

Lives Built By Christ

by Steve Zeisler

Last Friday evening in the Lillehammer Olympics, Katarina Witt skated a program that honored the Sarajevo Olympics of 1984. She used the poignant song *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?* in her routine. It reminded those who were watching of the earlier games, which were as grand, marvelous, beautiful, and charming as this year's winter Olympics have been. The city of Sarajevo itself just a decade ago was a beautiful place filled with happy people. Its ancient buildings had been there for centuries. It was a place with a long history and much to commend it in every way. Of course, the horror now is to see destruction where there was once beauty.

It is much easier to destroy something beautiful and worthy than to build it. In Israel in recent years Arabs and Israelis have put much effort into reaching out hands to one another, each trusting those they feared to trust, and building a fragile bridge for the possibility of friendship and mutual respect. But the bridge has been torched by one man with a gun in Hebron, destroying lives and setting suspicion aflame.

Building a Sturdy Home

The word meaning to build up is at the heart of our passage in Romans 14-15. The Greek verb *oikodomeo* and noun *oikodome* are used. These are forms of an architectural term that was used of physically constructing a house or some other type of building. We are to visualize the building of a home, a place of beauty, safety, purity, and intimacy. And the passage will say we are to build up one another, each of us part of the great temple that God is building. Peter speaks of a temple that is being built with living stones (1 Peter 2:5). So we can picture our Lord as a master Architect, creating a building that is beautiful and that will attract others to it, a building that will last.

A building that will be secure and life-giving must be built over time; this cannot happen quickly. It is significant how long Paul extends his argument about believers' doing the hard work of loving one another, understanding one another, including people who are different from us, and living in unity. He doesn't simply make the point and move on. He argues it again and again in various settings. He repeats himself because this is hard business. Christian unity is easily faked, but it isn't easily achieved. As in the story of the three little pigs, it's easy enough to put up a straw house that does you no good. But building a house that will last and that has value is something that takes work. Romans 14:19-20:

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.

The term edification means to build something, just as an edifice is of course a building. The idea of edification here is not so much teaching information. Paul talks about building up a life, seeing character formed; and mutual edification, each of us contributing to the others and being part of the plan of God that creates something beautiful and lasting in the others' lives. Peace allows for the building process to succeed. After the destructiveness of war peace creates the possibility of restoration.

The word destroy in verse 20 is different from the word translated destroy that we saw in verse 15. This word means to specifically tear something down: We are not to tear down the work of God for the sake of food. It is the opposite of building up. So Paul is speaking of a tension that exists. God intends to build something, and we may choose to serve him in that process; but if we are not careful we can tear down what he is building. How foolish to let something as inconsequential as the eating habits or the worship habits of others, their sensitivities, the way they go about life, or whatever their differences in Christ, be an excuse for us to destroy what God intends to build!

The Question of Motivation

Verses 20-23:

All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

This is a long discussion. Verses 1-18 talk about the issues of who was free to eat meat or not, drink wine or not, and worship on Saturday or Sunday or some other holy day. All of those were sources of tension in the first-century church. Most of us have not experienced anything as wide as the gulf or as painful as the suspicion that existed between Jews and Gentiles in the early church. There had been mutual antagonism from long before the Roman period. Jews were isolated unto themselves. They rejected the Gentile world and its influence, and the Gentiles in return rejected the Jews and treated them with suspicion. Now they were in church together, and the requirement was to love each other rather than let the little things in which they were different drive them apart. Verses 17 and 18 are a crescendo in the argument: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men."

In verse 19 Paul makes the unambiguous statement that all food is clean. There is nothing in creation that is, in and of itself, foul. No spiritual taint attaches itself to anything that could be considered food or drink. There is no place on earth that is unclean. There is no kind of clothing that is ritually unclean and damnable. There is nothing as it exists in creation that we need to fear for its own sake.

But Paul goes on to make the point that just knowing this is not enough. Remember the way the detective in the old *Dragnet* series, Joe Friday, would call for, "Just the facts, Ma'am." But just knowing the fact that all food is clean does not mean that we know how to live. Just hearing the announcement of freedom does not mean that we know how to exercise freedom.

Convictions and Conscience

So he brings before us two people. Verse 22 speaks of the first one, someone who must not make his brother stumble by the exercise of his freedom. "Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves" is the conclusion Paul draws about this person. The first sentence of verse 22 is very badly translated in the New International Version, which says, "So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God." It sounds as if you are supposed to keep your beliefs a secret. But that cannot be what Paul means, because he himself has just spent all of chapter 14 and will spend a fair amount of chapter 15 teaching his own convictions about freedom, weakness, strength, and so on. A better way to understand his thought here is, "Make up your own mind, have your own convictions; but form them before the face of God. Invite God into the decision-making process as to what you will do about these matters." Verse 22 again: "Whatever you believe about these things have as your conviction between yourself and God."

For example, if you have decided that you will wear clothing to church that is completely different from your normal attire and different from everyone else's around you---perhaps cut-offs and a ripped T-shirt---go to God with that decision before you enter the church. Why have you made such a choice? You're free to do this; God doesn't care what you wear to church. He isn't offended by cut-offs and a T-shirt. But the question is, why are you doing what you are doing? You need to invite the living God into your decision-making process.

