

# CORE CONVICTIONS OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Romans 15:5-7

Treasuring Christ Church – Pastor Boyd Johnson

September 10, 2017

## INTRODUCTION

I hope you enjoyed the series we completed last week called God's Blueprint for Building the Church. The main point of each of the sermons in that series was simple, yet a powerful guide to what we are called to do as a church.

This sermon today is not part of that series, but is related. Thinking back on that series, it's important that we not only have:

- a commitment to Scripture so that we can grow as a church,
- a commitment to worship so that we can reach the lost,
- and a commitment to holiness so that we can be a church that endures,
- but also that we have a commitment to each other.

One of the ways we commit to each other is through church membership and the covenant affirmation we make with each other—promises to live out the “one anothers” as God has called us to.

But we also need to hold core convictions that guide our relationships with each other. In order to build the kind of relational culture that God expects of us in a church, we need to possess the same convictions. Our passage today will help us set those convictions and I hope these convictions become embedded in our church culture so that we can be all that God has for us.

**Romans 15:1–7:** "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

## Context

Most of Paul's letter is a brilliant theology of salvation. But here at the end, Paul addresses a problem in the church of Rome. The church in Rome faced the triple-threat of tension, suspicion, and dissension. There was strong disagreement in the church between those who were strong in their faith (more mature) and those who were weak in their faith (less mature).

Those weak in their faith were unable to let go of the religious rituals of their past. They felt they needed to observe the Sabbath, perform sacrifices, and adhere to dietary laws. Their consciences weren't yet matured in Christ, so they didn't feel the freedom to do away with these things.

On the other hand, you had those stronger in faith, who knew that Christ fulfilled the Law and that worship of God was now different. They didn't violate their consciences when they ate meat that had previously been sacrificed to idols. They considered every day a day unto the Lord and didn't feel they had to observe a Sabbath like the Jews, and so on.

So there was real tension in the church between these two groups. The groups became suspicious of each other's motives and love and the tension was causing dissension and division. The strong had become arrogant in the exercise of their freedom and the immaturity of the weak caused failings.

Hearing of the situation, Paul wrote to restore unity in the church beginning in 14:1 through 15:13. We're focusing our attention on 15:5-7, which establish the foundation for unity within the church. In these verses, he gives them a path forward. He does so first by a prayer of benediction in verses 5-6. He follows that with an exhortation in verse 7.

A benediction is a special kind of prayer. Sometimes it's called a prayer-wish. It's a prayer that is said to man, almost like an exhortation, but in the form of a wish that God would do something. So it has two audiences: God and man. So really all of verses 5-7 are an exhortation to pursue unity in the church.

## **Proposition**

As we study what Paul writes, we learn that for a church to be a distinctively *Christian* community it must be unified. In order to be unified, what core convictions must a church have? Here, we'll find five core convictions of Christian community.

### **I. AS A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, WE MUST SHARE A COMMON PERSPECTIVE**

Paul begins his prayer in v. 5: "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another. . ." He first reminds them who God is.

Elsewhere, Paul describes God as the God of love and peace (2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:9; 1 Thess. 5:23), the God of hope (Rom. 15:13), and the God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3). Paul doesn't randomly list attributes of God. He describes God in particular ways that bring light to the circumstances at hand. Here, Paul describes him as the God of endurance and encouragement. That means that God is the source of a Christian's endurance and the source of encouragement. In other words, if this church is going to be unified, the power must come from God. He will

help them endure one another and he will be their encouragement.

The principle instrument God uses to give endurance and encouragement is his word. In the verse before, Paul writes, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” The tool in God’s hand to work endurance and encouragement in his children is the Scriptures. So Paul prays that the God of endurance and encouragement would grant them to live in harmony with one another.

That there was a need for harmony presupposes that there were real differences within the church. And we need to understand that not all differences in the church are bad. In fact, differences are *necessary* for unity.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about divisions occurring in that church over spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12, he likened the church to a human body and its many parts. A body is composed of many parts and it requires the diversity of its parts in order to function. In the same way, the church as the body of Christ requires the diversity of its individual members with their God-given gifts to function properly. Differences in the parts make unity in the body possible.

He wrote (12:24-25): “God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, *that there may be no division in the body*, but that the members may have the same care for one another.” So not all differences are bad. Unity is the goal not uniformity.

Nevertheless, there must be harmony in our attitudes toward one another. The phrase “live in such harmony” could be more literally translated, “to think the same thing.” Other translations:

NASB: “be of the same mind with one another”

NIV: “[have] the same attitude of mind toward one another”

NKJV: “be like-minded toward one another”

This is actually, I think, a clever word play by Paul. The whole problem between the weak and the strong in the Roman church was that they didn’t agree. They didn’t have the same mind. And yet, Paul in chapter 14 embraced their disagreement.

Romans 14:5–6: “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. *Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.* The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.”

“Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” That is, in these nonessential areas, differences in conscience can be embraced. Yet even as they settle in their mind

their viewpoints, nevertheless, they are still to have the same mind with one another.

He means this: even as they have differences in the relatively trivial, they must share a harmony in perspective. In order to have true Christian community in the church, they must have a common perspective. They must share common convictions. Particularly, they are to share the perspective that they are called to love one another, sacrifice for one another, and build each other up, not tear each other down.

He writes in 15:2–3: "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.'" There can be no harmony without love. But where there is true love, there will be harmony. Paul pleaded with the church at Philippi: (2:2) "Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."

Harmony is a gift of grace from God. That's why Paul prays that God would "grant" it. This is not a prayer for Christians to pull themselves together, but that God would give his grace. This harmony must come from him. It cannot be self-manufactured. It is something to seek through prayer. If we do not pray for it, we will not likely have it.

