

INTEGRITY, a journal published by an independent nonprofit corporation, is basically a ministry of reconciliation which utilizes the varied talents of a large community of believers who seek accurately to reveal God to both the church and the world so that all may become one as he is one.

Integrity

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wonders God had done through them, the apostles and elders and brethren sent out a letter expressing their unanimity, stating in part, "it seemed good to us, having become of one mind . . ." They were not naturally of one mind; their differences were greater than those which usually divide the church today; but when God provoked them to praise, those differences were set aside under one controlling aim.

One Voice

This inner unity is outwardly expressed "with one voice," suggestive of a chorus composed of people who can no longer be accepted or rejected, or elevated or

demoted, according to such distinctions as Jew, Greek, bond, free, male, female, but who, in unifying worship, glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. For this reason, Paul says, "accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God."

As our inclination to glorify God wanes, as we lose sight of the very basis and purpose of our Christian existence, our divisions will increase. On the other hand, when the one supreme purpose in our lives is to praise him, and when we derive our motivation for such praise from what he has done for us, we will find that unity is inevitable.

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THE RUBBER KNIFE

For several years we have been hearing proposals on how the church may maintain and/or restore unity. We are always pleased when one of these proposals is made, for at the very least it indicates that someone is taking the question of unity seriously. And although we are a long way from Barton W. Stone's hope that the union of Christians would be our guiding star, one of the encouraging signs of the times is that so many people from such diverse viewpoints are actively searching for ways to maintain fellowship.

Unfortunately, proposals for bringing together the various parties in the church often impose conditions of fellowship which are contrary to the Bible. That, of course, should be reason enough why they have not worked. The problem is so great, and the forces which keep people apart are so powerful, that nothing but God's way will triumph. Any other approach toward eliminating sectarianism is like trying to remove a cancerous growth from the human body with a rubber knife.

We feel we have used the rubber knife long enough. Let us study the Bible way more carefully and apply it more diligently. To that end we dedicate this special issue on unity, along with out last. We hope that together they will at least get us thinking in the right direction.

THANKS FOR THE GIFTS

To our last issue we attached an addressed envelope in which readers could send in their contributions to our financial support. We are deeply grateful to those who used them for the intended purpose, especially since we see no way this publication can continue without widespread support from readers. So again we say thank you! Of course, if you have not used your envelope, opportunity still knocks.

Living Together with Those with Whom We Differ

JOSEPH F. JONES
Southfield, Michigan

One of the most coveted promises of the Good News is that men are free in Christ. Not only are believers free from the law, from its ceremonial and ritualistic demands, but they are exhorted not to become again enslaved in a yoke of bondage (Gal. 5:1). If salvation were possible through law-keeping, then Paul affirms that "Christ has died to no purpose" (Gal. 2:21; 5:2-4). But the responsible exercise of the Christian's freedom presented serious problems for the early Christians in congregations throughout the Roman Empire; and similar problems exist today for those followers of Jesus who take their freedom seriously.

Romans 14

In learning how to relate within the Christian congregation, members of the body must understand the nature of freedom and how to exercise it lovingly and responsibly. It was to brethren wrestling with this precise problem that the apostle Paul addressed the material found in Romans 14:1 through 15:13. It is the intent of this essay to single out some of the significant insights couched in chapter 14 relating to the concepts of unity, differences and freedom; and another writer will share similarly in his exegesis of chapter 15.

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER, 1981

Some Christians in Rome were not thoroughly convinced that the salvation in Christ was adequate apart from some aspects of law-keeping. Special dietary controls were still difficult to give up: some foods simply could not be eaten with good conscience. Certain days and seasons must be honored with all sacred intent. So firm were some Christians in holding these views that they found it difficult to recognize as true to the Lord any others who dared to differ. The apostle characterizes those believers with such strict and inflexible views as "weak in faith"; while those who could act fully on their freedom like Paul himself, who were not afraid to be free nor too timid to live fully in faith, he calls "strong" ones.

