Principle & Method
Romans 14:1–15:6

❖ Introduction

Our churches have grown large enough that it has become difficult to actually get to know everybody—there are probably a number of families you have not even met. But is it correct to say that a church is "growing" simply because there are more heads in the pews? While numeric growth is easy to ascertain, spiritual growth is more difficult. If we did want to determine if we are growing *spiritually*, what would we look for? A primary fruit of spiritual growth is the way that we love each other.

❖ Background

In Ephesians 2, Paul tells us to strive to bear with one another in love to keep the unity of the Spirit. The bonds of peace and the unity of the Spirit are not states of being that we are told to drum up. We cannot manufacture these blessings, but we are told to strive to *maintain* them. If we are not striving in this area, we are sure to lose the peace and unity. Just like gardening, if you do nothing, weeds of sin will destroy a beautiful garden of fellowship. But in obeying this command, there are many different things that we might do. Today I would like to address simply one aspect of striving together or bearing with each other by remembering the differences between principles and methods. Put another way, we are differentiating between God's commands or laws for us and the various means that we employ to obey Him.

Sometimes God will give us a required principle and a corresponding required method. In this case, our conduct is not optional. However, as we shall see, there are those principles where faithful obedience may take the shape of a myriad of methods. But first, we need to consider the 14th chapter of Romans, where Paul is addressing these very issues between brothers and sisters.

❖ Exposition

Romans 14:1-4

- We are commanded to receive other Christians even if they may hold a "weaker" position. Paul explains that we are required to receive him because God has received him. If God has entered into fellowship with this person, if God has placed His Spirit upon this person, if God has accepted the perfect work of His Son as atonement for the sins of this person, then who are we to withhold our fellowship? Does God extend his covenant fellowship willy-nilly? Are we suggesting that we have higher standards for fellowship than God does?
- As a side note, the idea of "breaking fellowship" with someone is not an act that we exercise autonomously upon those whom we individually determine to be sinners. The breaking of fellowship is a *response* by a congregation to a judicial declaration made by the Church about the status of someone who has continued in unrepentant sin and yet @calls himself a believer. We do not have the vigilante freedom or authority to go around breaking fellowship.
- At the same time that we are commanded to receive someone, we are also told not to receive them so that we can argue with them. We don't bring them in so that we can then wrangle with them to "straighten them out". The Scriptures are very aware of our temptations—even the ones we try to disguise. Receiving a brother or sister who differs with you on a method or a "doubtful" thing is not done so that you can "have them where you want them". It is done because our fellowship should look like God's.
- Notice that a "doubtful thing" does not mean that Paul is trying to promote theological relativism. He is not saying that everything is doubtful and that there is nowhere for us to land on issues. The important thing here is that Paul is *not saying* that something is a doubtful thing because it is *doubtful in the Scriptures* —instead, these things are doubtful because they are so in the *minds of the Saints*. Notice this first issue he brings up in vs. 2 about food restrictions. Paul embraces the point that we may eat all things (v. 14) and that there are no clean or unclean foods. But the brother who is more sensitive to refraining from eating certain kinds of foods is correct, too, *because of his convictions*. He does not instruct either brother to give up their convictions, nor does he say that there is no way to know the right answer. And here is the main point: *there is a deeper right than being the one who is right*.
- Paul teaches us that this is a two-way street. The stronger brother is to receive the weaker brother, and the weaker brother is not to judge the stronger brother. The stronger brother cannot bully or despise (like big brothers tend to do) the weaker brother. The weaker brother is going to be tempted to legalism and imposing his standards upon the stronger brother. Paul tells us in Colossians 2 that we should reject the teaching of the legalist who puts false restrictions and burdens upon those whom God has not placed such requirements. But the weaker brother is not necessarily a legalist, but it is certainly a temptation. It is the imperialistic nature of legalism ("we've gotta get everybody doing this and those who won't are sinners") that must be resisted.
- Your Christian brother or sister is not your servant. They are someone else's servant—the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor are you their Lord or master. Obviously, there is an authority that exists between parents and children, but between families, the Scriptures rule, not you. And the Scriptures tell us to be kind, peaceful, and to mind our own business. God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of Christ, and He is the one who will complete the work of sanctification.

