

Oh Be Careful Little Feet

Grey Matters – Part III

Romans 14:10-12

Introduction

In light of our discussion on debatable and divisive grey issues within the church, I have received a number of interesting responses and illustrations of division over non-essentials. It is good to remember the words of one man who said:

In essentials, unity;

In non-essentials, liberty;

In all things, charity.

I am not sure who said this, as I have seen it attributed to three different men. So it is a rather divisive issue, but let us not fight over it. Someone said it and it is worth repeating:

In essentials, unity;

In non-essentials, liberty;

In all things, charity.

One of the men in our church sent a story to me regarding the division over singing choruses or hymns in church. I thought it was very interesting and will share it with you.

An old farmer went to the city one weekend and attended the big city church. He came home and his wife asked him how it was.

“Well,” said the farmer, “it was good. They did something different, though. They sang praise choruses instead of hymns.”

“Praise choruses?” asked the wife. “What are those?”

“Oh, they’re okay . . . they’re sort of like hymns, only different,” the farmer said.

“Well, what’s the difference?” asked his wife.

The farmer explained, “Well, it’s like this. If I were to say to you, ‘Martha, the cows are in the corn,’ that would be a hymn. If, on the other hand, I were to say to you,

‘Martha, Martha, Martha, Oh Martha, Martha, Martha, the cows, the big cows, the brown cows, the black cows, the white cows, the cows, the COWS, the COWS, COWS, are in the corn, corn, corn, they’re in the coooooorrrrrnnnnn.’

Then, I repeated it three times, that would be a praise chorus.”

Wouldn’t you know it, that farmer’s little church had a visitor from the big city church that same Sunday. He went home to his wife and she asked him how it went.

He said, “Oh, it was okay, except they don’t sing choruses – they sing hymns.”

She asked, “What’s a hymn?”

He said, “Well, it’s like a chorus, only different.”

She said, “What do you mean, different?”

He explained, “Well, if I said to you, ‘Martha, the cows are in corn,’ but said it like this:

‘Oh Martha, dear Martha, hear the words of my mouth,

Turn thou thy whole wondrous ear to this glorious truth;

For the way of the animals who can explain;

There in their heads is no shadow of sense,

Hearkenest they in God’s sun or His rain,

Unless from the mild corn they are fenced;
Yea those cows in glad, rebellious delight,
Have loosed their shackles, their warm pens
eschew,

Yea goaded by minions of darkness and night,
They all my sweet corn are now destined to
chew.

Martha, look to that bright day when earth is
reborn,

And I shall not see those cows in my corn.’

That would be a hymn!”

I am glad to hear some of you laughing – which
is further proof that a balanced music program is
intended by God to both educate and irritate the
entire church!

The truth is – grey matters are rarely laughing
matters.

Go all the way back to 1700’s – to the days of
Jonathan Edwards – and the debates over music in
the church. There were two controversies:

- One controversy surrounded whether or not
everyone should sing together. We today,
have a song leader who keeps us all singing
together and instruments that keep us on the
same pitch and in the same key. In those
days, everyone often started when they
wanted, in the key they wanted, and sort of
sing their own way through the lyrics.
- The other controversy was whether or not
women could sing at the same time as the
men. Would they be violating their place of
submission to sing alongside their husbands?

Think about that! When our Worship Pastor led
us in singing together – all at the same time and,
for most of us, in the same key – had it been the 1700’s,
he would have been doing something highly
controversial.

Ever since the Pharisees were challenged by the
Lord for teaching their traditions as doctrine (Mark
7:5-8), we have been dividing and arguing and
splitting over methods and mannerisms and
mechanics and minutia, while at the same time,
failing at what matters.

The apostle Paul writes to the church at Rome,
which was deeply divided over issues of lifestyle and
liberty. He will both irritate and educate the entire
church.

In Romans 14, we discovered in our last session,
that Paul had delivered a rather shocking guideline
for determining what to do in grey areas, or areas in
which the Bible is silent or inconclusive. This is not
in matters of doctrine, but in matters of lifestyle. This
debate was not over beliefs, but over behaviors.

Paul wrote in Romans 14:5b-6a,

*... Each person must be fully convinced in
his own mind. He who observes the day,
observes it for the Lord, and he who eats,
does so for the Lord . . .*

Now keep in mind, Paul is talking about the
incredibly controversial subject of the Sabbath and
eating meat offered to idols. These were actually
more important issues than whether we should sing at
the same time or in the same key.

Paul gave the guidelines – two of them:

- First, are you surrendered to the Lord as a
priority?
- Secondly, are you giving thanks to the Lord
as a practice?