How then could such divergent views be held by differing brethren and the unity and fellowship of the Christian congregation be maintained? Let us look into Romans 14 for some principles and practical guidelines, without wrestling with all of the complexities of Christian unity which have vexed believers since apostolic times.

God Has Welcomed Him

Into this strained relationship where brother was pitted against brother, with arrogance in one heart and judgment in

another, Paul casts the obvious but all-essential principle: **seek always to live in harmony and unity with one another** (Rom. 14:1-5; 15:5, 6). Both sides would likely agree readily to the principle; but how can it be effected when neither party has the slightest intention of yielding to the other in what is viewed as "deep conviction"?

The apostle offers two very lofty yet practical suggestions. The liberated believer, free "in Christ" from the law and rules and ceremony, must **avoid all arrogance** toward his narrower, "weaker" brother. "Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats." **Never yield to the temptation to be judge of your brother.** "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? . . . Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother?"

Reasons

The reasons why brethren are not to pass judgment are clear and profound. (1) Though differing strongly in their point of view, the liberal and conservative have both been accepted of God. If one is saved in Christ and welcomed by God, who dares question this acceptance? Whether one eats or refrains, esteems one day better than another or all days alike, "God has welcomed (received) him"; and it is to his own Master that he stands or falls. (2) The second reason for refraining from judgment is that all judgment is ultimately reserved for God. "For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God . . . So each of us shall give account of himself to God." Members of the body, so quick to castigate, draw lines of fellowship, and determine who "has the truth" and who hasn't, need to feel the

impact of this powerful truth, for there before God is the seat of true justice.

We Are the Lord's

Unity and fellowship among believers root in the sovereignty of Jesus' Lordship. The Christian is one who through obedient faith has enthroned Jesus as Lord, has been baptized into the body of Christ, and finds his expression of life in the community of saints where each esteems other better than himself. Saved by Christ, the believer is now subject to him as Lord. It is to the Lord Jesus Christ that one's loyalty must be extended; and every conscientious follower of Jesus commits belief and behavior to him who is both Lord and Judge. If the brother is liberated, then he eats to the Lord in the exercise of his freedom; and if the one restricted in conscience refrains from eating or insists on special days, he does both "in honor of the Lord" (14:5-9). Whether in life or in death, "we are the Lord's"; for it was to this purpose, that "Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living" (15:9).

Oneness or unity is the result of believers being "in Christ," having been buried with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life . . . For if we have united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom. 6:4, 5). Not only has each baptized believer been united with Christ, but he has been united with other believers in the body of Christ, the church. The unity of the church is God's doing, its fellowship the result of God's saving activity in Christ. We do not create the unity nor the fellowship; but through either arrogant or judgmental treatment of other members we may disrupt and divide, even destroying him

for whom Christ died (Rom. 14:13-15).

Walking in Love

One of the most helpful (though difficult) of all Christian exercises is to reflect upon life in the light of eternity. Many of our views or interpretations, held with such tenaciousness, characterized as nothing less than "the truth of God," may ultimately prove to be as insignificant as the Roman Christians abstaining from meats or esteeming days. But of far greater importance is the attitude with which such views are held, and how they affect the deeper interpersonal relationships in the body of Christ. "I know and am persuaded that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean. If your brother is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died" (14:14,15).

Note carefully again two basic principles in maintaining the fellowship. (1) While the apostle clearly aligns himself with the more liberated conscience (14:14), he does not try to force another to change his views; but he does insist that the stronger brother exercise his freedom with utmost considerateness. For to injure another's conscience through the arrogant and reckless display of Christian freedom is to be guilty of "no longer walking in love" (14:15). (2) A further even more grievous consequence of the "strong" being unmindful of the "weak" is to "cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died" (14:16-20). The free man in Christ is concerned not to cause this ruin of another by tempting him to violate his understanding of God's truth (see also I Cor. 8:11-13; 9:10-23).