That is why Paul says at the end of verse 22 that the man is blessed who does not in what he is free to do act in a way that ultimately condemns him for it. It is sin to exercise our freedom if it hurts a brother or sister. The

action may not be wrong, but the way you did it, the reason you did it, or the timing of the thing was wrong. To take something that is completely good and find ourselves affronting God with it is a genuine tragedy. If we are going to offend God, we might as well do it with something that is offensive, not something that is completely good. That is a great foolishness.

The second person Paul talks about appears in verse 23: "But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin." This is a person who has heard the words of Romans 14 that nothing in and of itself is unclean, as the apostle has argued. This brother or sister has grasped these things intellectually and on some level acknowledges that it must be so because the person telling them is an authority. But in their conscience they haven't been able to grasp it yet. Their inner person still believes that acting in this manner would offend God. If you violate your conscience in order to have the approval of your circle of friends then it is sin, even though what you are doing in itself isn't wrong. In that case what God discovers by looking at your motives is that you would be willing to shake your fist at him in order to have the approval of people, and that is wrong. Whatever cannot be done from faith is sin, even when the act itself is a good thing, because your conscience hasn't been formed around the truth yet. You cannot do it with your head held high.

What all of this does is highlight the importance of asking not just what people are doing but why are they doing it. To have unity in Christ, therefore, is hard work, because just seeing the events and the circumstances themselves has not told us enough. We are required further to look at our own motives and to understand the inner world of the person next to us. That is why the building is so hard to get up, why it takes endurance and hope. That is why it takes the example of Christ.

Changing Over Time

An illustration of this occurred when I came to PBC in the fall of 1967. I had become a Christian through the ministry of Young Life, a parachurch youth organization that functions primarily on campuses, not in religious settings. They seek non-Christian teens and share the gospel with them. I had grown up in very liberal, lifeless churches. I had never felt that I had any experience with God in those settings. Then someone shared Christ with me in my high school years and it was wonderful and freeing. I joined a wonderful circle of Christian friends. We studied the Bible, sang songs, and traveled and worked together. In contrast, in the church I attended occasionally in high school, we read poems of spiritual anguish and little else. That's the only thing I can remember from that youth group.

By the time I came here for college, my inner sense was that churches were dangerous, and that real Christianity happened in parachurch organizations. It had been nineteen hundred years since Jesus died, and the church was an anachronism that we had outgrown. When I first got here I went to Memorial Church at Stanford, and my suspicions were renewed.

It was with some trepidation that I actually came to Peninsula Bible Church. I was invited by some of my friends whom I trusted because they were part of the Young Life leadership group, but I was nervous about it. I even declined the first few times I was invited because I was suspicious of what I was being invited to. The people involved were sensitive enough to let my conscience be finally formed by the truth rather than berate me for my bad thinking. It took me a little while to finally believe that the Lord had the church in mind even in the twentieth century. It had been a completely silly way for me to think, but it was based on my own experience. I actually felt that anyone who took organized church very seriously was probably not of the Lord, and I had to overcome that.

That is what Paul is talking about here. There are some who can't act in faith because even though you tell them the truth and they can tell it back to you, it doesn't become internalized. So the issue again, if we are going to be mutually edifying to one another, is to take seriously what is going on inside.

In this business of building the building, we are (a bit more than we would like to admit) like the carpenter's apprentice who has been handed a saw and a hammer and a nail and a square. We have even been taught how to use them, but we don't really know enough. We still need the master Architect, the one behind it who understands what is really happening. We still need to check in. Just being given the facts about the tools is not

enough to know how to build into somebody else's life. We must take motivation as seriously as action.

The Need for Endurance

Verses 1-6 of chapter 15:

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him 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 endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Being motivated rightly and doing what is right, knowing how to be a blessing to other people and asking the right questions about what is going on inside, have been the subjects of the last paragraph of Romans 14. What we are additionally encountering now in this section is the matter of endurance. The calling before us is to stay with it, to not expect people to get fixed as quickly as we would like them to.

Living in unity is going to require the example of Christ, for one thing, who endured insult after insult himself. All generations of human beings have insulted the Lord of heaven and earth. And the wrath of God that would have been deservedly aimed back against those who disobeyed and flouted him was all laid on Christ. He endured it all. Further, the Scriptures, we are told, are written so that we will be encouraged and will endure.

The long process of seeing a good, stable and worthy life built is the calling, not just the house of straw or sticks that you can throw up in a minute. Christian unity is hard work. Romans 15:1 speaks of the arena of endurance that is before us: "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up."

This is the first time that Paul has referred to the strong. He has referred frequently in chapter 14 to the weak, but he has not named anyone "strong" until now. The argument until this point, throughout chapter 14, is that both the weak and the relatively less weak have the same problem. They both mistrust each other and they both lack in love. But now in chapter 15 Paul is going to speak of those who are really strong. He means here not those who are just strong in terms of doctrine, who understand what is possible and having a clearer view of things. He means those who have maturity and character and humility, who have learned to walk with the Lord and grow wise in his ways.

