

The Salvation of the Church

Romans 14:1-12

They are at it again, the Christians, that is. The Christians are fighting, quarreling, clashing, battling among themselves. This time it's the church at Rome.

Christians have a lengthy history of infighting on matters of the utmost importance. How many angels can you get on the head of a pin?, What happens to the bread and the wine during communion?---transubstantiation, consubstantiation, the color of the carpet, whether to sign the old hymns which really aren't that old instead of the old hymns which really are old, whether women can wear slacks and makeup to church, and, the crucial matter of what temperature to set the thermostat.

It's always been a fuss, hasn't it?

Did you catch what the fuss was about when we read Romans 14? Food. It's a food fight, not throwing food at each other, but a quarrel over what Christians can or cannot eat. On one side you've got the meat-eaters and on the other side you've got the vegetarians. Filet Mignon lovers verses the Broccoli lovers.

Actually, we can't say for sure, what was going on in the Roman church. God never said that Jews or Christians had to eat only vegetables. God simply told the Israelites to stay away from Eastern Style BBQ. O.K., God said, to avoid all pork and---and a few other things.

What I'm concerned about is not so much the details and particulars of the controversy as the Apostle Paul's response to it. Or put another way, I am curious about Paul's formula for the salvation of the church. And that's really what was on the line, the church's salvation because anytime a church is majoring on the minors it is in danger.

What is most striking about Paul's response is that he does not attempt to decide the specific issues of food laws or practices. Paul does not take sides. He issues no call for a standard by which all believers may be assessed or evaluated. Instead, in this instance, the health of the faith community takes precedence over having the right belief or the right practice.

Interesting. So much energy is spent these days on getting church members to all believe the same way and to behave in like manner. To be a Christian, according to this line of thought, everyone has to be cut out of the same mold.

But Paul doesn't see it that way. The central conviction Paul brings to bear in this conflict appears first in Romans 14:3-4 and then again in verse 6-9. And that conviction is, "Who are you---who are you to pass judgement on others?"

What Paul seeks in this passage is not merely the tolerance of diversity, a grudging acceptance of the inevitability of differences. Rather, he articulates an active welcome for those with conflicting views and practices.

We would, of course, be mistaken to take Paul to endorse any and all behaviors and beliefs for elsewhere he insists on certain limits. But Paul, nevertheless, insists that the fabric of a community not be torn apart by Christians who are dead sure they are right and everyone else is wrong.

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris recalls reading a monastery newsletter and Anglican Benedictine women were saying that the modern tendency to see all issues in terms of pro or con was putting a considerable strain on monastic communities. One woman said that she hoped that religious communities could provide a vision of a church, and a community, in which not everything has to be decided, where you don't have to take a stand on every issue before you can live together peaceably and creatively.

Norris comments: "To church congregations and denominations that are weary of strife, of continually arguing things out in a tense, judgmental atmosphere, it may come as welcome news to learn that they are allowed to say "I know not" with regard to the bible, free not to use it to justify taking sides in every issue that comes along."

"I know not."

Not a bad posture to adopt.

I would also recommend a Moravians have, a saying that Paul, I believe, would like. The saying is this: In non-essentials, diversity, in essentials, unity, in all things love.

It's not a perfect solution because who is to say what is essential and what is non-essential, but the saying does lead us in the right direction.

In essentials, unity, in non-essentials, diversity, in all things love.

Would you repeat after me:

In essentials, unity, in non-essentials, diversity, in all things love.

And repeat this: I know not.

Keep saying those two things and Wedgewood will be saved.