Spiritual growth and maturity enable the Christian to discern between essentials and non-essentials, between what is

central and what is peripheral in Christian revelation as it is lived out in the community of believers. How urgent it is that Christians acquire sharp discernment and maintain Biblical perspective. Like the Christians of Rome or Corinth, we need our notions of what is essential vigorously challenged and refined.

The Essence of Life in the Kingdom

Following through with his exposition of principles and practical suggestions for maintaining the unity and fellowship of the church, the apostle then dares to spell out what in the midst of such debate constitutes the essence of life in the Christian body. "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (14:17-19). Righteousness, not man's activity but that justified state before God resulting from faith (Rom. 3:22); and peace resulting from God's acceptance of the justified sinner; and joy in the Holy Spirit, when one realizes his forgiveness from sin, removal of guilt, and the energizing presence of God's Spirit within, are all dependent upon the undeserved grace of God (Rom. 5:8). The freedom in Christ enables each member of the body to claim his acceptance by God, and consequently to accept every brother whom God has received.

And all of this brotherly acceptance is no mere display of sentimental feelings without regard for truth, but a demonstration of our efforts to heed and implement the divine imperative. "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (15:7). To God be the glory, great things he has done! □

Maturity and Unity

AMOS PONDER

Flint, Michigan

But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.

— Eph. 4:7-16, RSV

The apostle Paul deals with unity in much of his writings. In Ephesians 4 he deals with unity and its relationship to maturity. Perhaps there were divisions at Ephesus, as there were in other congregations he wrote to, which prompted him to

write about unity. There were a variety of gifts being demonstrated in the body which could lead to some members feeling that they were more important than others. Paul points out that all these gifts were from Christ. It was the same Jesus that descended, died for our sins, arose and ascended on high. It is through his grace that these gifts are given. These differing gifts should not lead to division but to maturity and unity.

The purpose of these gifts is stated in verses 12 and 13: to build up the body of Christ until we all mature and to bring us to a unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God. As stated in verse 3 of this chapter, we are to maintain the unity of the Spirit. This is a God-given unity. We do not produce this unity but are made one by being added to the body. Verse 13 is talking about a different dimension of unity. This unity is realized in our maturity. But, our oneness is also what helps us to mature. There seems to be a cycle of unity, maturity, unity. How then does this work?

Historically, the Christian religions have weeded out those individuals who do not adhere to their particular creeds, and at times have killed them. Each denomination seems to have some doctrines that everyone must agree to or be excluded from that fellowship. Thus they take on the nature of a cult, which tends to reproduce a type. All members of a cult almost always think, say and do the same

things. This sameness does not produce the depth in our Christianity that Christ requires but produces counterfeits. What is called for is unity, not conformity. We are of the same mind and are united in our commitment to Christ without agreeing on every interpretation of scripture.

I believe that Ephesians 4 is teaching us the opposite of this identical behavior. We are to maintain the unity that God produced in reconciling us through Christ. Paul states that they have this unity and are to maintain it in spite of the diversity of gifts at Ephesus. In fact this diversity of gifts is what leads to the greater dimension of unity. In each congregation there are those who by reason of study and experience have matured as well as those who are unlearned and weak. If we weed out those who have not grown in knowledge, they might never be able to grow. By maintaining unity we can help each other to grow and mature. And yes, even those who are new in the faith can sometimes edify the older members. We are all needed to help the body function as it should.

Freedom of Expression

This maturing demands that we maintain an atmosphere of freedom of expressing our viewpoint. If there is no freedom to express our views there is no freedom to grow. There should be times for us to debate differing views so that we all are challenged to think and study. Some might object to this, claiming that open discussion will lead to confusion, but it is my opinion that we will not grow significantly if we are never challenged by others' ideas and viewpoints. If we insist on never hearing anything different from what we believe, we are also insisting that we have already attained to all knowledge. We all know that we have much to learn

about God and the Scriptures which reveal him.

