

Dear Fellow Redeemed by the blood of God's own Son,

While in the farm and ranch lands of our country this past week I was reminded of how "good" the smell of a corn field is during the harvest. But in South Carolina I enjoy the smell of fresh pine straw, the Gardenia, the tea olive, and so on. In fact, many South Carolinians would agree that we have the most aromatic state in the union.

There are many other things about our state and its citizens on which nearly all of us would agree. But if you bring up "Obamacare," the government shut-down, property taxes, or a host of other issues, including the tastiness of "grits," there is a whole lot of disagreement among the citizens of our state. Many things might be said about the people of South Carolina, but above all else, we are an independent bunch!

The Roman congregation to whom Paul wrote was also known for its strong feelings about things and the independent spirit of its people. One of the Apostle's reasons for writing his letter to this congregation was to preserve unity and peace within a congregation that had strong and sometimes different feelings about things. Of course, his guiding principle is not "Whether we live or die, we are going to be independent; but rather:

## **WHETHER WE LIVE OR DIE WE ARE THE LORDS!**

### **I.**

How often do we give serious and thankful thought to the blessed unity we share in this congregation? We are the Lord's because He bought us with the blood of Christ and adopted us by the working faith in His Son. We are ONE in the Lord. In the next chapter Paul prays that the Roman Christians "**may be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that they may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.**"

How can it be otherwise? For there is only one God. As children we learn from Deuteronomy 6:4: "**Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the LORD is One.**" The ONE God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are unchangeable. So also the Word in which He reveals Himself to us is ONE and unchangeable. The oneness of our conviction and confession in this

congregation has its firm basis on the ONEness of God revealed in His ONE Word. In order to glorify the One God a Christian congregation or church body must have unity in the essential things.

Of course, this means that wherever God's Word speaks there is no room for personal opinions which contradict that Word among us. For example, even if the world around us thinks that it is OK for people to live together before marriage, God clearly forbids the sin of fornication in the sixth commandment. There can be NO "agreeing to disagree" where God's Word has spoken.

Wherever oneness of mind and mouth is lost, somebody is wrong, somebody is not glorifying God, and injuring himself and others! In essential things – wherever God clearly speaks in His Word – there must be unity, since we are ONE in the ONE Lord.

## II.

But what about indifferent things, called "adiophora"? These are things which God has neither commanded nor forbidden. Here we have Christian liberty – We are free in the Lord.

There were Jewish Christians in the Roman congregation who had been trained in the Mosaic Law that the Saturday Sabbath was a special day to the Lord, on which there were things they should do, and things which they should not do. It was hard for them to realize that the observance of the Saturday Sabbath came to an end when Christ became the "Sabbath Rest" of His believing people. So also, Jewish children were trained from the Law that there were certain meats they should never eat, such as pork, or meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

On the other hand, there were Christians in the Roman church who knew from Ps. 24:1 that **"the earth is the Lord's and the fulness of it."** They knew as Paul says in v. 14, that **"there is nothing unclean of itself."** So these Christians would eat and drink whatever they desired, and they did not observe special days according to law. You can see how strong feelings about such things might cause division in the Christian congregation.

The point is that a Christian is free to make a list of his own "do's and don'ts" on Sunday; but no Christian has the right to impose his list on his fellow Christian, who is also free in the Lord! Likewise, there are many sincere Christians who have strong personal feelings about alcoholic drinks

and tobacco – They won't touch the stuff!

Some Christians feel strongly about what they should wear to church, or whether the pastor wear ought to wear a robe or not, or whether a Christian should go to a bar, etc. But neither are such things in and of themselves wrong or sinful, for all such things are neither commanded or forbidden by the Lord. Rather, Paul says at the end of v. 5: **“let each be full convinced in his own mind”** in such matters. Why? Because, **not one of us Christians “lives to himself or dies to himself, but to the Lord. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.”** (vs. 7-8)

### III.

But take note! Even this freedom in unessential things is to be **directed to the Lord,** lest we insist that our freedom or independence is more important than the welfare of our brother or sister in Christ. **In all things we are to show love, since we walk in love in the Lord.**

It is true as Paul says in v. 14 that **“there is nothing unclean of itself.”** But then he adds, **“to him who considers anything unclean, to him it is unclean. And if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.”** How shocking! It's possible, Paul says, to destroy our brother or sister in Christ by our exercise of our Christian liberty. How so?

In everything a Christian must act from faith's conviction that what he does is **“to the Lord”** – in keeping with the Lord's will and Word. If my brother has strong feelings about NOT doing something that others have the right to do, it may be a matter of conscience for him. If he cannot do it with faith's conviction that he is free in the Lord to do it, then to do it anyway is a sin! As Paul says at the end of this chapter: **“Whatsoever is not from faith is sin.”** As Luther said at Worms in 1521: “It is neither right nor safe to go against one's conscience.”

Was it walking in the Lord's love for the Gentile Christians in Rome to invite a Jewish Christian for supper and shove a plate of pork in front of him? Is it love to make a fellow Christian feel badly over food or anything that he denies himself for conscience reasons? Is it love for a Christian who rejoices in his liberty to badger a fellow Christian to go along when his

brother does not feel the same liberty to so?

Who knows what a stumbling block or death trap to a brother's faith may be set by such thoughtless and loveless actions? How can we risk destroying him "**for whom Christ died**" for the sake of such trivial things as food, or drink, or any such thing?

Whether we live or die we are the Lord's. This principle applies to each one of us as a congregation of believers who have strong feelings about this or that. Living TO the Lord, and dying TO the Lord – this is what shall count when each of us stands before Him on that Great Day! On that Day we won't be asked about our style of clothing, or what we ate or drank, or any such thing! All that will count is whether we have kept the faith, bowing our knees in repentance of our sins and receiving forgiveness for Jesus' sake.

So let our concern be to help each other remain in this saving faith, while we grant one another the privilege to differ in things that are neither commanded nor forbidden by our Lord. In essential things let there be unity; in the indifferent things let there be liberty; and in all things let there be love's charity, to the glory of our One Lord – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.