

Alive for God!

Romans 6.1-11

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The baptism of Christ was a moment in the life of Jesus when God showed himself very present in his existence. Jesus was baptised, His Father spoke from heaven, and the Spirit of God descended on Him like a dove.

This was Epiphany- revelation.

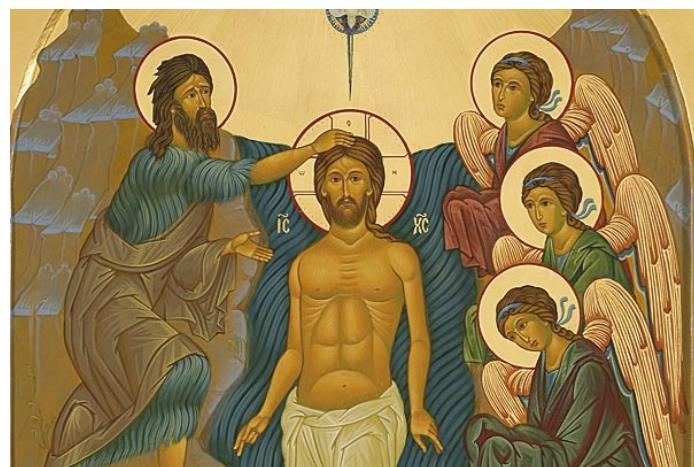
Compared to knowing this Lord, all other things lose a bit of importance.

But we often make things important that are really not. And by doing so, we often damage relationships.

How can we maintain our unity as Christians - even though we come from so many cultures and backgrounds, also from different church backgrounds, and with such a wide range of different viewpoints?

We are nowadays even able, as Christians, to be divided over whether to have a vaccine or not, and as churches we allow the viewpoints and divisions of society to invade into our own communities.

To answer this question - how to be united as Christians, Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome. And in his answer he focusses on our baptism.



1. Differences

In Rome, they suffered from tension because people had very different views of how to serve God together.

The concrete issue they faced, was that many followers of Jesus Christ with a Jewish background were happy to have people from other nations and cultures enter into the church, but only as long as they behaved like the Jews did.

“You can join our group, but then you must behave as we do. Only then will you be truly a good follower of Jesus.”

The people from the other nations could not accept this. “Why do we have to become like you first? Why can we not follow our Lord Jesus in the context of our own culture?” And they insisted on that.

And those Romans, by the way, could also not force the Jewish Christians to adopt the Roman ways of life as a precondition for really following Jesus.

This is complicated. How to be true to yourself and at the same time, live in peace with very different people under the one roof of the church.

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul clarified to the Jewish followers of Jesus, that they should stop making their national laws into the law book for Christians from other nations.

You simply cannot force people to change their nationality and their culture before they can be real followers of Jesus.

Paul begins his letter by underlining that this is unacceptable - because it divides the church. And following the laws of Israel or of any nation will not bring us closer to God anyway, as the history of Israel and the world has shown quite clearly.

But God, in his grace, has reached out to us through Jesus Christ, completely bypassing all rules and laws. In our faith, Jesus is central, not a set of rules.

With the feast of Epiphany, we celebrate that God revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. That is an awesome revelation that supersedes God's revelation on Sinai and any rule or regulation.

That is what Paul underlines. God's response to the human problem of sin is not more law, but it is grace through Jesus Christ. God does not throw the law book at us, but He sends Jesus Christ.



By attaching ourselves to Him, we become part of the people of God: a completely new society where our sins are forgiven and we live in the presence of God.

So when we meet as Christians, we do not bring the rules and do's and don'ts of our own cultural background with us. We leave them at the church door,

because we enter into the meeting of the new family that we belong to, and this family bond has precedence over anything else.

2. Jesus central

Your views on vaccines - to Pfizer or not to Pfizer, your views on what is proper food - meat or veggies - your view on how to dress - a suit or shorts in church-, your views on football - Liverpool or Feyenoord - we leave that at the door. It is not important enough to allow it to create division.

So be careful that you do not approach other people in church with your own cultural rules; be careful that your interpretation of Holy Scripture, which is always through the lens of your own culture and background, does not drive us apart.