Basic Belief

If we are to allow and even promote this diversity of thought in the body, it might be asked, is nothing sacred? Is there nothing that all must believe? If there is, who decides the limits and who decides what is to be done to those who do not agree? A thorough answer to these questions could not be contained in a paper this short but in Acts 15 most of the questions are answered in that the whole congregation made a decision concerning those who caused a problem about circumcision and what to do about it. It must be remembered that we are all one in Jesus. We must believe in him and the doctrines concerning him, else there is no basis for unity. Much of the New Testament was written to establish belief in Jesus and to warn the believers about those who would deny him. We are talking about the unity of believers and how to mature in that unity. Discipline is often used to control the thinking of members and supposedly to maintain unity. The discipline of members of the body of Christ in scripture was based upon three things: immoral living, being factious, and distorting the doctrine of Christ. I Corinthians 5 deals with how bringing fleshly sins into the body will corrupt the whole body. Titus 3:10 talks about the heretic or factious person, who could be causing trouble teaching truth or error. I John 9 and 10 tells of those who have corrupted the doctrine of Christ. This does not mean every point on which we might disagree but concerns only the Christ and the things taught about him. I know of no other reason for disciplining or excluding members of the body. This would be a good place for us to think about drawing lines instead of excluding everyone who

disagrees with us. Discipline will maintain conformity, but openness will promote unity and maturity.

The reason for this kind of unity is given in verse 16. The body is joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied. How can we be supplied for edification if we are separated? It is within the body that we are enabled to grow. If a member of our physical body is cut off, it dies because it has lost its connection to the life-giving supply. Likewise it is through our connection with the body that we are edified. This is a point overlooked by those who do not become involved with a congregation or those who seldom meet with other members of the

body. Involvement is necessary to the well-being of each member of the body. We cannot edify each other if we are divided. We must have unity in order to mature.

The conclusion to the unity-maturity cycle is unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. If and when we all mature to manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, we will understand these things more nearly alike. We are not perfect but the community of God is designed to bring us to perfection. When we attain perfection we will have perfect knowledge and unity. Until that time arrives we must maintain our unity in spite of differences and encourage each other to grow. □

Diversity and Evaluation

DEAN THOROMAN

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The primary emphasis of this and the previous issue of **INTEGRITY** is exactly where it ought to be — on unity and fellowship. Nothing in this article should be interpreted as being in opposition to or inconsistent with the goal of being one in the Lord and having a harmonious relationship with others who love and serve Him. Having said that, let us examine some ideas which are essential for a fuller understanding of what it means to be of one mind and one spirit.

There is a need to recognize the truths which follow and to acknowledge that their existence need not disturb unity nor interfere with fellowship. First, we must openly admit that differences **do** exist. Second, let us honestly assume that dif-

ferences have a **right** to exist. Third, free expression of our differences must be allowed. Such expression may be spoken, written, and/or practiced. As in all matters of liberty there are limitations such as those governing the eating of food in apostolic instructions to Christians at Corinth and Rome.

Is there any good reason for true oneness to be threatened by telling it like it is with regard to the existence of differences? Would not the denial of such be akin to the proverbial ostrich's hiding its head in the sand? Perhaps some would be surprised to know the number and the depth of diverse views in any local congregation which may have achieved so much outward sameness that it would be

easy to wrongly believe that most of its members see religious matters very much alike. Failure to express diversity should never be understood to mean that diversity does not exist. Often the absence of such expression is due to fear of being ostracized. In churches where this fear does not exist there is a healthy sharing of views and a happy working relationship.

Love and Trust

Why do some church leaders assume an inconsistent stance with regard to the right of differences to exist? All other phases and activities of life include this right as though it were automatic and many religious persons accept the same assumption for churches. Perhaps keepers of orthodoxy and some within a church power structure would feel most threatened if the right under consideration were consistently upheld. An atmosphere of trust and unconditional love is essential to be comfortable with those whose views and practices differ — sometimes quite dramatically — from “the norm” or what generally believed and followed within a particular group. Where such trust and love flourish it seems natural to defend the right to hold diverse views even though the views themselves may not appear to be defensible!

