

WHAT IS UNITY WORTH?

By SCOTT GRANT

I am part of the contemporary American coffee craze. I frequent local coffee houses on a regular basis. Like many of you, I stand in line to place my order. All you have to do is stand in line once to realize that there is more than one way to order coffee. The variables are endless. Sometimes the baristas are unprepared for me when I get to the front of the line, for all I want is a cup of coffee. Fully caffeinated as opposed to “decaff” or “half-caff.” No room for milk, whether it be nonfat, low-fat or full fat. No sugar. No whip cream. I don’t want a grandé decaff, non-fat, extra-hot caramel caffè latte with whip. I just want a cup of coffee. Or, should I say, I just want a “drip,” which distinguishes my beverage from an espresso drink.

If you go to a coffee house around here, you can get what you want. When you attend a worship service on Sunday morning, you might not get what you want. You can’t walk up to the front of our auditorium and say, “I’d like a grandé-decaff-non-fat-extra-hot caramel-caffé-latte-with-whip worship service today, please.” You also know that you’ll be in the same room with others who, if given the option, would order a different kind of worship service. In that we are the body of Jesus Christ and the family of God, how do we live out our common faith together? If we heed Romans 14, God would have us value unity over personal preferences, which may call us to make sacrifices for the sake of our family members.

Finally, in Romans 14-15, Paul says what he really wants to say. Romans 1-11 prepares the way for the general instructions of Romans 12-13, and all of Romans 1-13 prepares the way for the more specific instructions of Romans 14-15. The letter of Romans flows like a cascading stream into the lake of these two chapters. Aside from the final chapter, however, Romans 14 and 15 may be the least appreciated. Earlier chapters, if taken in isolation, allow us to focus on our individual relationship with God. These chapters won’t let us do that. Also, they speak of issues concerning food and days that are difficult for us to relate to directly. Therefore, Romans 14-15 doesn’t get much attention. It is so little appreciated that Gordon Fee, one of the world’s foremost Pauline scholars, said not long before his retirement that he had never heard a sermon on Romans 14.

So, here we go. And Gordon, this one’s for you.

Romans 14:

¹Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. ²One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. ³The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. ⁴Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

⁵One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to

God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. ⁷For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; ⁸for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

¹⁰But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹For it is written,

*“AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME,
AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.”*

¹²So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. ¹³Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. ¹⁴I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. ¹⁵For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. ¹⁶Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. ²⁰Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. ²¹It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. ²²The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. ²³But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

The attitudes of all

Verses 1-12 concern attitudes toward each other in the church.

Those whom Paul defines as strong are mostly Gentile believers who held to no dietary restrictions. Those whom he defines as weak are mostly Jewish believers who, in the interest of adherence to the Mosaic Law, don't eat meat. Paul does not openly define the two parties along ethnic lines, probably because he wants the church to see themselves as one people. Also, some Gentiles who were attracted to the Mosaic Law would have been in the “weak” group, and some Jews who had rethought the implications of the law would have been in the “strong” group.

Although some meats were permissible under the law, the “weak” thought it was safer to avoid all meats in a Gentile land where Jewish preparation practices were not followed. The strong outnumbered the weak in the Roman church. Paul urges the strong to unconditionally accept the weak into the church. Some would welcome others just to criticize them, but Paul wants his readers to have nothing to do with this kind of “acceptance.”

The tendency of the strong is to think of themselves as enlightened and to ridicule the supposed narrow-mindedness of their more conservative brothers. On the other hand, the tendency of the weak is to think of themselves as faithful and to condemn the supposed licentiousness of their more liberal brothers. Therefore, Paul admonishes the

two parties differently, urging the strong not to “regard with contempt” the weak and urging the weak not to “judge” the strong. God has accepted both the weak and the strong in Christ, so the parties have no business slighting each other (Romans 15:7).

In verse 4, Paul uses a master-slave analogy to discourage the parties from judging each other. Any servant stands in favor or falls in disfavor with his master. Paul expresses confidence that the Lord will enable any of his servants to stand in his favor regardless of his or her views concerning food.

Another issue joins the discussion in verse 5: the observance of holy days in accordance with the Mosaic Law. The weak observe them and the strong ignore them. Each person, however, is free to take either approach. What’s important is not the approach to food and days but what each person means by his or her approach. If someone is giving thanks to God and partaking or abstaining because of his relationship with the Lord, then his approach is appropriate. The lordship of Christ is comprehensive, extending to matters of life and death and embracing everything in between, including food and days. It allows for either approach.

