

The Secret of a Loving Church

BY [RICK WARREN](#) June 1, 2006 | 1:49 pm

One of the reasons for Saddleback's growth is because we've maintained a harmonious atmosphere. **When a church loves, it attracts people like a magnet. When a church really offers love to each other and those who are welcomed into it, you'd have to lock the doors to keep people out!**

In the second half of Romans 14, Paul says building each other up is the secret to building a loving church. He says it's not enough to just accept – or tolerate – the people you don't get along with in the church. Instead, he says we need to actively build each other up. Satan would love to destroy your church by goading one group of people into getting angry at another group.

Phillips translates Romans 14:19 as: "Let us concentrate on things that make for harmony and the growth of our fellowship together." Paul says you should concentrate on two things: (1) that which makes for harmony, and (2) that which helps the church grow. So we must always aim at those things that bring peace and health, that strengthen one another.

According to Paul, there were three issues causing conflict in the Roman church: diet, days, and drink. But the principle Paul establishes in Romans 14 transcends those three examples. Paul gives five ways that we are to build others up:

By committing ourselves to building each other up

Determine this: "From this day forward I'm going to make it one of my goals in ministry to build up those around me."

Can you imagine if a small core of leaders in your church committed to building up everyone they came in contact with? What if just five people in your church began writing letters – one note a week – saying, "I appreciate you," and they sent them to others in your congregation. What kind of impact would that have on the morale of your church?

Paul instructs us to make this "building up" of others our goal. Life is tough, and there are enough discouraging people in the world. We need a whole band – an army – of encouragers! Instead of criticizing people we don't agree with, or whose lifestyle we don't like, we should pray for them and encourage them.

We all need to learn from Paul's instructions in Romans 14. The strong believer needs to grow in love, and the weak believer needs to grow in knowledge. Now, when Paul talks about a weak believer, he's talking about a legalistic Christian who, rather than seeing the relationship with Christ as the key element, sees the rules, regulations, and rituals as the key to a Christian life. The only problem is my list rarely matches yours. Legalistic Christians need to grow in knowledge of God's grace. On the other hand, those Christians who say, "I'm not hung up on rules and regulations" need to grow in their love, possibly limiting some of the things they do for the benefit of those who might be offended.

By recognizing the value of every person

"Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died." (Rom. 14:15b)

They may be obnoxious; they may be immature; they may be disagreeable, but Christ died for them. And don't forget that! When you start to get upset with someone in your area of ministry or in the church, just remember: Christ died for that person.

That shows how valuable and important they are to God. What right do I have to hurt people Christ died for? The answer is: I don't have the right. Stay attuned to their importance to God.

By keeping our focus on what's really important

"Don't allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and is approved of men." (Rom. 14:16)

Paul is saying that food and drink are not the burning issues of life. The essence of Christianity is not external but internal. By focusing on the things that are internal – eternally important – we can then put up with a lot of external quirks, faults, and faux pas.

Let me give you an illustration: Back in 1917, as the Bolsheviks grabbed the reigns of power through a revolution in Russia, the priests in the Orthodox Church were in a heated debate over how long the tassels should be on their robes. They ignored the Bolshevik revolution, and instead split their church arguing over this trivial matter!

As the son of a pastor, I've been in hundreds of churches. Through that, I've learned that most churches don't split over major issues. They split over trivia, foolish little things. And Paul is making the plea: Don't be sidetracked over minor issues.

When the world looks at a Christian, their first thought shouldn't be, "He's got every jot and tittle crossed." Instead, they ought to be able to see righteousness, peace, and joy flowing from the Holy Spirit out of that Christian. As the great preacher Vance Havner once said, "You can be straight as a gun barrel doctrinally, but be empty spiritually." You can avoid that by focusing on what's really important.

By limiting our liberty out of love for each other

"Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It's better not to eat meat, drink wine, or do anything else that will cause your brother to fall." (Rom. 14:20)

When my liberty limits the work of God, then I've got a problem. I have to be sensitive to how my liberty potentially causes a weaker brother to stumble.

When God called me into the ministry, I was basically a hippie. I had really long hair. But then I was asked to go to Bakersfield – a rather conservative area of California – to do a citywide crusade. Guess what? When I sent them a picture, the steering committee wanted to cancel the crusade. They were concerned that my hair would encourage the young people to grow their own hair long, in direct contradiction to what the adults had been teaching.

What did I do? It didn't take me but a moment to decide. I cut my hair. Even though I had every right to wear my hair any length, I limited my liberty in order to minister to others.

Paul's point in Romans is that if I need to limit the way that I dress, fine, I'll limit the way I dress. I'm not limiting myself out of legalism. I'm limiting myself because I want to minister to people, who may not be mature enough to accept a different form of dress. (This is why I wear a suit whenever I leave southern California!) Other people's souls are far more important than my liberty.

By not forcing my opinion on others

As long as I am the senior pastor of Saddleback, we will not make disputable issues a test of fellowship. We will not say, regarding disputable matters, "Believe as I believe, think as I think, drink as I drink, do as I do – Be like me! Only then can I fellowship with you." Don't force your opinion on others.

Romans 14:22: "So whatever you believe about these things, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves."

Paul says, on these disputable matters, keep them between you and the Lord. Go ahead and enjoy your freedom, but don't flaunt it. Enjoy your freedom but enjoy it in privacy. You can practice your freedom without parading it.

Romans 12:18 offers a good balance for this: While you need to look out for people who might be offended by a legitimate "stumbling block" issue, some legalists will be upset no matter what you do. You'll never be able to please them. In that event, Paul says, "As far as it depends on you, if it is possible, live at peace with all men."

God even admits there are some people you can't get along with! In that case, it's not so much your problem as it is theirs. Their nitpicking says more about them than you. What you need to do is allow the Holy Spirit to help you determine when you're dealing with a legitimate stumbling block and when you're dealing with another believer who is simply unpleasable. But don't jump to the conclusion that it's their problem. Take it to God and see what he has to say.

The result of building each other up is a spirit of unity that glorifies God: "So with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." God is glorified because unity brings glory to God. When Christians are divided, it's a bad testimony to the world. When Christians are united, it's a beautiful testimony.

Verse 13 says a unified church is marked by joy, peace, hope, and power: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

That's the kind of church I want to be a part of. Saddleback is not a perfect church, but it is a healthy church – and it's growing in joy, peace, hope, and power.