

## PROFILE OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

### Willing to Affirm Theological Diversity

**THEME:** Okay. “Theological Diversity” is a bit of a tongue-twister and may be a vague term to you. Here is what it means: *intelligent and honest people may not agree on how to understand or implement the truth we believe is taught in Scripture.* Although this is a bit frightening for some people to admit, it is the reality all of us live with every day – among our best friends, in local churches, and in families. So how do we admit the obvious without sliding away from the confidence that all Scripture is God-breathed?

#### **ICE BREAKER**

1. Can you name a biblical issue about which you have changed your mind since you were 15 years old? In the last few years?
2. How did it make you feel to decide you had been “wrong” about some interpretation of Scripture? Frightened? Insecure?
3. Should we really be surprised that our understanding of Holy Scripture enlarges, changes, or grows over time?
4. Do you think Christians have ever been in danger of valuing some disputed text or doctrine over the gospel? The unity of the church? Love for their brothers and sisters?
5. Can you name a text or doctrine (see #4) that caused baptized believers to break fellowship with one another?

#### **THINK**

1. If the theme of *present-day disagreement* among Christians either scares or discourages you, realize that it has always been this way.
2. You are aware that such things as slavery, basic human rights for women, and child-rearing looked very different in the time of Jesus or Paul than we would tolerate today. Can you cite some biblical counsel (commands) that would be inappropriate for us to give today?
3. If #2 stumped you, what about some of the following:
  - a. God’s people should never get tattoos (Lev 19:28)
  - b. Unruly children should be beaten with rods (Prov 31:6-7)
  - c. Christians should never swear under oath (Matt 5:33-37)
  - d. Jesus commanded his disciples to wash one another’s feet (John 13:14-15)
  - e. Christians must greet one another with a kiss (Rom 16:16)
  - f. A male shouldn’t wear a cap in worship (1 Cor 11:4)
  - g. Women must wear head coverings in worship (1 Cor 11:13)
  - h. Women are not allowed to speak in church meetings (1 Cor 14:34)
  - i. *This could go on forever . . .*
4. The point of these questions is not to get your small group into a fuss over how to understand these texts; it is simply to affirm what we know about disagreement over the *meaning of certain texts* and the *methods of interpretation* we use to explain our understandings and practices.

## EXAMINE

Read Paul's prayer at [Romans 14:1 – 15:13](#) to answer the following questions:

1. It might help to have two or three different translations from which to read this section of the Epistle to the Romans.
2. What "issues" were named here as being friction-points of interpretation and practice among the Roman Christians?
3. Why do you think they had come to different conclusions about these issues? Life backgrounds? Childhood teaching? Sensitivity to criticism?
4. Do any of these same issues still cause disagreement among sincere and intelligent Christians?
5. How did Paul tell them to handle their different views? Did one side have to "win"? Did one's final conclusion and action on one of these issues mean he or she could not worship or have fellowship with those who disagreed?
6. What precedent do you see in this for modern Christians?

Read [2 Peter 3:14-16](#) as background for the following questions:

1. Does it surprise you to hear Peter saying that some of Paul's writings are "hard to understand"? Comfort you?
2. Do you think it is reasonable to think that *some* elements of the Bible are more obvious and more important to spiritual life than others?
3. How does a text such as 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 help answer #2? Explain.
4. Do you think Ephesians 4:4-6 offers any insight on the central items of Christian faith? Explain.

**THIS WEEK:** One of the Christians virtues that seems to be appropriate for winding up this study is *humility*. Is it necessary to have "the final word" on every topic to be a Christian? To offer an answer to every hard question? To "win" every disagreement-debate over such things? Does humility cancel out one's right to hold deep personal convictions? Is it possible to have "deep personal convictions" while still respecting other people who disagree?