Even so, the lordship of Christ compels those who take different approaches to gather under his banner. Christ’s death and resurrection mean that he is Lord. The gospel proclaims the lordship of Christ and creates one family out of all nations. If Christ unites even the living and the dead, how much more should he unite those who eat meat and those who don’t? Matters of food and days are trivial in light of the lordship of Christ and the unity that he commands.

Christ is Lord, Paul said in verses 4-9, “but you,” he says by implication in verse 10, are not. Because you’re not Lord, you’re not qualified to render a verdict in the case of your brother in Christ. Moreover, if he’s your brother, your inclination should be to favor him, not rule against him. In the end, each of us is accountable to God, who will judge the world through the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31). The gospel assures those who believe it of a favorable ruling. Nevertheless, each of us will give an account of himself or herself to God, so we should think twice before passing judgment against our brother, particularly in trivial matters such as food and days.

The actions of the strong

Whereas verses 1-12 concerned attitudes of the weak and the strong toward each other, verses 13-23 concern the actions of the strong insofar as they affect the weak. Paul has disavowed judging one another, but he does advocate a certain kind of judging. He says in verse 12, literally, to “judge this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.” He’s speaking about potential actions by the strong that could damage the weak.

Theologically, Paul sides with the strong. Practically, he sympathizes with the weak. The Mosaic Law divided food into clean and unclean categories in order to teach God’s people about holiness and protect them from pagan influences. The food laws, however, proved to be a barrier between Jews and Gentiles. The coming of Christ eliminated the distinction between clean and unclean foods and signaled the openness of the people of God to the Gentiles. Jesus himself declared all foods clean, fit for consumption by the people of God (Mark 7:17-23.) God also showed Peter that all foods were clean (Acts 10:9-16).

Nevertheless, Paul says, if someone partakes of food that he or she thinks is unclean, it is, to that person, unclean. If someone does something that he or she thinks violates God's will, even if it doesn't, it's just the same as if that person had violated God's will. That person is not eating with respect to the Lord. He or she is not giving thanks.

Paul wants to discourage behavior on the part of a strong person that would cause a weak person to eat food that he or she thinks is forbidden. If the strong were to hurt the weak in this manner, then brotherly love, which Paul encouraged earlier in this letter, would be violated (Romans 12:9-10). This kind of behavior could wreak such havoc in someone's life that it could even jeopardize his or her allegiance to the Lord. A brother is more important than one's stance concerning food. If Christ sacrificed his life for our brother, how much more should we sacrifice our dietary freedom for him? After all, in a spiritual sense, we're all weak, even helpless, and Christ died for us, the ungodly, to include us in the family of God (Romans 5:6).

Everything that God created is good. Particularly in light of the coming of Christ, we're free to eat all foods. But freedom practiced irresponsibly runs the risk of being condemned by observers if it wounds others. The gospel itself suffers if those who profess belief in it hurt each other. Non-believing Jews would decry the behavior of believing Gentiles if they perceived that such behavior was harming other Jews.

Christ died and rose again in order to defeat evil and bring in the kingdom of God as the world's true Lord. He didn't die so that we could eat what we want when we want. Freedom in matters of food and drink are of no consequence in the kingdom of God. If necessary, freedom must be sacrificed for the sake of the great concerns of the kingdom: "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Righteousness concerns membership in God's people for everyone who believes the gospel (Romans 10:4). Peace concerns relationships in God's family (Romans 14:19). Joy is a product of community life: membership for all, who live together in peace. The Holy Spirit, who dwells among God's people, creates this kind of community life, if we will yield to him. We may have to sacrifice a few freedoms for the sake of the kingdom: for the sake of righteousness, peace and joy, for the sake of God's community. The kingdom of God is worth it.