Now in Romans 14:10, Paul goads us to
remember something else that really matters.

Be Careful Who You Judge

Notice the first part of Romans 14:10.

*But you, why do you judge your brother? Or
you again, why do you regard your brother
with contempt? . . .*

Do you see a word that appears twice in this text?
You should circle it. It is the word, “brother”.

This is a family matter. We are separating from
family members over issues colored in grey –
traditions we are desperately trying to define as
doctrine. The church is against the church.

In our last study, I told you about Charles
Spurgeon and Joseph Parker. These two well known
London preachers exchanged pulpits at times and
enjoyed fellowship together, until Parker criticized
Spurgeon for smoking his cigars and Spurgeon, in
turn, criticized Parker for attending the theatre. They
broke off their fellowship, if not their friendship.

In another incident, D. L. Moody, America’s
most famous pastor/evangelist, was visiting Spurgeon
and preaching for him. They got into a small tiff that
was widely reported, when Moody asked Spurgeon
when he was going to give up those awful cigars.
Spurgeon pointed a finger at Moody’s considerable
midsection and said, “When you get rid of this.”

I use these examples to remind us that even great men of faith can bicker and argue and even divide over issues far less significant than the issues facing the Romans.

The entire nation of Jews had built their worship on the Sabbath day – on kosher diets. The Gentiles had left their lives of idolatry and wanted nothing more to do with the temples, while others did not see anything wrong with eating non-kosher meat offered to idols – right out of the temple. And they were at each other's throats.

Paul says, in Romans 14:10, "You! Stop condemning your brother! You! Stop looking down on your brother with contempt!"

It is as if to say, "What good does it do?"

We could ask:

- What church is more unified after an argument over hymns and choruses?
- What church experiences unity as it advances the cause of Christ because it uses only a piano and an organ, or no instruments at all?
- What church is strengthened by arguing over schooling choices – at home, taught by the mother; at home, taught by the father and the mother; at home, with a few classes co-opted out; or entirely outside the home in public school or perhaps, in a Christian school?
- What group of believers was ever edified over the color of the carpet or the methods of evangelism – starting with the law or starting with the cross of Christ; in the home or on the street corner; confrontational or lifestyle?
- What group of believers glorified God in the marketplace by refusing to wear make-up or choosing to wear their hair short – or long or with long curly sideburns – or choosing to wear beards – or no beards or mustaches only?

I remember as a teenager, the heated debate in the church was over long hair on guys and what was considered too much hair. Now, I would like to *grow* hair!

Paul would give the answer to these questions in Romans 14. He writes, "Make up your mind . . . and then do it as unto the Lord with thanksgiving."

Oh how we love to compare and compete and criticize and command.

Paul writes in Romans 14:4a,

Who are you to judge [your brother]? . . .

Then, in Romans 14:10a, he writes, effectively, ***[Do not] judge your brother . . . why do you regard your brother with contempt? . . .***

You might ask, "Is it ever right to judge anyone for anything?"

Absolutely.

Four judgments we are to make

The New Testament makes it clear that we are to make several judgments. Let me give four of them.

1. First, we are to judge unrepentant transgressors.

Paul rebuked the church in Corinth for refusing to remove an unrepentant man from their midst, when he wrote in I Corinthians 5:1-4,

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you . . . You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst. For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this . . .

Paul said, "I have already judged him."

It is interesting that Paul did not commend them for being tolerant; he rebuked them for being arrogant. This church thought they knew better than God. They thought they were smarter than God's prudish demand for monogamy and fidelity.

Paul demanded that the church judge this unrepentant man and remove him from their fellowship.

2. Secondly, we are to judge not only unrepentant transgressors, but false teachers.

These are teachers with false doctrine.

Without a doubt, our culture and the church at large is resisting more and more the notion of theological absolutes. Doctrine is considered too dogmatic; too divisive. Let us lay aside doctrine and unite in love. Let us just worship God and not bother with the attributes of God – like justice and mercy, wrath and love.

That may be politically correct, but it is unbiblical to the core. In fact, that which is politically correct is frequently biblically corrupt!

Paul wrote in the last chapter of Romans – we will get there soon; in fact, I believe we will be there next year, so be patient – in Romans 16:17,

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.

In other words, do not unite in love if they deny sound doctrine.

How far can the church stray from that simple guideline?