How will we know what others honestly believe unless we encourage free expression? It seems logical that if one has the right to hold a view, he or she has the right to make it known. Neither ideas nor their expression cause harm of and within themselves. The harm comes from reaction! If we could just learn to listen without being judgmental we would hear more and we would expose ourselves to concepts which might very well open doors of understanding and expand our wealth of knowledge. When we listen well we will

have more opportunities to be heard. Let us heed the scriptural admonition to be “swift to hear and slow to speak.” When responsible expression of ideas is sincerely encouraged there is a creative and spontaneous exchange which should be profitable for all who openly share.

Testing Ideas

One of the reasons for supporting the concepts which have been presented so far is that we must allow our ideas to be tested in the open arena of discussion or we may never know their true worth. Most of us have such tender egos that we are easily offended any time someone disagrees with anything we say. What is greatly needed is a strong dose of self-confidence to enable us to see the big difference in being against an idea and against a person. Then we need to be bold enough to throw our ideas out for others to consider knowing that acceptance or rejection should not be taken personally. How stimulating to our minds to be in the company of those who are not afraid to challenge each other!

Another reason to support the freedom and openness advocated here is that we may be far more relaxed in defining the bounds of fellowship. Congregational rules and traditions will continue as long as the world stands, but as long as these are publicized and subject to change there can and should be lots of room for diversity without division. This ought to be true within a local church group and even more so in relationships between various congregations.

Someone may wonder how much difference may be tolerated in “doctrinal” issues. The principles enumerated at the beginning of this article still apply. It is obvious that we even have difficulty distinguishing what is “doctrinal” from

what is "opinion" and that if we cannot tolerate this difference we may reduce those with whom we associate religiously to a precious few!

Letters to the editor in response to

material in INTEGRITY are genuinely welcomed. Difficult as it may be at times, we try to practice what we preach. Please feel free to share your thinking with us and our readers. □

How Does It Feel to Be Judged Unworthy

DAVID C. STEEN
Bay City, Michigan

The identity of the judge is an important factor to consider. But when a church member points to another in exclamations of damnation, it never feels too great.

Recently a visiting family, hailing from a distant southeastern area of the country, attended our Sunday morning worship assembly. There was a hearty welcome for them. They seemed quite friendly and open as they came in, shared introductions, and settled down for the service. What happened in the service to elicit a negative judgment, I did not know. What mistake we made, I could not guess. (Thankfully, I am not hip to all the latest burning issues raging across the churches these days.) But when the high point of our service came, as we were sharing the Lord's Supper, our southern visitors refused, disdaining our fellowship.

Soon the worship service came to an end. I may have been reading too much between the lines, but there seemed to be a different quality of greeting as they left. In fact, there was just barely a greeting at all. Politeness stripped to the bare essentials is all I received from these visitors on their way out, as if I were an attendant at the airport weapons detector and they only wanted to hurry on to their

departing flight. I got the distinct impression that we had just been removed from someone's list of "the faithful."

The Galatians 2 account of the open confrontation of Peter by Paul relates only sparse detail with regard to the electric emotional current that must have been flowing among all concerned groups and individuals. Betrayal is a word which may evoke some of the feelings that certainly were present on several levels. Self-betrayal, a turning on friends, and a virtual kiss of death to the Savior are all present in Peter's actions. Surely it was providential, and not just "lucky for us," that there was one present that day who knew the healing touch of Truth and was blessed with courage to complement his convictions. It is instructive for current sojourners in faith to note some of the dynamics present.

Paul says to the Christians of Galatia, "But when Peter came to Antioch I opposed him in public because he was clearly wrong. Before some men who had been sent by James arrived there, Peter had been eating with the Gentile brothers. But after these men arrived Peter drew back and would not eat with the Gentiles, because he was afraid of those who were in

favor of circumcising them. The other Jewish brothers also started acting like cowards along with Peter; and even Barnabas was swept along by their cowardly action. When I saw that they were not walking a straight path in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, 'You are a Jew, yet you have been living like a Gentile, not like a Jew. How, then, can you try to force Gentiles to live like Jews?' " (Gal. 2:11-14, TEV).