❖ Knowing the Difference

Paul continues in the rest of the chapter to discuss other examples of how we are to receive each other and not to dispute over doubtful things. He discusses eating food, drinking, and setting aside certain days for special occasions. Paul is teaching us here how to love each other in the way we hold to certain customs and methods of obeying our Lord. These principles can be applied to a virtually unlimited number of areas of our lives. Therefore, a proper understanding of the differences between principle and method is essential for the peaceful life of the Body.

- Principles are those requirements that God has called us to obey or those foundational truths that God has called us to believe. As such, they are typically in the form of a command, and the Lord has not necessarily laid out the explicit details of how He expects us to submit to the principles He gives.
- Methods are good things. One of the most wonderful aspects of the healthy life of a congregation is where brothers and sisters share different methods and ideas for living faithful lives before our Lord. Historically, one of the greatest blessings of the Ladies Fellowship has been women exchanging experience and ideas on numerous topics to help each other with the various duties to which God has called them.
- Sometimes, God gives us both a principle and the method for how He expects us to believe the principle or obey the command faithfully.
- The most frequent problem that we have in this area is when we exalt our favorite method to the level of a principle and then seek to impose that method upon others.
- There have been countless controversies in the Christian Church; some are still with us today, and others have been settled in history. When we look at the issue of eating meat sacrificed to animals, our modern minds wonder how this could be a big deal. But the reason we have this problem understanding the controversy is largely that the issue has been settled, and the ideas of principles and methods have been properly distinguished. The hard work for us is making these distinctions on more contemporary controversies. These are the mine fields that we are forced to walk through today. But we cannot do so successfully without a proper distinction between principle and method.
- If you find yourself in a dispute with a brother or sister and you find yourself impugning their motives or thinking you can read their heart, the truth is you are probably wrong. If you think that you can accurately identify all of this person's motives for believing what they believe, then you should step back and tell yourself that you are most likely completely wrong because we cannot judge another man's heart like God can. Notice in verse 10 that we are told that we cannot judge our brother in these things and that one day, we will all answer to our Lord.

❖ Where the Rubber Meets the Road

PRINCIPLE	METHOD
Parents should train and teach their children	Private school or home school; classical or prep; allowances
Parents should discipline their children	Hand or rod, paddle or belt.
Worship the Lord corporately	Young children in the service or children in the nursery.
Husbands should provide for their families	Teacher or engineer, musician or banker, insurance or not
Mothers should feed and care for their children	Nursing or bottle, cloth or disposable, schedule or demand
Christians should be stewards of their bodies	Jogging, eating fries, tofu sticks, yogurt tacos, meat or vegan
We are to worship God	Hands up or no hands up, psalms or hymns
Husbands, love your wives	Gifts or service, flowers or kind words
Wives, respect your husbands	Respect notes, gifts, and seeking counsel
Drunkenness is prohibited	Teetotaling or drinking in moderation
Honor God with your money	Tithing, buying stuff, or not buying stuff
Marriage to be honored	Date nights, couch time, careful about relationships

❖ How Could this Possibly All Work?

Sometimes the differences between principles and methods can be subtle. Sometimes the principles may be difficult to understand. So how do we even hope to function then as a body? The solution is that the Father has placed each of us in Christ. You don't have to be right. You don't have to convince the world of your position. But you do need to do whatever you do by faith in Christ. It is your place in Christ that puts all else in perspective. Remember that we are striving *with one another* to maintain the unity of the Spirit. God commands peace, and He grants it. He commands joy, and He grants it. He commands faithfulness, and He grants it. He has supplied all we need in His Word, His Son, and His Spirit.