One major Protestant denomination is publicly wrestling with the issue of homosexual ordination. One of their homosexual leaders was elevated to Bishop. For the first time in their church's history, an openly active Protestant homosexual now serves in the highest echelon of this church tradition. One of his colleagues, who tried to settle the firestorm, spoke at an annual meeting of his denomination. Trying to keep the denomination from splintering and dividing, he said in his speech, "If the church must make a choice between heresy and schism (or division), we must always choose heresy."¹

In other words, if sound doctrine brings division, abandon the scripture and stay together.

The apostle Paul would judge them and warn us to stay away from them.

3. Thirdly, we are to judge cultural trends.

Paul wrote further to the Corinthians believers, ***... he who is spiritual judges all things ... (I Corinthians 2:15 NKJV)***

This text sort of covers everything else.

Paul writes that in light of the wisdom of this world and the natural reason of man, the believer should always walk with alertness and spiritual wisdom, pursuing the mind of Christ.

4. Lastly, we are to judge our own testimony.

I Corinthians 11 is filled with exhortations for the believer to judge himself and hold himself accountable to the pure standard of holy living.

Judge yourselves – make certain you are not pulling the wool over your own eyes.

Ladies and gentlemen, Paul is not saying in Romans 14 that we should not judge anyone. He is not saying to us, "Hey, go out and do whatever you want to do – and if anyone looks down on you, so what!"

Paul, in Romans 14, is talking about judging one another on issues that are not related to doctrine, unrepentant sin, or some other area that is clearly black and white.

This is the difference between biblical judging and simply being judgmental. There is a vast difference between being a critical thinker and being everyone's critic.

Paul is saying, in effect, "Stop being judgmental and critical toward one another over grey matters!"

"Why Paul? Give me one good reason why I should stop."

Be Careful Where You Go

Paul gives the reason we should stop being judgmental of other believers over grey matters, in the latter part of Romans 14:10.

... For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.

Oh ... that!

Paul says, "May I remind you who are judgmentally criticizing your brothers and sisters in contempt that you will one day be standing before Christ."

In other words, "Think of it this way – you who are looking down on your brother, will one day be looking up at your sovereign Judge."

If you want to circle a very convicting word – it shows up in my Bible, right in the middle of that last phrase,

... For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.

It is the word, "all". Every one of us who claim to know Christ as our personal Lord and Savior will all stand before Him one day.

Those who do not know Christ will also have an appointment with God. It is another, entirely different judgment called the Great White Throne. In Revelation 20, that awful moment is recorded in which all unbelievers will be given the guilty verdict and cast into eternal hell.

Those of us who know Christ – by the grace of God, through faith in the work of Christ alone – will also have an awesome moment in which we all will stand before the Son of God, for the Father has delivered to Him the right of judgment (John 5:22).

When Paul described this moment to the Corinthians, he wrote,

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ . . . (II Corinthian 5:10)

This is perhaps a wonderful text that speaks of the fullness of Christ's deity – called "Christos" or Christ in II Corinthians 5:10 and "Theos" or God in Romans 14:10.

Nevertheless, we shall all stand before the second Person of the Godhead, the One who came to earth as Savior, but now sits in the heavens as the Judge of all things.

Paul calls that place the judgment seat – or the Bema. What is this place?

The Greek word, "bema," primarily means, "a step . . . a pace". It is translated in Acts 7:5 as a footprint . . . or a place for your feet.ⁱⁱ

This word came to be used for foot-rooms, which was later changed to platforms – raised areas that were accessed by steps; places where one stood and spoke.

Later the word was used; in fact, during the time of Paul, as the raised platform upon which sat the Roman tribunal. This was a place for judges who sat at the Bema and rendered verdicts in the ancient courtrooms. Some were in the open; some were in palaces or political offices.

The word bema is used for the seat of Pilate who judged the Lord in Matthew 27:19.

While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent a message, saying, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man . . ."

There was also the famous bema at Corinth, where Gallio, the governor, judged Paul (Acts 18). In fact, that bema still exists. I have seen pictures of it, with Gallio's name clearly inscribed in the stonework.

When Paul said to these believers, "You're going to stand one day before the Bema of God," they immediately got the picture.

But wait, how can we stand before Christ as Judge, since He is already our Savior?

Two things the judgment seat is not

Let me tell you what the judgment seat is not!

1. First, it is not a place where your future will be decided.

The only people standing at the Bema are believers. Sin was judged in Christ on the cross, and because we stand in Christ who was already judged,

we will never be condemned for our sins – He was condemned for us. I Peter 2:24 says,

and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

We will stand at the judgment seat without fear of rejection, for God has no more charges against those who trust in His Son – those who belong to Him – and will allow no one else to bring charges against them (Romans 8:31-34).

Romans 8:1 is one of my favorite verses because of one little word that it contains – the word "now".