My guess is there was surprise and embarrassment behind Peter's fear of the circumcision party from James. He had been caught, pork chop in hand, by some of the home-folks who he knew would disapprove of his actions and even his presence in the midst of these Gentiles. Since we all know the power of peer pressure, it seems understandable that with the arrival of these legalists there may have been some confusion and failure on Peter's part.

The Pain

In the freedom of the Gentile fellowship Peter had been able to express his solidarity with the Antioch church. The close-knit group was a product of the unifying work of Christ's spirit active in the context of mutual faith and acceptance of the gospel. When fear took over, Peter's actions went against his own historically proven openheartedness. The message of betrayal the Antioch Christians received was, "I was acting as if I counted you as brothers and sisters in Christ — but now I reject you as condemned."

Try to imagine the twisting pain piercing through that loving, supportive group. Trusted leaders like Peter and Barnabas were showing ugly colors from banners all thought lain aside long before. There is no feeling quite like that very

human suffering that takes place when those we consider brothers and sisters in Christ slam and barricade doors, rejecting the validity of our Christianity and refusing to accept our fellowship. It comes with a stunned sensation of deadness deep in the bowels. The chin drops, opening the mouth to a posture of incredulity at the event. The heart flutters and then beats so hard that the pulse can be felt in every extremity. I believe those sorts of symptoms were probably experienced by at least some of our forebears in the Antioch church.

Peter's Actions

A respected leader was saying to them with actions speaking far louder than words, that their faith in Christ was really faith in vain. That their experience of God's saving grace was really empty and false. That the unity they had come to know was meaningless and would not last. Peter's message to those folks ran contrary to any previous expression of support and fellowship. His present word was that they were hell-bound, unclean and unacceptable for sharing his life.

Understandable as Peter's actions might have been in the context of the arrival of the men from Jerusalem, when those actions were seen in the light of truth, they were truly known. Paul was right. The one who was now and again a right hand man of Jesus was wrong. And Paul, recounting the scene for the Galatian readers, underscores with clarity the implication of Peter's deed.

Peter's withdrawal from fellowship was on course with some other life vector than that provided by the good news of Jesus. The path of Peter was crooked, for one thing, evidenced by this switchback. But for another, it was not in line with the truth of the gospel. The sweeping truth of the

gospel is expressed by Paul in 3:26-29. And when anybody — even Peter himself — begins to want to insert more extensive requisites for fellowship in Christ and the church, then that person is stepping off the path and is no longer on Gospel Road.

I suspect that we are not few who can identify with the disdained Christians at Antioch. We, too, have felt the pains of rejection because of the survival of legalism with its unwillingness to simply trust Christ to grant and sustain the unity of his church. But we need not always suffer in silence as if we were helpless to respond to the threats of faithlessness.

Quick Action

Certainly the rejection of our congregation by our visitors from the Southeast was much less threatening to our vitality than Peter's rejection was to that of the Antioch Christians. Most of our congregation didn't even know it happened, and these visitors were not revered leaders of our group. Still, it hurt a bit. Even though we recognized the smallness of the act and can imagine the narrow perspective of this judging brother and sister, that only partially dulls the sad-denying blow. "Simon Peter rides again," I thought (it being my turn to judge without communicating clearly). But unfortunately there was no quick-thinking, courageous Paul to seek and point out the clear truth of the situation so that some healing could take place.

When Paul recognized the misdirection of Peter's actions, he spoke a quick, incisive question, raising the issue of Peter's inconsistency. Because of Paul's fearless determination to stick with the trail blazed by Christ, there was an opportunity for reconciliation. Paul's pastoral intervention provided Peter a chance to stop and evaluate his action, think more clearly

through its implications, and perhaps see his way to freedom from the fear of his peers from Jerusalem. That was when healing and renewal could take place between Peter and his Antioch sisters and brothers. I prefer to believe that is what happened.