He who serves Christ in this way, who is willing sacrifice freedoms for the sake of the kingdom, is both pleasing to God and acceptable to men and women. Because God wants one family composed of different nations under the lordship of his Son, he is pleased when he sees his people making sacrifices toward this end. Observers who would speak evil of those who wound each other in the church would on the other hand find no reason to criticize the sacrificial behavior that Paul advocates.¹

Sacrificial decisions for the sake of others in God's family are "the things which make for peace and the building up of one another." A sacrificial mindset, and decisions on which it is based, must be pursued. If it isn't pursued, it won't be captured. If it's not captured, God's family will suffer. If, on the other hand, we pursue a sacrificial mindset, peace in God's family will prevail over conflict and his church will be strengthened. God builds his church through the sacrificial decisions of his people. On the other hand, it is possible to "tear down the work of God," the church, by living in such a way that values personal freedom over brotherly love.² The freedom to eat whatever one wants is not worthy to be compared to the value of God's church.

Paul has featured the words "good" and "evil" prominently since Romans 12:1-2. Romans 12:9: "Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good." Romans 12:21: "Do not be

overcome by evil; but overcome evil with good.” Now, he says that even food that God has declared clean is actually “evil” for the one who believes it is unclean and consumes it because of the behavior of his brother. On the other hand, it is “good” to sacrifice freedoms so that your brother does not consume food or drink for which he is ill-prepared. The willingness to sacrifice freedoms extends beyond food, drink and days, for Paul advocates abstaining from “anything by which your brother stumbles.” Good (abstaining for the sake of a brother) overcomes evil (provoking a brother to partake when he’s not ready).

Paul has a final word in Romans 14 concerning both the strong (verse 22) and the weak (verse 23).

Those who deem it permissible to eat and drink all foods and to ignore holy days are justified in their beliefs. Even if some of their brothers would judge them (verse 3), they are, literally, “blessed” by God. Theologically, their judgment is correct. But one can be theologically correct and practically insensitive. Therefore, they should hold to their beliefs “before God” but should be careful what they practice before their brothers and sisters.³

On the other hand, those who partake with misgivings do so without God’s approval, because they doubt whether they have it. They’d be acting based on someone else’s faith, not their own. They’d be following in the footsteps of Adam, not Abraham, who “did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith” (Romans 4:20-21). Even so, Paul calls those who deem certain foods forbidden “weak in faith” and would have them, like Abraham, grow strong so that they embrace freedom (verse 1). Love fulfills the Mosaic Law, so observance of it is unnecessary (Romans 13:10). But Paul’s words reflect the understanding that freedom cannot be thrust upon those who are unprepared for it.

What God likes

Our Father, it seems, has eclectic tastes. He loves Jews and Gentiles, and delights in the worship of each. He accepts those who eat meat and those who don’t; those who honor certain days and those who don’t. Our Father loves the diversity of his family—all the tribes, tongues, peoples and nations—and their various approaches to him. If his people are giving thanks and honoring his Son, God finds their approaches acceptable. He loves High Church; he loves Low Church; he loves almost everything but no church. One day, his entire family will be worshipping him together. How he must delight when we come together in the present under the lordship of his Son and anticipate the future. God therefore has no problem with differing approaches to him. He would have us all grow up into maturity so that we share his appreciation of diversity. He wants us to be free—free to enjoy him and free to embrace others who enjoy him somewhat differently.

The gospel declares that there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, who unites men and women from all cultures. There is also one God, one Spirit and one family of God. The gospel brings us together and thereby declares to all creation that God is reconciling all things to himself, including inanimate creation. If everyone is the same, you don’t know whether the gospel works. If all the members of a church are from the same culture and the same generation, for example, you don’t know whether the gospel is powerful enough to bring different people together under the lordship of Christ. You don’t know whether Jesus Christ is powerful enough to lead his followers to live sacrificially for his sake. If everyone values only one musical form of worship, for example, you don’t know whether

the gospel works. If we're all the same, our witness is diminished. If we're different, and the gospel doesn't unite us, we're not allowing it to do its work. If it does unite us, we're tasting eternity.

Some years ago, when I was worshiping in a church in Ensenada, Mexico, we sang the song Amazing Grace. The Mexicans sang it in Spanish; and the Americans sang it in English. We tasted eternity. When the worship service was over, however, we went our separate ways. If we worshiped together every week, no doubt some issues would have surfaced. Local pastors from different traditions gather monthly in our building to pray together and consider what we can do together. We're trying to live out the unity that Paul calls for, but we're not really tested because we don't have to live and worship together on a regular basis.

