

“Convictions of Conscience”

Romans 14:1-12

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Prayer...

What does it mean to be a Christian? What does a Christian believe? How does a Christian act in the world and live out those beliefs? Of the estimated 300 different Christian traditions producing roughly 30,000 denominations and organizations composed of well over 3,000,000 faith communities¹ - - which one is getting it right? Which one is proclaiming and living out true Christianity in a way that Jesus would recognize it today? My guess is that you'd get roughly 3,000,000 different responses to that question!

For those of us here that identify as Christian, have you ever been told that you're not a *real* Christian because of something you do or do not do, believe or do not believe, something you are or are not? I know I have.

Have you ever judged someone as not being a *real* Christian because of something they do or do not do, believe or do not believe, something they are or are not? Uh oh! I know I have done that, too. Quite possibly from this pulpit!

It seems as long as there's been Christians, there's been an argument about who's doing it right and who's doing it wrong. This is the argument that we are eavesdropping in on today in our selection from Paul's letter to the Christian community in Rome.

But before we look more closely at that, I have a study tip and a request. This is one of those scripture passages where we need to move past and look beyond the words on the page and consider the deeper meaning of the message, perhaps even substituting our own examples or images. That is to say, let us not get too hung up on this ancient slight against vegetarians - - which is admittedly confusing and seems unnecessary out-of-context.

What Paul is talking about is the religious practice of purity-related dietary laws and the celebration of holy days, and how the observance or nonobservance of those laws and holy days has become a wedge issue in the early Christian community. Food and festivals were a critical issue in Paul's day, and what is happening in the Roman Christian community is faith-based judgement about these practices is leading to exclusion from the community.

Through this passage and this disagreement, we are shown that there is already great diversity in the religious practices of the early Christian community. And with this diversity comes judgmental disagreement. So some in the community believed it was important to

¹ These numbers vary widely based on multiple counting methods. <https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/56020/how-many-christian-denominations-are-there> referencing The World Christian Encyclopedia, 2nd edition, 2001. Accessed 9/15/17

their relationship with God to follow a strict diet, while others believed that this was not necessary. But not only did those folks believe it wasn't necessary, they believed that it was spiritually weak, even heretical. But Paul teaches that differences like this are inconsequential - - they are only that: differences. And - - even for Paul - - God and Christ are expansive enough to allow for such differences. These extraneous things aren't make-or-break issues, rather according to author and professor Mark Reasoner, "They lie in a moral zone where each person must exercise conscience to decide how to proceed."²

Paul's words are a rebuke of those who believe themselves to be spiritually mature, pious, and sanctified, but are really just obnoxiously holier-than-thou, exclusionary, and judgmental, while asserting that what truly matters is as-broad-as-possible inclusion in the community and a covenantal respect for the individual. Does one person believe that by abstaining from certain foods they are growing closer to God and honoring God? Great. Then that person would do well to abstain from certain foods. But they should not judge others for their indulgence, nor should they themselves be judged for their abstinence.

Along with that, there is a call to mutual respect and accommodation. Paul cautions the community to be careful that their individual practices do not present a "stumbling block" to others in the community by offending them. "If a member of the community is being injured by what you eat," he writes, "then you are no longer walking in love."³ Lest Paul's readers forget that food choice is not the core principle of the faith, he reminds them that, "[The] kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."⁴

Paul's position on these differences gives scriptural grounding to the words of 17th century German Lutheran theologian Rupertus Meldenius: "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity."

That is to say, Christians ought to be united on the defining, essential tenets of Christianity. Allowing for diversity and plurality in living out those essential tenets produces multiple and equally valid expressions of faith, and it is incumbent upon Christians of each stripe to reserve judgement and give respect to others who practice the faith differently. Sounds reasonable to me. The only catch as far as I can see is our differing beliefs on what is essential and what is non-essential. Perhaps that where the charity (or grace) part comes in.

This argument about the "right" way to worship God is still very much alive in Christianity today. There are those who have very strong opinions about what a worship service should look like and sound like - - which prayers are prayed when, what sort of music should or shouldn't be played and on which instrument, the color of the altar cloth, the ingredients of the communion elements. Some of these opinions are backed up by theology or

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=130 Accessed 9/15/17

³ Romans 14:14-15

⁴ Romans 14:17

scripture, but just as many are simply opinions backed up by tradition or personal preference. In my interpretation of Paul's words, while these preferences might feel essential to an individual or one certain community, they are not essential to the knowing the truth of God's love and kin-dom. And so we must reserve judgement on the validity or quality of someone else's belief based on how they worship.

To my mind, God is big enough and grace-filled enough to allow for a wide diversity of worship styles and even theology. But we are presented with a challenge when we move from differences in worship preference to how a believer acts in the world. Specifically, how one acts when it comes to deciding who is included and who is excluded from God's love and kin-dom. These matters are convictions of conscience of another kind that do present stumbling blocks and obstacles, and can lead us to no longer be "walking in love."

Paul's teaching about reserving judgement has been used and abused in an extreme application that has led to tacitly and even actively condoning behaviors and beliefs that truly do warrant judgement. Believing that we must never under any circumstance judge beliefs can put us in the place of sitting idly by in the face of injustice, violence, and oppression. And these are not inconsequential things.

I cannot withhold my judgement is when God and Jesus are wielded as a sword to cleave off fellow children of God. I cannot withhold my judgement when those beliefs deny the humanity of others or calls for physical, psychological, spiritual, or legislative violence and oppression against others.

Sometimes I hear about something being called Christian and I have to wonder if these folks are talking about the same Jesus that I know. If you go by popular media and laws based on so-called religious freedom, the US American version of Christianity looks a whole lot more like social and fiscal conservatism with a grudge to settle, than it does the movement founded by the radical social teachings of an essentially homeless Jewish peasant. This is not the Jesus I know. Author and theologian Brian McLaren has gone so far as to say that what we see in our country today is not Christianity, but the religion of white nationalism - - the holy text is Fox News and not the Good News. I don't think McLaren is that far off.

If you can show me where in the Bible Jesus comes out as a Second Amendment free market capitalist who demands stronger national borders and believes accessible healthcare is evil and that poor people are just lazy, then maybe I'll change my mind. But this is not the Jesus I read about in scripture. This Jesus of racial purity and superiority, the Jesus of prosperity and endless war, the Jesus of a scarcity mentality in the face of incredible abundance, this Jesus that dehumanizes anyone who's not cisgender, heterosexual, or male, this Jesus of economic exploitation and extra-judicial killings - - I don't know that Jesus, and I cannot withhold my judgement against a belief in that Jesus. That is the conviction of my conscience.

Still, I don't believe that folks who hold these beliefs are excluded from God's love and grace. I just happen to think they need to repent from the belief that Jesus requires us to

exclude, dehumanize, and do violence against others. For me, honoring the dignity and humanity of every person is essential to “walking in love.” I don’t believe it to be inconsequential, non-essential, or negotiable. It is also not easy, and I must constantly examine my heart to find the beliefs I hold and the behaviors I enact that betray this conviction. But maybe that’s just me, and God is big enough for you to hold your own convictions.

It is for you to discern what is essential and non-essential. It is for you to discern when charity and grace overrule judgement. It is for you to discern the convictions of your conscience. And when you do so, ask yourself if you are putting yourself in the place of God, if you are revoking an invitation to the table that is not yours to revoke, if you are putting a stumbling block in front of others, and if you are walking in love.

Amen.