Our Need to Know

I also believe we are surrounded in our congregations today by people who are in positions much like Peter's. Many of us have hearts that either have been or could be opened far wider in acceptance, fellowship and unity with Christ's disciples who stand beyond some of the boundaries prescribed by our peers. Yet we fear those brothers who seem to be in positions of authority within the boundaries. What we may need are some clear-thinking sisters or brothers who can cut through that fear and jolt us a bit with a question here and there. We may need to know that there are others in our churches who feel like we do, longing together with us for a new day of fellowship. Given that impetus of togetherness we may be able to see Christ break down walls that have stood between people for years.

Certainly we do need ministries of intervention by courageous men and women of faith. If individuals who understand the inconsistencies of the self-styled judges will take the risk of speaking in behalf of the gospel, we may find avenues of communication and fellowship open that would have remained forever closed. The risk is there. The potential for painful rejection is great for the ones who bare open hearts. But the risk is worth taking.

"You were baptized into union with Christ, and now you are clothed, so to speak, with the life of Christ himself . . . you are all one in union with Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27, 29). □

Characteristics of the United Church

HOY LEDBETTER

George Bernard Shaw once said of Christ, "This man' has not been a failure yet; for nobody has ever been sane enough to try his way." Although it would not be quite true to say that nobody has ever been sane enough to try Jesus' way of maintaining the unity of the church, his way is out of phase with some contemporary Christians who do not believe it will work and who consequently impose on the **brotherhood an approach which only aggravates the existing division and frustration.** The remedy for our sins against fellowship is not to be found in the fickle opinions of the present-day church, but in the unalterable words of the Lord. With that in mind let us take a lingering look at Romans 15:1-7, in which one of Christ's chosen spokesmen lays out some characteristics of the united church.

Religious Unselfishness

The very first verse of this text jolts us to attention: "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves." As the apostle calls upon us to renounce self-interest in our fraternal relations, he makes it quite clear that that does not mean we are not to be interested at all. We are to be disinterested, not uninterested, and this requirement goes far beyond mere tolerance. We must actually take up the burden of "the weaknesses of those

without strength," bearing them, we may say, in grateful remembrance of our Elder Brother bearing his own cross (and our sins) to the place of crucifixion. The result will be an atmosphere in which none of his "little ones" will be caused to stumble.

The negative side of this directive — that we are to "not just please ourselves" — strikes at the very root of division, which is selfishness. Our fellowship must be expressed in an attitude of genuine pastoral concern for our brothers and sisters, which is impossible when we are inclined to just make ourselves happy.

Self-denial as an aspect of fellowship is stressed further in verse 2: "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification." But this antisectarian medicine is pretty hard for some of us to swallow. It is especially difficult for one who takes pride in the "courage of his convictions" (which is a common camouflage for self-pleasing) to really concentrate on pleasing his brother or sister, and he will be happy to recall that Paul told the Galatians, "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Jesus Christ." Or that Paul viewed negatively the Corinthian brother's anxiety about "how he may please his wife." Or that he boasted that his speech at Thessalonica was "not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts." Such disclaimers may easily be distorted by

those who think that doctrinal uniformity is the first essential of Christian unity.

However, this same writer exhorted the Corinthians to imitate him in pleasing men: "just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved." From these two seemingly contradictory postures we may derive this principle: if we Christians are to offend anyone, it must be for the right reason — because we herald Jesus as Lord — and not because we are inconsiderate of the scruples of others.

Two qualifications are attached to the requirement that we must please our neighbor: (1) for his good, and (2) to his edification. It is fundamental with Paul that whatever takes place in the church must contribute to the spiritual progress of the saints. Although there is to be no men-pleasing in the sense of humanistic conformity or back-slapping accommodation, fellowship still entails a corporate attitude which disallows using Christian liberty for selfish ends, which eliminates enervating individualism, and which insists that Jesus is Lord over each one. If we are to have a community in which proper deference is shown to both God and man, two extremes must be avoided. On the one hand, our sensitivity to others may lead us to neglect God's desires in any given situation. On the other, a false piety may cause us to overlook the vital needs of our brethren.