When preferences clash

The rubber meets the road in local congregations where different cultural, generational and personal preferences meet each other on a regular basis. First, Paul would affirm your preferences. You are free to like what you like. Indeed, in many cases, your preferences are deeply ingrained. They seem attached to your identity. Your preferences don't need to change. God's tastes, remember, are eclectic. He likes what you like. He likes it that you like what you like. Our preferences inevitably express themselves in our approaches to church and to living out our faith in the world.

Your ecclesiastical preferences, insofar as they help you worship God and follow Jesus, are good. If you partake and give thanks, God is praised. In-depth expository sermons and punchy homilies, 19th century hymns and 21st century songs, loud music and quiet music, hands up and hands down, ancient liturgies and modern informality, Bible studies and accountability groups, activism and contemplation—it's all good. If you like old music, praise God. If you like new music, praise God. He likes both old music and new music. More importantly, he likes people who like old music, and he likes people who like new music.

How do we live out our faith in the world? Do you find a spouse by "kissing dating goodbye," as one author advocates, or by "giving dating another chance," as another author advocates? What kind of clothes do you wear? Should a mother stay home with her children or go to work? How many hours should you work? How do you educate your children? Some prefer public education, some prefer private education and some prefer home school. What about alcohol? To drink wine or not to drink wine? Each of us is free to answer these questions differently before the Lord.

How should we think?

We have our preferences. What do we think of those whose preferences are different from ours? Those who think of themselves as enlightened may ridicule the supposed narrow-mindedness of others. Those who think of themselves as faithful may condemn the supposed licentiousness of others. In such cases, both the "enlightened" and the "faithful" have a problem: God accepts both the "enlightened" and the "faithful." Each of us is accountable to God, so it is a serious matter to pass judgment against your brother who may be, in his own conscience, following the Lord.

You are free to like what you like, but you are not free to ridicule or condemn your sister whose preferences differ from yours. Your sister is more important than your preferences. Your inclination should be to favor her because she is your spiritual flesh and blood.

Many years ago I played in a church softball league. The two top teams in the league differed on whether it was advisable to drink beer after a game. We competed on the field athletically and off the field theologically. In hindsight, and with a more thorough understanding of the scriptures, I would critique not so much what I did but what I thought. I considered the brothers on the other team to be our inferiors.

You are free to like what you like, but you must also “pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” We must learn to value the larger issues of the kingdom of God above our preferences. Those issues may call on us to make sacrifices for the sake of our brothers and sisters. Remember, Paul began Romans 12-16, the final major section of his letter, with these words: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” Matters of food, drink and days, not to mention worship styles and educational philosophies, are trivial in light of the lordship of Christ and the unity that he commands. If Christ unites the living and the dead, how much more should he unite organists and drummers?

Why should you be willing to sacrifice for the sake of your brother? Because your Lord sacrificed his life for you. If our Lord sacrificed his life for us, how much more should we be willing to sacrifice our preferences for our brothers and sisters? Jesus sacrificed his life not only to reconcile you to God but to make you part of a family. God’s witness to the world, and even to the demons, is not only what he has done for you but also how he unites his people.

Christ did not die so that we could eat what we want when we want. He did not die so that we could worship however we want whenever we want. He did not die so that we could have old music or new music in church. He did not die so that we could have 40-minute expository sermons or 20-minute homilies. He did not die so that we could kiss dating goodbye or give dating another chance. He did not die so that mothers could stay at home or go to work. He did not die so that we could send our children to public school or private school. He died so that people who have different ideas about old music and new music, expository sermons and homilies, dating and courtship, mothers in the home and mothers in the work force, and public school and private school could unite under his lordship and reflect the multifaceted splendor of God into the world.

The Father, who has one family, is pleased when he sees his children making sacrifices for the sake of each other. He builds his church through the sacrificial decisions of his people to love each other. He started his church with the greatest sacrifice of all—that of his Son. It is possible to “tear down the work of God,” his church, by valuing personal preferences over brotherly love. Personal preferences are not worthy to be compared to the value of God’s church, which he purchased with his own blood (Acts 20:28). Neither old music nor new music fulfills the law. Love fulfills the law.

What if you feel like you’re sacrificing more than your brother? First, our tendency is always to think of ourselves as making the greater sacrifice. Second, if we want to follow Jesus, we might want to consider it to our advantage to make the greater sacrifice.

