

The Weak and the Strong Romans 14:1-15:13

One of my passionate desires is to see Trinity Church continue to **grow in beautiful diversity**.

The story God has given us so far since we started in May 2017 has been very exciting. There are many things to thank God for. But there are two areas in particular that cause me to thank God repeatedly.

- Our **growth** in **numbers**
- Our **growth** in **diversity**.

An increasing number of people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. I love this for two reasons. First, it is both a beautiful thing to behold. Second, it is a reality that brings glory to Jesus. Only Jesus is the reason why everyone is together.

Let me tell you the simple reason why many churches don't actively seek to gather diverse people together. **It's hard!**

When different people come together and become part of a shared community on mission together, they bring with them many different customs, ceremonies and culture. People have all sorts of different preferences, opinions and conscientious convictions about a whole range of activities. **For example...**

- What should our corporate worship look like?
 - What songs should we sing?
 - Or what should people wear at the front? Robes, jackets, shorts?
 - Should we have any liturgy or must we only encourage spontaneous prayers?
 - What kind of building should we use?
- Or what should we do during the week?
 - What kind of groups should we run?
 - How should we integrate people in our lives?
 - How should we be engaged in mission?

When everyone is just like you then it's much easier. However, when the community of God is beautifully diverse, which it should be, tensions will exist.

And so therefore, we need to know how to keep united as a church so that we stay together, grow together and together become more effective in our witness for Jesus.

This section of **Romans** is full of **practical wisdom** and **powerful motivations** as we seek to do this.

I want to highlight **three** particular truths.

- We need to know about disputable matters (14:1-12)
- We need to make every effort to keep the peace (14:13-15:6)
- We need to know that this is God's plan (15:7-13)

First, we need to know about disputable matters (14:1-12)

Look at verse 1. **Read verse 1.**

The temptation we have here is that we rush to a definition of disputable matters that is completely disconnected and detached from what is written in these chapters of Romans.

If we do this, we'll be in danger of conveniently throwing all sorts of challenging beliefs and behaviours from the Bible into this disputable category because we just don't want to practice them.

To avoid this, we're going to work out what is going on in **Romans chapter 14.**

Let me show you a few verses that I think help paint the bigger picture for us.

- Look at verse 2. **Read verses 2 and 3.**

Within the church there are big tensions and stresses about what kind of **food** Christians should eat.

It's not just about food.

- Look at verse 5. **Read verse 5.**

There are disagreements in the church about whether all days are the same or whether one day is more special than another.

What is going on in this church?

The big issue seems to revolve around disagreements between Jewish believers and Gentile believers about how they live out their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now do hear me properly. This is not a conversation between those who believe in Jesus and those who don't. No, this is a clash **within the church** between those from a Jewish background who had put their faith in Jesus as the Messiah and those from a Gentile background who had put their faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

It seems that the Jewish believers were still continuing to follow the Jewish food laws and keep Jewish special days. Whereas the Gentile believers weren't doing this.

This didn't need to be a problem. There was great freedom and liberty for both groups to do this. **It's what we call disputable matters.** God hadn't said definitely do this and he hadn't said definitely don't do this. God's Word was silent on the matter.

So it didn't have to be a problem. However, it had become a problem for the church in Rome.

We need to be clear that **this wasn't a salvation issue.** It's not that those keeping the Jewish laws were saying to the others that if they didn't keep them that they wouldn't be saved.

However, it wasn't just about preferences anymore. It seems it had become **about how to live as a mature disciple of Jesus.**

The Jewish believers thought that the way to do this was by keeping some of the Jewish food laws and the rules about special days. Whereas, the non-Jewish believers responded by saying, “No, we don’t need to do that, and neither do you. We’ve got freedom in Christ. And these rules you follow are not a fast track way to make spiritual progress.”

Who was right? Did you notice that one group, the Jewish believers, are called the weak in faith and the other group, the Gentile believers, are called the strong in faith.

This means that in this example the Gentile believers were right. It wasn’t necessary to keep the Jewish food laws or Jewish special days. And if you did then it wasn’t a way to accelerated spiritual progress.

Before we continue to see what else Paul said to this church, I want to pause and apply what I’ve just said in **two** particular ways.

First, we need to realise that there are such things as disputable matters.