We will stay on the right track if we keep our eyes on Jesus. Nothing could be more Christian than to be involved in this "continuous act of self-limitation for the sake of men," for it is the very principle of the incarnation: "For even Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached thee fell upon me.'" We will always be on safe ground if the way we deal with others is

determined by the way Christ deals with us.

Constructive Use of Scripture

The example of Christ was one source of authority for the early church; another was the written word of God, read in the light of the gospel, to which Paul refers in verse 4: "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Notice that Paul does not appeal to the authority of Scripture for the purpose of establishing fellowship on the basis of the right doctrinal viewpoint. As the context indicates, that kind of solution is not even to be put on the agenda. Our reliance upon the authority of Scripture is not evidenced by our opinions, but by our hope. The church which is struggling to maintain the unity of the Spirit needs to use the Bible, not to win arguments, but to attain hope.

It is strange that many expositors feel that Paul's reference to "the Scriptures" is a digression from his subject (verse 4 is often cited without regard for its context) when it is actually an important part of his argument. Life in fellowship can easily lead to depression. If we are to give up pleasing ourselves to focus on the good of those who may be rather unpleasant to live with, if we must fellowship people whose opinions are altogether wrong, if we have to restrain the exercise of our freedom because of the scruples of those who cannot — and may never — detach themselves from their pre-Christian past, then what is to become of the church? Surely, we think, disaster is just around the corner.

But we have it on good authority (surely we recognize the authority of Scripture!) that the church will not only survive, but flourish, in an atmosphere of diversity.

The Scriptures give us the patience and encouragement we need not to give up when the church seems to be more apostate than apostolic. A congregation which does not emphasize the Bible will have trouble maintaining true Biblical unity.

Same Mind

Of course, God is both the source and norm of the aforementioned virtues, which leads us into Paul's prayer in verse 5: "Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Jesus Christ . . ." Hope is not based on the slim chance that everything will work out, but on the power of God to work through his less-than-perfect people and to sustain what he has given.

"The same mind" in this passage indicates unanimity, but not complete uniformity of opinion, since the preceding chapter stresses that minority (unorthodox) beliefs may be held indefinitely. It is not the result of human achievement, but is what God grants. The prayer is for harmony in accordance with the pleasure, will and manner of Christ. This unanimity is to be worked out in various aspects of brotherly relations.

One Accord

The effect of this harmony is indicated in verse 6: ". . . that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." "With one accord" translates the Greek adverb *homothumadon*, a very important word in this discussion, although it receives scant attention in the commentaries. According to Hans Hiedland (TDNT, V, 185: my debt to his article will be obvious to those who

have read it), *homothumadon* "denotes the inner unity of a group of people engaged in an externally similar action." Its common use in the political field is illustrated in Acts 12:20, where when Herod was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, "with one accord they came to him . . . asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country." Note, first, that this accord did not spring from a common sympathy with each other, but from material interest in a specific action. Second, their unanimity did not arise from similarity of disposition, but from something which came on them from without and provoked a common reaction. In other words, their unity was neither natural nor spontaneous.

When this word is used to indicate the unanimity of the early church, it does not denote a natural sympathy or ecumenical disposition on their part, but shows how serious differences were transcended when the disciples, under God's provocative action, began to magnify the Lord. When the disciples, "along with the women," prayed "with one accord" in the upper room (1:14), they were rising above the existing natural tensions and even sexual discrimination in their response to what God had done (in the ascension). So Acts 2:1 finds them "with one accord" on the day of Pentecost, and soon thereafter they attend the temple "with one accord" and break bread in their homes (2:46). In 4:24, having been liberated from prison by God's action, they pray "with one accord"; and in 5:12 they are "with one accord" in Solomon's portico, in the context of signs and wonders taking place among the people.

Last, but not least, in Acts 15, when the debate over whether the Gentiles had to be circumcised had adjourned, and when Paul and Barnabas had related what