Your preferences may not be eternal, anyway. Even the Mosaic Law, which God gave to his people for a certain time, wasn't eternal. Think how some of your preferences have changed over time. They suited you for a season, and perhaps like the law they were even God-given for a season. I used to hate reading; now I love it. I was a sports junkie; now I'm a Bible junkie. I hated oysters; now I savor them. I loved fly-fishing; I still love fly-fishing. (Some tastes don't change!) Was I wrong then and am I right now? No, I changed.

David writes, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1). What's good and pleasant about it? Or, to put it another way, what do you really want?

At one of my lowest moments, when I was grasping for answers, these words erupted from my soul: "I want to love and be loved!" That's it, isn't it? That's what we want. How do we get it? There's only one way, really. If you want to love and be loved, you need to know some people. If you're a follower of Jesus, you need—you want!—a community. You don't learn what you want to learn most by sitting in the back of an auditorium, being inspired by the worship service—or not—and going home to get on with your day. If you want to love and be loved, you need a church, and you need to move toward it, however tentatively, even if it requires all the courage you can muster. You can learn about love from a sermon, but you can't learn to love from a sermon. If you want to learn to love and be loved, you need a community. Oh, it's good and pleasant if the music and the sermon minister to you. But how much sweeter is it to dwell together in unity with your fellow worshipers?

What do you really want? You may also find, if you search your heart, that you want to live sacrificially for something that is worth the sacrifice. Are your brothers and sisters worth it? Is the church worth it? Jesus thought so. He "loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). He purchased it for God with his blood (Revelation 5:9).

What should we do?

Paul is not so much commanding behavior as he is cultivating an attitude. He wants us to be willing to sacrifice for our brothers and sisters. For the most part, he doesn't command specific actions—perhaps to the chagrin of those of us who want some simple rules to follow. Instead of giving us rules, he gives us an attitude.

We can, however, safely extract at least two principles from Romans 14. First, do not by your actions encourage people to do something that they think is prohibited even though you believe it is permissible. This principle does not necessarily pertain to actions in relation to people who would not be tempted to violate their conscience. Nor does it necessarily pertain to actions that offend others who have different preferences. A sacrificial attitude must obtain at all times. But a sacrificial attitude does not exclude the possibility of offending someone. Jesus had no problem offending people who differed from him in his interpretation of the law. Second, do not flaunt your preferences in the presence of those whose preferences are different. It is all too possible to be theologically correct but practically insensitive. These two principles would rarely, if ever, be applied to what you do in private. In private, you're free to be free.

How might a sacrificial attitude play out in our setting?

Give the elders and pastors the benefit of the doubt. Give the worship leader the benefit of the doubt. Most importantly, give the preacher the benefit of the doubt! Give all your brothers and sisters the benefit of the doubt. Believe that they are seeking the Lord and that their hearts are right before him unless proven otherwise. If possible, and it's not always possible, get to know the brother with whom you have issues. You might see something in his heart that surprises you. Let him see your heart. After all, you're part of the same family.

If you don't like a song, think, "There is someone in this church who is being blessed by this song." Maybe, for the sake of your sister, sing along. If you sit there stone-faced, you might discourage your sister. You don't have to like the song, but you can still sing. We all do lots of things we don't like for various reasons. How much more should we do something we don't like for the sake of our brothers and sisters? If you don't like the sermon, think, "There is someone in this church who is being blessed by this sermon."

Perhaps it is incumbent on the spiritually mature in a church to take the lead in making sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom. Those who have walked with the Lord for many years may be better positioned to lay down their lives. People who are newer to the faith may not have assimilated what the gospel asks of them.

Seventy-three percent of 16- to 22-year-old Californians in a recent survey said that spirituality is important in their lives. However, music and fashion preferences outranked spirituality as the most important characteristic that defines their identity.⁴ No one should be expected to instantly downplay a characteristic that she has considered central to her identity.

My 10-month-old daughter, who is crawling everywhere and grabbing everything in sight, has no facility to voluntarily part with a toy. My 4-year-old daughter, however, is learning to share. When I see my older daughter give one of her toys to her sister, my heart sings. How do you think God reacts when he sees his more mature worshipers sacrificing for the sake of his newer worshipers? He must be thrilled.