Therefore there is now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus.

Not later – not maybe – but now!!!

The Bema is not a place where your future is decided. Your future has already been decided – that is the reason you will be there.

2. Secondly, it is not a place where forgiveness will be determined.

You will stand at the Bema, not to be forgiven, but because you have been forgiven.

Listen to what God says about your settled state,

When you were dead in your transgressions . . . He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions [not some, but all], having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees [the record of all our sins] against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. (Colossians 2:13-14)

The Bema is not a place where our future is decided or our forgiveness is determined – that has already been granted and decided. That is forever – secure – now! Now!

Then what is this place called the Bema?

It is a personal one on one encounter with the living Christ, where He will not judge our position in Him, but our performance for Him. We are there because we are His bride.

Now, what kind of bride have we been? What kind of sons and daughters of His Father – our Father – have we been? What is the record of our footprints? What kind of trail will He review?

It will be a place of great weeping; a place of great sorrow; a place of loss of reward that we could have had; a place where we are confronted with what

we missed. Oh, but it will be a place of great joy and relief; a place of grace; a place of deepest love – for there is no deeper love than to offend Someone and He loves us still.

In the meantime, however:

Oh, be careful little feet, where you go,

Oh, be careful little feet, where you go,

For the Father up above, is looking down in love,

So, be careful little feet, where you go.

What is it going to be like at the Bema?

Four illustrations of the judgment seat

Paul uses four illustrations or metaphors to describe this awesome encounter with Christ.

1. The first picture is of a great, divine smelting furnace.

In I Corinthians 3:12-15, Paul writes of this day – the judgment day for the believer at the Bema – saying,

Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

The fire mentioned here is used elsewhere in scripture as the emblem of deity – “Our God is a consuming fire.” This means the holiness of God.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is not a mild reference to a place of purgatory where we go to have our faults burned away over time. This is a reference to that moment when we stand before God and have our lives evaluated by the agency of His purity and holiness and faithfulness.

What is it of our lives that was faithful and holy and pure? What will stand the purifying gaze of our holy God?

Evidently, there will be those who have nothing left; nothing of value, as if they have come through the fire with nothing but their salvation intact.

The apostle John wrote the warning,

Watch yourselves, that you do not lose . . . [your] full reward. (II John 1:8)

So build your life – you get to choose the material. You can choose valuable things that would honor God, or worthless things that are trivial and earthly and self-centered.

2. Paul uses another image, not only that of a smelting furnace, but, in our modern world we could refer to it as, a supernatural x-ray machine.

A chapter later, Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts . . . (I Corinthians 4:5)

It is not the quantity of work for God, but the quality of the work. It is not the magnificence of the task, but the motive of the heart.

Rewards at the Bema will have nothing to do with our position, or education . . . many dear saints, completely unknown to the world and perhaps hardly known to fellow believers, will receive reward after reward after reward from the Lord's hands, because their works were purely motivated for His glory.^{iv}

Spurgeon put it this way:

Do not hold back because you cannot preach in St. Paul's Cathedral; be content to talk to one or two; you may cook in small pots as well as in big ones. Little pigeons can carry great messages; even a little dog can bark at a thief, and wake up the master and save the house.^v

That is, unless the master has taken the little dog to the pound; where the dog cannot bark and warn the mean master. The thief then comes and the master deserves to have everything stolen from him! Is that not right?

I told the story of our Bassett hound last Sunday – I am sure he was adopted. My wife told me, after that sermon, “Honey, that story did not represent me or the children at all. We didn't want to take the dog to the pound – only you did.”

It has been a lonely week.

I remember spending the night in a beautiful hotel in India. There were so many people clamoring for our attention. We were having meetings; I was to preach in a rally – I have no idea how many people were there. But in that beautiful hotel, the maid who cleaned my room seemed to have such a countenance of joy. I finally stopped her in the hallway and asked a question that she could have been reprimanded for

answering. I said, “Ma’am, your smile, the countenance of your face, the way you’ve cleaned my room with such detail – I have to ask you, in a world of Hindus, do you know Christ?”

She immediately beamed and said, “Oh yes, I am a Christian.”

She may never deliver the gospel to hundreds or thousands of people; she may not be known to a large body of believers, but she cleaned hotel rooms and it was obvious that it was for the glory of God.

The divine x-ray machine will reveal the motive of our hearts for everything we said and did, at the Bema seat.

3. Paul also pictures the judgment seat as an award ceremony.

Understand that on this raised platform were the places that the judges of the athletic contests sat. It was the place where the victorious athletes would stand to receive their crown – their laurel wreaths made of oak leaves. For them, it would be the moment of a lifetime.