We find a second core conviction as the verse continues.

## **II. AS A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, WE MUST SHARE A COMMON SAVIOR**

Romans 15:5: "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, *in accord with Christ Jesus*. . ."

The kind of harmony we are after is the kind that accords, fits, agrees with Christ Jesus. We dare not have just agreement among ourselves, but we must strive for agreement that Jesus would agree with. We need a unity among us *and* a unity with Jesus.

To have unity with each other and unity with Jesus requires that we are all found in Christ, because we cannot please God unless we are found in Christ. Our unity's foundation is our common Savior. This is the starting point of unity—to have trusted in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

A church isn't a community that is based on similar interests or life stages or ethnicities or social backgrounds. You don't start a church for millennials. You don't start a church for homeschool families. You don't split churches up into, effectively, two churches—those who like contemporary and those who like traditional. You don't unite a church on patriotism.

I'm not arguing you can't have interest-based or life-staged based ministries within the church. But interests and life-stages cannot be the foundation of unity. There is nothing distinctively Christian about affinity. Everyone is attracted to people just like them.

But in our culture that values self-absorption and “people like me,” so many decide on a church—truth be told—on whether there are people like them there. Do these people fit my social status? By appearance, are these people like me? Can I find friends here who are in my life stage and share my interests? Are there enough of my race at this church?

Christian community must be based on something more than similar interests. You can’t get all nations, tribes, and tongues gathered together based on similar interests. It’s the very fact that we are so different and yet we can find such rich relationships with each other that make the church’s community compelling.

We can share nothing in common interest-wise and yet, because we share one common Savior, we share everything important in common. What makes the church different is that the Jesus we share is more important than the differences we don’t. So as a Christian community, our foundation is our common Savior.

### **III. AS A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, WE MUST SHARE A COMMON VOICE**

All this harmony has a purpose:

Romans 15:6: "that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

This word “together” is packed with meaning. In the Greek form, it’s only found 11 times in the New Testament, all of which are in Acts, except this verse. We’ve seen this word recently in our series, *God’s Blueprint for Building the Church*, from Acts 4.

In Acts 4, Peter and John had been in prison for preaching about Jesus. They were released with the warning never to talk about Jesus again.

Acts 4:23–24: "When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices *together* to God. . ."

The word “together” is the Greek word *homothymadon*. It’s a compound of two words meaning to “rush along” and “in unison.” It’s to be speedy about unity. One commentary says that the term is almost musical. It’s a word you might use to describe a beautiful, large choir singing in perfect harmony. The choir sings different notes, yet they blend in perfect harmony. Even as the voices are many, the voice is one.

In the church, we must all be singing the same song, even as we sing different notes. The song we sing is the song of praise to our God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a unity of heart and a unity of mouth.

#### IV. AS A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, WE MUST SHARE A COMMON LOVE

In verse 7, Paul gives a direct exhortation to the church in Rome.

Romans 15:7: "Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. . ."

He prayed the benediction over the church, now he implores them to take the next, first step.

What must they do in order to develop the kind of community Christ calls for? They must be a welcoming community. Various translations have struggled to capture the warmth of this word "welcome." "Accept" or "receive" don't do it justice. The ESV probably does the best job with "welcome." Yet, the idea behind "welcome" is not a polite, yet disengaged, hello. What Paul calls for is a warm welcome, a hearty acceptance. It is to welcome someone into the family—a wholehearted embrace. It's the welcome of a couple bringing into their home an adopted child. We are to embrace each other relationally with all the love and concern of a close family member.

The standard of our welcome of each other is no less than the way Christ has welcomed us. "Welcome one another *as Christ has welcomed* you." We have been welcomed into the family of God. Romans 8:29 tells us that Jesus is our brother. Hebrews 2:11 tells us that Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers. Not only is Christ's acceptance of us the *standard* of how we should accept others, but Christ's acceptance of us is also the *basis* of our acceptance of others.

In other words, *because* Christ has accepted us *and* people different from us, we are free to lay down prejudices. If Christ warmly welcomed them in his family, then we too are free to embrace them. With this view, the tensions, suspicions, and dissensions will fade from view.

To welcome each other like this requires love for each other. The church isn't the preaching. It isn't the music. It isn't the programs and Bible studies and children's ministries. The church is the people. You can't say you love the church if you don't want to be around the people of the church. If you're rather indifferent about engaging the people of the church, then you don't really love the church. You may love things the church does or what it does for you, but you don't demonstrate an affection for what Jesus died for and loves.

So a Christian community must share a common love for each other—a desire to be in the family, a love of being together.

#### V. AS A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, WE MUST SHARE A COMMON PURPOSE

Twice in these verses, Paul has given the purpose of Christian community. In verse 6, "That together you may with one voice *glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" And in verse 7, "Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, *for the glory of God.*" To glorify God is to honor him, worship him, give him the highest praise. This is the our ultimate priority,

our aim for unity.

Tension and dissension in a church is a worship issue. It is a failure to glorify God. Division over non-essentials is proof of immaturity in worship. It also directs precious time and energy away from the church's basic mission of glorifying God. But when we are united with the common purpose of glorifying God, divisions are overcome. The way to unity is not appeasement and people-pleasing, but a change in a common purpose of glorifying God.

## **CONCLUSION**

So what are the core convictions we as a church must have in order to be a distinctively Christian community?

Our core convictions must be:

- A common perspective,
- A common Savior,
- A common voice,
- A common love,
- A common purpose.

Christian community is a community of believers with differences united by a common perspective, Savior, voice, love, and purpose. That is uncommon in this world, but exactly what God has called us to.