There is a marketing machine in this country that identifies, encourages and targets our preferences so that we might consume its offerings. We are made to think that we deserve to have our tastes satisfied. I'd be interested in the results of a survey that deals with this question: Of all the people in attendance at worship services in the United States on any given Sunday, how many people are worshipping, and how many people are evaluating the worship service?

If your church doesn't satisfy your tastes, if doesn't satisfy them the way it used to, if your tastes change or if your brother's tastes clash with yours, you can always go to another church. Don't you deserve to have your tastes satisfied? To remain at such a church and to sacrifice for your brothers and sisters is to swim against the American tide. But if you want to love and be loved, if you want to sacrifice for something worth the sacrifice and if the unity of God's family despite different preferences is God's witness to creation regarding the reality of the gospel, then perhaps we should consider whether God's way is different from the American way.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, a senior devil, gives this advice to a junior devil who has been assigned to distract a man from serving the "Enemy," who is God:

Why have I no report on the causes of his fidelity to the parish church? ... Surely you know that if a man can't be cured of churchgoing, the next best thing is to send him all over the neighborhood looking for the church that "suits" him

until he becomes a taster or connoisseur of churches. The reasons are obvious. In the first place the parochial organization should always be attacked, because being a unity of place and not of likings, it brings people of different classes and psychology together in the kind of unity the Enemy desires. ... In the second place, the search for a “suitable” church makes the man a critic where the Enemy wants him to be a pupil. ... So pray bestir yourself and send this fool the round of the neighboring churches as soon as possible. Your record up to date has not given us much satisfaction.⁵

None of this is to say, of course, that there aren't biblical standards or that moral and theological issues don't matter. In both Romans 14 and 15 Paul urges the Romans to accept their brothers and sisters, but elsewhere he tells the Corinthians to kick out a man who was sleeping with his father's wife (1 Corinthians 5). It is to say that there are gray areas between the black and the white, and even that behavior that is permissible for one person can be sin for another (Romans 14:22-23). It takes humility, thorough consideration of the scriptures and prayer to discern what matters and what doesn't matter in a particular setting.

A great gift

The gospel unites Jews and Gentiles, drummers and organists, the caffeinated and the decaffeinated. Paul commands us elsewhere to be “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Living out our common faith together is not an easy task, but it is a high calling. God purchased the church his own blood. What is unity worth? It's worth the blood of God's Son. Unity, therefore, is worth at least a few personal sacrifices. We've been given a great gift: God's church. Don't take it lightly. Don't throw it away. Don't tear it down. Be prepared, if necessary in some cases, to sacrifice your personal preferences for it.

One day, the gospel will work: It will unite men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. I say, let's get on with it. When we unite under the lordship of Christ in the present, we are telling ourselves—and our world—not only that the gospel will work but that the gospel does work.

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¹ Verse 18 echoes Romans 12:1-2, the theme verses for Romans 12-16. Romans 12:1 urges us to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice; Romans 14:18 speaks of serving Christ sacrificially. Romans 12:1-2 says that a living sacrifice is, literally, “pleasing to God” and that practicing God's will is, literally, “pleasing” to him; Romans 14:18 says those who serve Christ sacrificially are “pleasing to God.” Romans 12:2 asks us to “prove” (*dokimazō*) what the will of God is; Romans 14:18 says that those who serve Christ sacrificially are “acceptable” (*dokimos*) to men. The words translated “prove” and “acceptable” are related. The will of God is that we sacrifice for the sake of each other in God's family so that observers will find nothing to criticize in the way that we treat each other. The echoes of Romans 12:1-2 in Romans 14 indicate

that for Paul, the offering of our bodies as living sacrifices and the renewing of our minds are worked out in the personal sacrifice in the context of spiritual unity.

² Similar wording in 1 Corinthians 3:17 suggests that the “work of God” is the church, not an individual.

³ Verse 22, like verse 18, echoes Romans 12:1-2. The word translated “approves” (*dokimazō*) in verse 22 is the same word that is translated “prove” Romans 12:2: “... be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” Those who believe they may eat all foods, for example, have understood God’s will, provided they practice their freedom responsibly.

⁴ Peter Schrag, “Youngsters Respect Tolerance, Hard Work,” San Jose Mercury News, April 27, 2007. P. 15A. The survey by Florida pollster Sergio Bendixen for San Francisco-based New American Media featured 601 respondents.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, © MCMXC by Barbour and Co., Uhrichsville, Ohio.