Paul wrote,

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness [the “stephanos”; the laurel wreath of a victorious athlete], which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day . . . (II Timothy 4:7-8)

We can watch Olympic winners even today, mount a small platform to receive their awards – which harkens back to the ancient bema. Watch their faces and see the tears brimming in their eyes; look at their joy and their honorable pride.

Paul and all the other Romans had undoubtedly seen the victorious athletes step up to the bema to receive their crown. Paul said, “I’m going to be there one day – only this Bema will be the Bema of the Living Lord.”

4. The judgment seat is like a smelting furnace, a divine X-ray machine, an awards ceremony, and finally, it is like a performance review.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed [paid back] for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad [profitable or unprofitable]. (II Corinthians 5:10)

It is not sin that is judged – it is service.

Paul wrote to the Romans, in chapter 14 verse 12, ***So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.***

So:

- What kind of testimony did you have?
- What was your work ethic?
- How did you spend your money?
- How did you serve the church with your gifts and talents?
- What do your footprints reveal?
- What kind of influence did you exert on earth?

A man in our church sent this story to me recently – I guess he thought it was funny. It has something to do with rewards in heaven being related to the impact and influence we had on people while on earth – which we have learned is certainly true.

A minister died and was waiting in line at the Pearly Gates. Ahead of him was a scruffy looking guy – beat up leather jacket, worn out jeans.

Peter finally comes and says to the guy, “Who are you, so that I may know your position in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The guy says, “I’m Joe Cohen, taxi driver from New York City.”

Peter looks at his list and then smiles and says, “Oh, you’re Joe . . . well, here, take this silk robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

The taxi driver struts into heaven with his fancy robe and solid gold staff.

Now it is the minister’s turn. Peter asks, “And who might you be?”

He says, “I am Joseph Snow, pastor of more than forty years.”

Peter looks at his list and says, “Oh, so you’re Pastor Snow . . . well, take this cotton robe and wooden staff and go on in.”

The minister says, “Now just a minute, Peter! That man ahead of me was a taxi driver, and he got a silk robe and golden staff. I get a cotton robe and a lousy wooden stick – I want an explanation!”

Peter said, “It’s the results – while you preached, people slept; while he drove, people prayed!”

I did not think it was that funny either.

Aren't you glad your performance review will be taken up with none other than Jesus Christ? His evaluation will be perfect. It will not be prejudiced. It cannot be wrongly motivated. It will not miss something important. It will be right.

Romans 14:11 gives our response. We will bow our knee in submission to His righteous evaluation, and we will say, "You are Lord."

We will open our mouths to praise Him at the end of our performance review for He is God. He is both holy and loving; awesome and personal; terrible and yet, terribly gracious.

At that Bema Seat, the Son, the righteous Judge will make everything right! If:

- someone has cheated you on earth – God will make it right;
- someone has passed you over – God will make it right;
- someone abandoned you; someone left you for another – God will give you that reward for following Him still; He will make it right;
- someone has stolen your money; someone has stolen your good name – God will make it right;
- someone applauded your failure; someone rejoiced when you suffered – God will make it right;
- someone failed to love you; someone failed to care for you; someone failed to take up your cause – God will make it right;
- someone refused to encourage you; someone never cheered you on; someone hoped you

would lose in life and fail in business – God will make it right;

- someone has betrayed you; someone has physically and emotionally hurt you – God will make it right;
- someone has misled you, someone has mocked you; someone has ridiculed your purity and slandered your testimony – God will make it right;
- someone has convinced you to believe you will never amount to anything; someone has caused you to be certain you are not worth anything – God will have something to say about that, victorious forgiven one – God will make it right;
- there is something you never understood – God will make it clear;
- there is something you could never figure out – God will let you see;
- you could never get it together – God has made you whole.

There you are, at the Bema Seat of God – you will not be able to stop the tears until He wipes them away; you will never be able to hold back the praise – and that will continue forever – for,

*. . . every tongue shall give praise to God.
(Romans 14:11b)*

Worthy are You, Son of God, all praise to You, my righteous, gracious Judge, my Redeemer, my Lord and my King!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/19/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Chuck Colson, <http://www.townhall.com>.

ⁱⁱ W. E. Vine, *Vines Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nelson, 1997), p. 612.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roy L. Laurin, *First Corinthians: Where Life Matures* (Kregel, 1987), p. 79.

^{iv} John MacArthur, *First Corinthians* (Moody Press, 1984), p. 102.

^v Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories* (Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 198.