

"AVOIDING JUDGMENTAL ATTITUDES AND PURSUING PRACTICAL UNITY"

(Romans 14:1-23)

(Frank Theilman)

Paul began his pastoral instruction to believers in Rome by referring to the important transformation that needed to take place in their thinking as a result of their trust in the gospel. They were to engage in "reasonable" worship (12:1), "be transformed by the renewal of their mind (12:2), and not to think too highly, beyond what one ought to think, but to think sensibly" (12:3). Here in 14:1-12 he takes those general precepts down to the level of the day-to-day interactions of Roman believers with one another at their gatherings. What was eaten at the common meals that accompanied those gatherings (14:2, 6; cf. 1 Cor 11:17-22; 2 Pet 2:13; Jude 12), and the day of the week on which those gatherings occurred (Rom 14:5; cf. 1 Cor 16:2), were issues that had created divisions among these believers. These divisions had originated in the ways that believers who differed on these matters thought about each other: the judgment and contemptuousness of which Paul speaks (Rom 14:3, 5,10) were attitudes, and Paul's instructions urge his audience to reshape these attitudes toward one another.

Avoiding Judgmental Attitudes toward Others

This reshaping should take place, Paul argues, on the basis of an important theological truth. Every believer lives (and dies) under the lordship of no one else but Christ (14:7-9), and it is the role of God, and no one else, to render judgment about the authenticity of a particular believers faith (14:10-12). Paul himself had been on the receiving end of judgmental and contemptuous attitudes. He wrote Romans from Corinth, where not long before some Corinthian believers had held him in contempt, questioning his qualifications to be an apostle because of the "weakness" (ασθενεια) with which he conducted his ministry when he was among them (1 Cor 2:3; 4:1-5). Paul had responded to this by saying that,

with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God (1 Cor 4:3-5).

Believers cannot even judge themselves correctly, Paul argues, and so sitting in judgment on whether a particular expression of another's faith or calling is authentic would not likely be accurate either.

This does not mean that the church has no responsibility to exercise discipline among its membership. Only a few paragraphs after 1 Corinthians 4:3-5, Paul impressed on the Corinthians how important it was to judge" (κρινειν, 5:12) a member of their community involved in flagrant sexual sin (5:1-14). At issue in Romans 14:1-12 and in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 was the particular way in which believers sought to obey God as an expression of their faith, not the question of whether obedience to God really matters after all.

Seeking Practical Unity despite Differences

Romans 14:1-12 is instead an admonition to Christians to seek practical unity with other believers despite differences in the use, for example, of ritual, liturgy, music, the arts, the sacraments, and church organizational structure. Some ways of worshiping God are certainly more



theologically sound than others, just as the theological position of "the strong" in Rome was more theologically sound than the position of the weak (14:14, 20). But especially where the customs of a group whose faith is vulnerable are concerned, the message of Romans 14:1-12 is clear. As long as no fundamental theological truth is at stake, extending to them the same welcome that God extends to them (14:1, 3) must take priority over the assertion even of a correct theological position.

What criterion decides whether a particular practice stands within the bounds of acceptable diversity or whether it has crossed a line and become unfaithful to the gospel? Since Paul's letter to the Romans is itself a full explanation of the gospel, it is a reliable resource for answering this question. The basics of the gospel, as Romans explains it, are straightforward. God created the universe and all the people within it, and he deserves both thanks for these good gifts and obedience to his command that his human creatures should love one another (1:18-32). The failure of every human being either to thank God or to treat others lovingly has led to a break in their relationship with God and with one another (2:1-3:18). These failures deserve God's punishment (1:18,32; 2:2, 6-11; 3:19). God has taken the initiative, however, to reconcile humanity with himself and to transform human beings into loving people through the death and resurrection of the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, and through the power of the Holy Spirit (3:21-26; 8:1-11). Trust in this work of God—trust that is not mere intellectual assent but is the reorientation of one's life to God—is all that God requires for reconciliation to and peace with him (4:1-25; 6:1-23; 12:1-2).

These elements should form the basis of Christian unity. Paul never mentions the Lord's Supper in Romans, and although he does speak briefly about baptism (6:1-4) his language is primarily metaphorical. He never touches on the authority structure of the church. Clearly, the diverse ways in which Christians have thought about these issues over the centuries should not prevent Christians from praying, evangelizing, and working together to help the poor and to educate church leaders.

In their biography of the Quechua church leader and martyr Romulo Saune, W. Terry Shalin and Chris Woehr describe how the Presbyterian missionaries who first brought the gospel to the Andean village where Romulo's grandfather lived did not fully understand Quechua social customs. Although many of the village's inhabitants happily responded to the gospel with faith, the Presbyterian missionaries had proclaimed a highly individualized form of the gospel and discouraged the Quechuas in the village from participation in their community (or *ayllu*). They probably did this because some of the elements of that participation involved practicing traditional religious rituals. It was unnecessary, however, to disregard every element of this essentially Quechua institution; indeed, some of the communal values that it expressed were fully compatible with Christian teaching. It took Romulo's uncle, Fernando Quicana, to realize that it was possible both to affirm this central cultural tradition and to remain faithful to the gospel, to be fully Quechua and fully Christian.

Something similar happened with respect to Quechua hymns: missionaries sometimes resisted the composition and singing of hymns in the traditional Quechua mode because non-Christian versions of the same music seemed to advocate behavior incompatible with a Christian way of life. Here again, Fernando Quicana and the hymn writer Florencio Segura advocated preserving Quechua musical traditions in the hymns written for their people.

The case of evangelical Christianity among the Quechuas illustrates how important it is for believers of every culture to know the essence of the gospel well and to allow that gospel to flourish within the cultural particularity of the various human societies where it takes root. Whether we sing hymns by Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley in English or hymns by Florencio Segura in Quechua, we should welcome one another in the same way that Christ has welcomed us.