The Ministry of the Strong

His statement here is that the strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, although our tendency is to want to please ourselves. Now, we know that the gospel is very good news: It offers real liberty from slavery and real companionship and friendship in the body of Christ. If you were once lonely, knowing the Lord can give you home and family. If you were once dominated by enslaving passions of some kind, you can be really free from them. And it is marvelous to have all the benefits of the gospel apply to you. Most of us became Christians because we saw that would be better off if we were a Christian than if we weren't. So we began the Christian life essentially selfishly, choosing what was to our advantage. That was the appeal.

But in the long run we have to learn to live not to please ourselves, but instead to live with some willingness to sacrifice for those who are weak. And he means here not so much those who are weak in doctrine, who are still struggling to know if they can have a glass of wine, eat a ham sandwich, or keep company with certain kinds of people. He is talking about weakness in a more profound sense here. This is about people who cannot get their lives together. It is about people who have horrible habits of life, addictions, or terrible backgrounds that return time and again to make them miserable. It is about people who are hard to live with. They are demanding and frustrating, and no amount of good intentions accomplish a quick fix. It is these people whom

the strong ought to bear with. They must not be more concerned to please themselves, but instead be willing to let the building be built over the long haul.

We find that we need endurance in this. We need the encouragement of those who have lived in other generations and have had to do the same thing. We need the example of Christ who paid the ultimate price. That is because our hope is not that things will be accomplished quickly. Verse 4 again: "...that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

Verses 5-6: "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." There is very important picture in this. If we are to glorify God, we must do it together. You can't enter the glory of the gospel, have its benefits for you, take all the singing lessons in the world, have a taped orchestra behind you playing strings and horns and woodwinds and percussions and beautiful melodies, and stand up and sing solo the praise of God. It takes everybody. That is why the strong should bear with the failings of the weak---they have to be in the choir, too. It is only with one heart and one mouth, only when everybody has been really allowed in and given opportunity to sing, that God can be really praised.

We can't grow past people; we are not in a race against one another. Everybody is going to end up on the gold medal stand together; there will not be gold, silver, bronze, and also-rans. Everybody will be on the same level, together singing God's praise. So those who have more have to care for the others so that we can all sing with one voice.

Accept One Another

Verse 7:

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

That is a succinct statement of this whole section. If you want to boil it down to one sentence, this is probably it. We are to accept one another---everybody on all sides, every direction, 360 degrees, all possible people, each of us reaching toward the other in acceptance---as Christ has accepted us. The basis for it is that we have been treated mercifully by the Lord, and we all relate to him on the same basis. Because he has accepted us, we accept one another in order to bring praise to God. The great beauty of Christian unity is not even that the believing people are praised for their unity, but that ultimately God himself is praised.

Verses 8-13:

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written:

"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing hymns to your name."

Again, it says,
"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."

And again,
"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and sing praises to him, all you peoples."

And again, Isaiah says,
"The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
the Gentiles will hope in him."

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 does something interesting in summarizing four quotes from the Old Testament, putting this in an ancient theological setting. He goes back and looks at all that God has done. He says to the Jews who are in Rome receiving this letter, "Christ became a servant of the Jews, but not because you particular Jews in Rome were attractive or worthwhile or had anything going for you. It is because he made promises to the patriarchs. So you have the advantage of his ministry because he keeps his promises." He says to the Gentiles, "Your experience of knowing God will result in recognition of his mercy. You may glorify God for his mercy---you don't deserve anything you have gotten, but a merciful God is going to include you as well."

In It Together

Then he goes back and quotes from Psalms and Deuteronomy and finally Isaiah. Verse 9: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name." We can imagine a singer who knows God standing in the midst of the Gentiles singing praise to God's name as they look on. Verse 10: "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." Now there are two groups, and they are rejoicing together. Not a singer singing amidst the Gentiles, but both Gentiles and Jews together are being allowed to sing. Then in verse 11, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples." The Gentiles are directly invited to sing his praise, without reference to whether anybody else is singing or not. They are being given more opportunity and freedom. Finally, the focus is not on who is singing at all but on the one being sung to. The Root of Jesse will spring up, the Messiah, the one who will arise to rule over the nations; and the Gentiles will hope in him. The focus of the last quotation is not the people but the one who is ruling all the nations, everybody equally related to him.

So Paul is handing back responsibility to this church in Rome. Everybody has to accept everybody else. The strong have to help the weak because the very fact that they are strong means that they have more to give than the weak do. It is going to require endurance and encouragement. The building is going to go up under the Master's command, and it is going to be marvelous to behold, but it is not going to be an easy thing. It's easy to love people who are like you and people who are going to love you back. The hard part is to love when it's demanding, when you are not sure you are going to get anything back for it, when you don't understand why people are doing what they are doing. It's hard to love people who come at life in a whole different way than you do. And yet when the people of God learn to live this way, the name of God is praised. We can be encouraged by the fact that God is going to build that building and we can cooperate with him in it. I again urge upon each of us the endurance and the long-haul effort so that what is built is worthy, rather than settling for anything less.

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