There are areas of *church life* and *Christian behaviour* that the Bible doesn’t speak about positively or negatively. That is, when the Bible doesn’t say definitely do this and it doesn’t say definitely don’t do this.

There will be different preferences for styles of music. Or for the length of sermons. Or about how we serve communion. Or whether the children stay in or out.

Or what about whether we celebrate Christmas on 25th December?

These are disputable matters. The Bible gives us great **freedom** in these areas.

Second, we must be careful that **disputable matters** don’t become **matters of disturbance**.

This can happen when we attach a spiritual significance to our preference that isn’t justified.

Let me give you an example.

Take music. Some Christians really dislike modern Christian music. They think we should only really sing traditional hymns and that this is the way to make faster spiritual progress. Now they would never say that those who sing modern songs aren’t Christians but they would see them as slightly immature. I think this is an example of **when a disputable matter becomes a matter of disturbance**.

There are many other examples we could talk about but for now let’s log in our brains the big truth that there are such things as disputable matters.

However, if we are to keep united, we must do more than this. It’s a good start. But we must also make every effort to keep the peace.

Second, we need to make every effort (14:13-15:6)

I think this is the **focus** of the next section.

- Look at verse 13. **Read verse 13.**
- Or verse 19. **Read verses 19 to 21.**

This is brilliant practical wisdom for a diverse church to stay united as it seeks to spread the gospel.

The big command is **not to stay passive** but to **actively make decisions** that lead to peaceful harmony.

We've got to clear in our minds **what the great work of God is**. He has sent the Lord Jesus Christ to die on a cross to pay for the price of sin for the whole world. He is forming one people out of all the nations.

We don't want to destroy this because of our attitude to our brothers and sisters over disputable matters.

What will this look like in practice?

First, let's actively integrate with each other. **After the service** and **in our homes**. I know it's hard. Let's help each other do it. Different ages. Different nationalities. Different professions. Different lengths of time at Trinity. It's a big project, but it's worth it so let's keep on actively integrating with each other.

As we do, let's listen out for our views on disputable matters and do all we can to make decisions that build each other up and lead to peaceful harmony.

Some things are obvious. Suppose you inviting a recently converted Muslim to breakfast. Should you serve them bacon sandwiches? They are certainly free to do this in Christ. Their old food laws don't apply. But in conscience they may be troubled.

Or suppose you invite someone round who has decided in conscience that they won't drink alcohol. You could may a show of your freedom in Christ to drink what you want. But for the sake of peace and joy then why not serve something non-alcoholic?

Or think about how we might talk about things in church that are not according to our preference but which other people find helpful. In certain situations we may choose not to say anything at all in a discussion. Or we may choose to say something like this, "My preference would be to do it like this but I appreciate there is great freedom in this area and I'm really pleased other people are being edified in the church family I love."

This doesn't mean we can never ask questions or talk about our preferences. I'm not trying to stop this. But what I am trying to do is get us to think about when is the right time to say it and who is the right person to say it to. So generally not the person next to you or your best friend at church. Come and talk to me or one of the team leaders (refreshments, music children's work). What might happen then? You might get a reason why it's done like this or maybe we'll say, "Wow, that's a great suggestion."

Let's do all we can to work for peace and build each other up.

If you are looking for a motivation to do this look at what we're told in 15:2. **Read verses 2 and 3.**

The **Lord Jesus Christ is always to be our example** of other-person centredness.

This is critical if we want to see our actions changed. And that's because if we want to see this happen we need to see our attitude transformed. So let's think of the Lord Jesus and ask God to change our thinking so our behaviour is radically changed.

Third, we need to know that this is God's plan (15:7-13)

One last point to encourage us to keep on striving for unity in our diversity. And that's to realise that gathering a diverse group of worshipping people has always been God's plan.

Look at verse 8. **Read verses 8 to 10.**

"Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."

There are not two or more salvation plans. There is one Saviour for all peoples. And his name is Jesus.

When we are finding it hard to be together and to be on mission together remember the plan of God.

This is **what he wants** and this is **what we need**.

So let's keep trusting in God and work it out.

And if you are looking in from the outside, why don't you join in? The way to do this is to **believe** in Jesus and then you'll **belong** to his people. And this is something you'll never regret for all eternity.

Let's pray.