

September 5, 2021

Romans 13:8-14 “Love, Unity and Reconciliation”

Sometimes we get this impression that the early first century Church was this shining example of unity and love. Maybe some of this has to do with knowing how much persecution the church faced under Nero and other Roman emperors. Maybe it really is easier to be united when there's a common enemy. So how does one re-capture this kind of unity in the church? Well, let's jump ahead 1800 years and see. We are the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). We are part of what history books call “The Restoration Movement.” And you heard correctly. I didn't say “*reformation*,” I said, “*restoration*.” No doubt our founders were reformers. They were troubled by all the Protestant denominations that crossed over from Europe and were competing for souls on the American frontier. They were all saying that theirs was the only legitimate expression of the church. But Alexander Campbell, a renegade Scottish Presbyterian Minister who immigrated to the states and helped found our movement, had a passion and vision for Christian unity. He was tired of all the divisions in the church. He wanted the church to be united. He said things like, “In essentials, unity, in non-essentials liberty and in all things charity.” He also said, “We're not the only Christians, we are Christians only.” In other words, he recognized the authenticity of *all* expressions of Christianity. That is until we claimed that we wanted to “restore primitive Christianity.” What could go wrong when you've got a goal like that?

The Cane Ridge revival of 1801 united over 10,000 people in the northeaster hills outside Lexington Kentucky. This event launched our unity movement which is, by the way, became the first American born Protestant denomination. But it didn't take long for us to start looking down on all those other European denominations because they didn't practice “New Testament Christianity.” We believed that the New Testament was the roadmap for how we should practice our faith. And don't get me wrong, we still claim this as one of our best virtues. We're not huge fans of the Roman Emperor Constantine who turned a

revolutionary, anti-establishment spiritual movement into a state-sponsored institutional hierarchy. We wanted the church to be perfect and pure like it was in the New Testament! Except the New Testament church *wasn't* perfect and pure which, I guess, is what you get when you say you want to restore the New Testament church! Two hundred and seventeen years later, our movement has split into three separate denominations and we fuss and fight with each other all the time. So, congratulations! Mission accomplished. We're *just like* the New Testament Church!

The reality is, no matter how much humans aspire to be united, issues come up in *any* group who are bound together by common commitments, shared goals and visions. Individual tensions and clashes flare up now and then, because although we are committed to the ways of love, all of us still have some growing to do before we can consistently live into what Paul writes in this passage, which is: "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." Now let me be clear. For the most part, we *do* love one another. But we still do one another wrong because our love is still in its infancy.

Paul does two things here in this passage from Romans. First of all, he completely puts the law in its place by saying that if we love one another, we will already be fulfilling the law and therefore we can pretty much forget about the law. To put it another way, to those who have truly followed Jesus in the way of love, the law is an unnecessary irrelevance. Love, according to both Paul and Jesus takes precedence over law. But secondly, Paul highlights some of the reasons why we deemed the law necessary in the first place like quarrelling, jealousy, and the desires of the flesh. The purpose of all human systems of law is to keep things like jealousy, quarrelling and competing desires under control so they don't escalate into war and bloodshed. That's why there was so much fear about Jesus and Jesus' followers undermining the rule of law. What's going to keep things in check if the law is no longer respected?

The trouble with human desire is not that desire is wrong in and of itself. It's just that we humans have a universal tendency to get *competitive* about our desires. When we see other people desiring things, the value of those things increases in our eyes, and we begin to compete for them. If you don't believe me, go sit in a class of preschoolers sometime and see how often a toy just sits there almost unnoticed ... at least until one of the kids picks it up. Then all of a sudden three or four kids want that toy and only that toy. Human desires almost always become competitive which inevitably creates quarrels and jealousy. Then those desires turn us against each other by making us rivals. Then we've got to create systems of laws to keep it all from turning ugly. And when it does turn ugly, we need a system which identifies offenders so they can be punished. And we need this too, because if we didn't have a legal system ... if we just left everything to street justice ... things would just escalate into a big hot mess and we'd be chopping people's hands off on the spot for stealing an onion at the produce stand. So here comes the Apostle Paul saying that if we follow Jesus in the way of love, we don't need the law. We can forget it. Why? Not because we have some sort of new and improved system of law endorsed by Jesus, but because the practice of genuine love renders the law obsolete. Why? Because love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.

Your head spinning yet? Mine is! Now, I think it's safe to say that Paul isn't suggesting that we toss out the law because it's going to solve all our social problems and bring an end to war and violence. I'm sure that both Paul and Jesus acknowledge that the law does in fact work to maintain some sort of social equilibrium. But I think what they also say when you read them carefully is that the laws that maintains social equilibrium are carried out by force and by a willingness to write some people off ... by giving up on them ... by locking them up and throwing away the key ... by sacrificing them in favor of the community. That's the shadow side of "law and order." That's when you see people getting their hands cut off for shoplifting ... that's when you see the kind of laws that make it illegal to be homeless.

The most radical and earth-shattering thing that Jesus said in his proclamation of the good news is that this kind of law is not God's desire. Many of the world's religions, including the most widespread understandings of Christianity, attribute *our* practices of law and punishment to God. But then Jesus comes along and says that God has no interest in punishment. God's desire is always for mercy and reconciliation. God is not offering a new improved system of law and discipline. Because as long as there is jealousy and quarreling, we'll need to keep resorting to some sort of system of law and punishment. What God wants is to do away with the *need* for it. See the difference? "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." Or as Jesus said in Matthew 22:37, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

So what we have here is a way of salvation, a way that can save us from the spiral of jealousy that turns into rivalry which leads to violence and vengeance. And this way of salvation has nothing to do with following rules. What it does instead, is gives us a way to stop imitating one another and thus becoming jealous of one another. See, we humans are naturally imitative. To put it crudely, "Monkey see, monkey do." This new concept that Paul and Jesus introduce acknowledges that as human beings, we are naturally imitative, and then it invites us to imitate Jesus instead of each other. It invites us to imitate Jesus in his reckless and extravagant love for others, including people like gentiles and the tax collectors. It invites us to imitate Jesus in pursuing love instead of punishment and reconciliation instead of vengeance.

I'm pretty sure I'm not alone in saying that although in my mind I'm committed to the ways of love, it doesn't take much for me to revert to my baser instincts. It doesn't take much for me to set aside the ways of love and reconciliation in favor of laying out passively elaborate plans

for how I can get my way. For others it may be different. Your temptations ... your vulnerabilities are not the same as mine. We all have our own buttons which, when they are pressed, override our desire to love.

But here's where we get to look back and touch base with our 19th century Stone-Campbell Disciples "Restoration Movement" roots. One of the things that sets us apart is the priority we put on this communion table. That's why the symbol of our movement is the chalice. It's a reminder that this table is where we come together to confess that we are hopelessly entangled in our sin, and that our love has failed again and again in the ways we have wronged one another. But then we hear the assurance that our sins are forgiven, that we will not be cast out of the presence of God because of what we have done. Instead, we will be embraced in the loving communion of God because of God's grace and because of God's extravagant mercy and love. So come to this table today and experience love, unity and reconciliation. Come and be restored.