITY AND DIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY.

##### A. A Brief Look at Diversity in the New Testament Church

1. When Paul stated, "*Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all*" (Col 3:11), he was exaggerating slightly to make a point.
  - a. There *were* Greeks and Jews, slaves and free, males and females, rich and poor in the early church.
  - b. Simply because these people became Christians did not mean there were no differences among them.
  - c. *Paul did not say there were no differences between members of the early church, only that such differences did not threaten the unity of a group glued together by Jesus Christ.*
  - d. He was not arguing against diversity but ***for unity in diversity***.

2. The New Testament church was about as diverse a group of people as you could possibly imagine.
  - a. Many Christians (like Matthew) were *Jewish*; others (like Cornelius) were *Gentiles*; a few (like Timothy) were a mixture of both.
  - b. Some (Apollos) were well-educated and even wealthy; others (Peter and John) were poor and unschooled.
  - c. Paul had a conservative religious background; the Corinthians had worshipped with prostitutes.
  - d. Some were hot-headed (Peter); others were loving (Barnabas); still others were logical (Luke).
  - e. Many (like Philemon) were free; many others (Onesimus, for instance) were slaves.
  - f. There was no such thing as a "typical" Christian.
3. Perhaps some of the greatest battles fought in the first century church centered on this very issue of diversity (Jew/Gentile).

#### **B. The Battle for Cookie-cutter Christians**

1. Having allowed Gentiles into the church, a concerted effort was launched to make them as much like Jews as possible. *"The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5).*
2. To a certain element of Jewish Christians, only a remaking of the Gentile converts along Jewish lines could maintain the unity of the church.
  - a. Gentile Christians must be circumcised; they must observe the Law; they must even honor the traditions.
  - b. They must become as Jewish as the Jews in order to enjoy fellowship in the church. Some Jews, like some of us, could not understand that there was room in Christ's one body for diversity on such matters.
3. But the fact is that room has always existed in God's church for diversity on a wide range of issues.
  - a. Gentiles, with all their differences in background and behavior, were as welcome in the church as Jews.
  - b. You didn't have to be kosher to be Christian.
    - i. Pork-eaters could rub shoulders with pork-haters.
    - ii. Pilgrimages to Jerusalem were not required, nor the wearing of phylacteries and skull caps.

## **II. ACCEPTANCE: THE KEY TO UNITY.**

### **A. Unity Does Not Depend on Uniformity**

1. The remarkable feature of the New Testament church was not the similarity of its members, but its ability to maintain unity despite such diverse people.
2. How did first century Christians manage to build a unified fellowship out of such a mixed membership?
  - a. Paul tells us how in the **14th chapter of Romans**.
  - b. Far from suppressing diversity, he gloried in it. The many faces of the church proved the power of the gospel and the power of Christian fellowship.

### **B. The Problems at Rome**

1. There were differences among sincere Christians.
  - a. Romans 14:1-5.
  - b. Two issues: food and religious days

- c. It may not seem important to us, but it was to them.
- d. ***“Faith” in this context is in reference to “a strong personal conviction.”***
- 2. The church at Rome found unity threatened by diversity.
  - a. They concluded this threat could be alleviated only by all members of the congregation acting alike.
    - i. Those who refrained from eating certain foods (or considered certain days holy) began to pass judgment on those who did not.
    - ii. Those who ate freely (or observed no holy days) tried to ridicule their brothers into more tolerant and broadminded attitudes.
  - b. Each side played the power game, the first group questioning the commitment of the second and the second group questioning the sanity of the first.
  - c. ***Interesting note, Paul did not identify which was “strong” or “weak.”***

### C. The Teaching of Romans

- 1. Into this situation stepped Paul, insisting that unity in the Body of Christ had nothing to do with uniformity on the part of its members.
  - a. Paul could have laid down one rule for all to follow.
  - b. But Paul saw a greater issue at stake - the importance of keeping the body unified in the presence of diverse opinions.
  - c. He knew that if it were not this issue it would be another over which brothers differed.
- 2. Paul asked these Christians to try a new method of promoting unity – *to accept diversity on such "disputable matters" [matters of opinion] and to behave in such a way so that these issues did not become divisive.*

### D. Don't Judge

- 1. Romans 14:1, 3
  - a. Matters which are "disputable" – not accompanied with "Thou shalt."
  - b. Accept each other and don't pass judgment.
  - c. **Those who can** - don't look down on those who cannot [*despise or treat as nobodies*].
  - d. **Those who cannot** - don't condemn those who do.
- 2. Romans 14:4, 10-12
  - a. Judgment about such matters should be left to God.
  - b. Worry about your own standing before God.
  - c. Give others the freedom to determine for themselves.

### E. Do What Leads to Peace

- 1. Romans 14:13, 17, 19
- 2. It is a “love” problem, 1 Peter 4:8, *“...keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.”*
- 3. Christians must never allow minor things to interfere with the major.
  - a. When differences of opinions cause the peace of the kingdom to be threatened, believers have strained the gnat and swallowed the camel.
  - b. Paul commanded that *“every effort”* should be aimed at what is truly major - peace within the congregation.
  - c. How will what I am doing affect my brother?
  - d. How will what I am doing help or hinder the growth of the church?

### F. Accept One Another

- 1. Romans 15:5-7

2. Christ has accepted so much in each of us - so much that is inconsistent with his preferences, or immature by his standards, or incomplete according to his knowledge - that it smacks of ingratitude for us to be less accepting of our brothers.
3. Jimmy Allen stated, God accepts us "*warts and all*." Should we not do the same?

## **CLOSING: Diversity in the Church Today**

### **A. The Church as Melting-Pot**

1. There are differences in who we are as *people*.
  - a. Black and white, rich and poor, young and old, , up-tight and laid-back. We have different cultures, values, appearances and personalities.
  - b. Some of us like rock; others prefer Mozart. We are single and married; with children and without children. All of us have lived through the Great Depression; it's just that some of us refer to the crash of '29 while others are describing what happened when they flunked chemistry.
  - c. In this one group there are optimists and pessimists, thinkers and doers, hard-liners and soft-touches.
2. There are differences in who we are as *Christians*.
  - a. Some of us were raised in warm, vibrant churches; some come out of legalism; some grew up more concerned with social status than with God's word; some of us never came to church during our childhood.
  - b. There are forty-year old Christians and forty day old Christians. There are spiritual giants and those who still need milk. Some of us are "liberals;" some of us are known for more conservative thinking.
  - c. There is not a single individual in this congregation who would agree with you on *every* issue.

### **B. So, How are we to Deal with Diversity?**

1. Diversity is not a threat to unity.
  - a. If we are not careful, diversity will be viewed as a barrier to Christian oneness. The plea for unity will degenerate into a passion for uniformity.
  - b. But the oneness spoken of in the New Testament has nothing to do with "standardized Christianity."
2. We need to learn Paul's lessons to the Romans:
  - a. Stop judging on matters of opinion.
  - b. Do what leads to peace.
  - c. Accept one another as Christ has accepted you.