

## **United or Untied?**

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### **Introduction**

I first heard or saw the unique connection of these two words a number of years ago. “The only difference between united and untied is that the ‘i’ is out of place.” How have we as a group of believers who have historically focused on unity become so divided? Why have we found unity so difficult and disunity so easy? What are the solutions? What must we do?

### **Historical Overview: Understanding the Problem**

Restoration as envisioned in the early days of our nation depended on recovering the pristine stream of truth. Those who established our nation believed that truth would result in government that could rise above individual and party wrangling. The principle was soon applied to religion resulting in the belief that truth can eliminate division and differences. Many who came to our shores in search of religious freedom also believed that truth could eliminate the persecution they had experienced in the nationalism of the Reformation in Europe. Our nation’s forefathers sought national unity believing that the separation of state and religion would result in a clear path for both. One familiar with history can see in these concepts a heavy dependence on Enlightenment thinking.

In our own religious heritage, *The Declaration and Address* sets forth this commitment to both truth and unity. In reality, we have found this a difficult path to walk. It often seems that the more we focus on truth, the less likely that we will find unity. Conversely, the more one focuses on unity, the less the commitment to truth. Why is this so?

### **Textual Study: Working Toward a Solution**

In Romans 14 Paul addresses the question of ‘disputable matters’ (disputes over opinions). The CEV translates this as differing beliefs, but one must understand that the beliefs under consideration are opinions. The illustrations given suggest that the problem and conflict is about what one does, growing out of one’s faith. These are matters of conscience, and one must not go against one’s conscience.

Certainly there exists a body of doctrine to be believed, but that is not the topic under consideration in Romans 14. The clear teaching of Scripture is non-negotiable. The problem is that there are literally hundreds of ‘applications’ and interpretative understandings which are not equally clear to every Christian. In addressing these areas of disagreement, the ability of the church (Christians collectively) to understand Scripture must not be demeaned. The importance of the church discerning collectively the meaning of Scripture is essential. When I have a position (belief or practice) that is not widely accepted, I must be cautious. Allow me some examples from real life settings.

I have doubts about Christians marrying non-Christians. What should I do? Should I refuse to perform the marriage ceremonies in such cases? Should I try to convince Christians? Should I demand that such marriages be dissolved, even withdrawing fellowship from those who continue the practice? Should I merely practice what I preach? Shall I try to ‘prove’ my position from Scripture to convince others?

I have doubts about the wisdom of the church engaging in the activities of some secular holidays, especially when those activities have strong secular, pagan, or anti-Christian roots and innate messages. What should I do? Has God made me a policeman to intervene in all such situations, and dozens of others that could be named?

In Romans 14, Paul writes about the strong and the weak. I, as you, have heard countless discussions asking, “Who is the weak brother and who is the strong brother?” I have heard such discussions with reference to major doctrinal matters. The first thing one must do is to make certain the subject under consideration is a matter of opinion. Then the text makes easy the identification of the strong and the weak. The strong are those who look down their noses and despise those who are not so liberated or strong. The weak are those who judge and condemn the ones who are not as restrictive. Tell me honestly about your attitude in a certain matter, and I will tell you whether you are the strong or the weak.

Do you judge those who engage in certain practices which are questionable in your mind? Do you separate yourself and allow such matters to break fellowship? You are the weak in faith according to the text.

Do you look down your nose and despise the less liberated? Do you wonder how they can be so foolish as to think such matters are faith questions when the kingdom of God is not about such trivial matters as eating and drinking and a host of other peripheral actions, but rather in hearts of righteousness and peace and joy motivated by the Holy Spirit? You are the strong in faith according to the text.

In some matters, I am the weak brother. In other matters, I am the strong brother.

As Paul concludes the section in Romans 15, he urges us to accept one another. This is not an undiscerning acceptance regardless of doctrinal beliefs. Some beliefs are so critical that they break fellowship (2 John 7-10). Some divisions come due to essential foundational Christian truth (1 John 2:19).

### **Conclusion**

May God help us develop spiritual discernment as we seek to know truth, and to develop Christian attitudes in our relationships with one another. A correct understanding of Romans 14-15 will be a major step in the right direction.