Grace as revealed in Jesus Christ brings people together, law apart from Him drives us apart.

For some Jews, this was unacceptable. ‘So our lifestyle does not matter, let us do as we like?’ They accused the apostle of creating sloppy Christians with his approach to law and grace.

And it is true, there have always been people who see in Paul’s proclamation of justification by faith an invitation for loose living.

Take the Russian monk Rasputin, the evil advisor of the Romanov family, the last Russian Czar. Rasputin argued that those who sin most, need most forgiveness. So by sinning boldly, he assumed he would each time experience more forgiveness, more grace, and that would be a better experience than receiving a little grace like average sinners do.

This extreme view of Christian liberty was obviously not what Jesus and his apostles intended.

Paul points the church in Rome, and us, to our baptism. Look at your baptism and consider how that should impact your lifestyle.

The Jews in Rome understood very well the implication of baptism. They had invented baptism and the church had taken the habit of baptism from the Jews.

Baptism was well known in Judaism. When a non-Jewish man, a pagan, wanted to convert to being a Jew, he had to accept all Jewish laws, he had to be circumcised, and then he, finally, had to be baptised.

The legal effect of this baptism for those pagans was complete regeneration. The person was no longer seen as a Roman, Scythian, Persian, or Greek, but as purely Jewish - and he belonged to one of the twelve tribes of Israel. He was born again.

He was seen as a child, newborn into that tribe of Israel; his pagan past was totally disregarded. He was a new man who had entered into a totally new life. He was a full Jew.



So when Jews heard Paul speak of baptism making someone totally new, they understood.

When people were baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, what happened? Their former life was ended, and they entered into a whole new life as part of the family of God.

This is what regeneration - being born again - means. When we were baptised we became part of Christ. And in this way, through Christ, we became part of the people of God. We entered into the life with God. No laws or rules or cultural habits could do this, and all of those rules and habits seem so irrelevant compared to being attached to Jesus Christ.

Belief in ourselves maybe, or the illusion that we can save our skin by earning much money, or by trying to be a good person. Or by sticking to certain codes of law and behaviour, it is irrelevant in regard to God.

3. Your baptism

This is what baptism does for us. We died in the water, but then we got out - into the new life with Jesus Christ, into the family of God - in the safety of a whole new humankind where the first principle is: only Jesus Christ can make us new.

Through our baptism and by holding on to Jesus Christ, we have become participants in what historically happened to Him - we died with Him, we rose with Him, we ascended with Him. We are united with Him forever.

And this is Paul's answer to division in the church in Rome - and it works for us as well. Jesus Himself is the heart of our new life; He Himself is the heart of our Christian unity. In Him we became one new family.

So when we as Christians meet, we meet as a new family where obedience to Jesus is number one, and loyalty to each other follows in the slipstream. We are brothers, sisters. And family does not let go of each other.

But does this really mean we leave our own cultural habits at the door of the church? Well, not really. Because that is who we are. And as God accepted us as we are, we do not need to deny the colour of our skin, our language, our upbringing.

But as Jesus comes first, and other Christians next, we do accept that our own views and habits and the things we really stand for, are always secondary.

That also helps us to appreciate the habits of others, even if we think they are weird. Sometimes they are. Let us laugh about our differences. In the kingdom of God there are people from all nations, from all languages.

Which does not mean the end of our Christians morality. Christ taught us how to live.

Conclusion

And being connected with Jesus Christ also meant the beginning of the work of the Holy spirit in our life.

This by itself does not make us live a life for God. That is exactly why Paul has to write about it, and why he has to convince his readers that their baptism points them into the direction of living a life for God as one united family. This calls for personal efforts. Hard work.

Paul had to endure many disappointments with those who had become christians. He had to write letters, preach, admonish, be angry, be kind, because living the new lifestyle that belongs to Jesus Christ does not come naturally. It is a lifestyle that must be taught. Wow have to learn to be one family.

The lesson for us today is that we put Jesus in 2022 in the first place. And that we recognise each other as part of the one family that we belong to. We are brothers and sisters.

And we decide that our differences will not separate us. Because compared to Christ and the family of God that we belong to, all those differences are so unimportant.

Amen.