

Known by our love: Romans 14:1-12

We cannot choose who God will call into Christ's body in baptism.

by [Craig Kocher](#) in the [September 9, 2008](#) issue

The oneness of the church—one Lord, one faith, one baptism—is as integral to being a part of Christ's body as receiving the sacrament of bread and wine. In Romans 14 Paul is writing to a broken body of people. The surface issues are about appropriate Christian eating practices, but the real issue is a pervasive self-righteousness, a sense that some in the church are harshly judging the discipleship of others. Labels such as *strong* and *weak* are being used as pious weaponry to put others in their place. The distinguishing marks of the church in Rome are not faith, hope and love, but verbal sparring, contempt and attacks leveled at others.

We live at a time when saber rattling is in vogue. Red states and blue states are squaring off in an election, while the blogosphere honors those who scream the loudest. Often the church reflects the wider culture and becomes another battleground where one person asserts superiority over another, or one group of Christians trashes something that's important to another group. In Christian history, Christians have repeatedly chosen to leave the table of our Lord rather than abide in the brokenness of his body. Divide and conquer has replaced reform and renew, leading to an ecclesial marketplace that rivals the largest American shopping mall. Sometimes the Bible and tenets of the faith are forgotten as a means of peacemaking and reinvented as instruments of violence. The division is made more painful against the backdrop of Jesus' prayer for oneness and Paul's reminder that whether we live or die, together we belong to the Lord.

Paul's letter attempts to rise above the fray, saying that what makes us indispensable to one another, and what distinguishes Christians from the wider world, is not what we eat, or our ability to win a theological debate, or our moral superiority, or the utility of our practices, but our baptism, our unity in the gospel which demands that we remain with one another precisely in those places where we disagree. Like a preacher massaging the edges of a three-point sermon, Paul gently

reminds the Christians in Rome of the following themes: First, each Christian is a member of God's household. If God has accepted this person, who is in a position to condemn? Second, Christian practices are all aimed at building up the body and serving God in Christ. What is done to honor God appropriately should not be condemned by others in the community. Third, each of us will have our day of judgment, and on that day it will be God, not our brothers and sisters in Christ, who will sit in the judgment seat.

However, there is another theme that Paul is working in this letter. He is subtly suggesting that places of friction and disagreement may in fact be the places that God is using to deepen our faith and love and bind us more closely together in Christ's body. When I sin against a sister in Christ I have an opportunity to confess. When I am hurt by a brother in the faith I am given the opportunity to forgive. When I disagree with a member of the household of God I can be open to the Spirit's working in new ways. The moment I start to feel a touch self-righteous is the time to pray all the more fervently for humility.

Just as we cannot choose which family we are born into, we cannot choose who God will call into Christ's body in baptism. We do not have to like them. We do have to love them. The goal of being together in the body of Christ is not to agree or get along. The hope is to help one another become more Christlike, to love God and neighbor in ever more praising ways. The logic of grace in this sense points not toward winning, but toward holiness. The contours of grace are measures of freedom precisely in how we conduct ourselves in relationship to others. Like the rocky edges of a fault line that push and grind each other down while transforming each jagged edge into a new creation, disagreement, frustration and even anger present an opportunity for a sanctified life, for deeper unity in the body.

We stay with one another because that is what our Lord commands and because it is the only way to grow in the image and likeness of Christ. We are like partners in a marriage who hurt and betray each other and yet hold fast to their vows, confessing their sins, offering forgiveness, listening intently and praying for insight and compassion—and in their togetherness over time discover a deepened life of joy and grace.

The world will not know us by our perfect harmony; it will know us by our love. By mimicking God's choosing to be with us in Christ in the way that we choose to remain with others in the body, we become church and model the unity of the

gospel.

Paul says that all of us will one day stand before the throne of grace, and on that day the questions will not be: Was your theology perfect? Did you point out the sins of others? Did you win the debate? Did you get the practices exactly right? Instead God will ask us: Did you love? Did you forgive? Did you encourage? Did you build up the body? Did you help others become holy? Did you help others serve God? Did you serve the one Lord, through the one baptism, in the one faith?