

**SERMON TITLE:** “We Do Not Live to Ourselves”

**TEXT:** Romans 14:1-14

**PREACHED AT:** Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today marks the beginning of many of the activities in the life of the church

- Sunday School
- Bible Studies
- VSers (who we will be praying for later)
- Ladies Fellowship

Each year, Mennonite Church Canada sets aside one Sunday a year as “Christian Formation Sunday.” This year, that Sunday was last week (Sep 11), but given that Sunday School began for us this week, we have decided to do it today.

I like the term “Christian formation.” I think it alludes to some very important things about the nature of discipleship—that the life of Christ is something that is *formed* in us over time, that we are continually *in formation*, whether we are 3 or 93 years old. We don’t go to a weekend workshop, and get a certificate saying we are “mature Christians.” It takes time, and it takes one another.

So, I obviously think “Christian Formation” is a very good and appropriate theme to devote a Sunday to.

But, when I looked at the biblical texts that were suggested for preaching by MC Canada, I have to say I was a bit surprised.

I had half-expected something like Ephesians 6, which talks about putting on the full armour of God, or, perhaps, John 16-17 where Jesus gives his last instructions to his disciples, and prays for his followers, present and future.

Instead, we were invited to reflect upon Romans 14, as we have just heard Marie read.

It is a very interesting passage, but at least initially, it didn’t seem to be the most obvious choice for the theme of Christian formation.

It’s talking about how to treat people who understand faith differently—which is important, but how does it fit with Christian formation?

But, as is so often the case, my opinion changed over the course of the week as I spent time with the text, and by Friday afternoon, I was quite convinced that these words were very appropriate for us as a church community as we launch out into a new school year.

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We will get to the text itself shortly, but before that, I want to spend a bit of time on how we read and apply the bible.

My view on this could be summed up in two words: **context matters**.

This is true in two ways. First, we have to pay attention to the context in which the words of Scripture were first written. Who was it written to? What was their social reality? What problems were they addressing? Who were the recipients of the words? And we will get to this shortly.

Second, it is important to pay attention to **our own** context. What is the reality into which these ancient words are being spoken **today**? What are our issues, our challenges, what might our blind spots be? Who are we and what do we need to hear?

Part of what is involved in Christian formation is understanding that followers of Jesus are (and have always been) formed in very different contexts!

The reality of Jesus Christ as God's response to a broken world doesn't change, but how this is implemented and articulated and practiced in different cultural contexts and at different times may change.

And so what does being formed in the pattern of Christ, whether as kids or adults, look like here and now?

What is the context in which *our* formation takes place?

We often hear that we live in the "digital age," and one of the things that I have been interested in for some time now is the way in which the online world affects and shapes us as human beings.

In very general terms, what I have observed as an observer of the world of online discourse is an increasing level of nastiness and intolerance of other viewpoints emerging.

You don't have to go very far for evidence for this—just go on any major news source's website and have a look at the comments sections of an opinion piece or an article dealing with some controversial story or person.

What you will often find is a surprising amount of hostility and personal attacks.

Many are commenting that despite the digital age's promise to expand our horizons, exposing us to endless viewpoints, and making us better citizens, what is in fact happening is a kind of narrowing effect.

We are paralyzed by the sheer volume of information available to us. We can't take it all in or even begin to be aware of enough diverse viewpoints, nor do we really want to.

And so, studies have shown that in a world awash in information, people increasingly tend to gravitate toward views that we already agree with. In other words, we tend to read and watch and listen to people that will reinforce our views, or give us ammunition against those whose views we disagree with or find objectionable.

One article I came across this week from *The American Prospect*, talked about how we are increasingly living in, what the author called, "filter bubbles"— "personalized micro-universes of information that overemphasize what we want to hear and filter out what we don't."

It seems that we are being formed in ways that are making us less willing to consider the views of others, more antagonistic in discussing our own, and more judgmental in our approach to others.

It's not a very flattering picture of citizens of the "information age."

And I wish I could say that Christians offer a shining light in this context of judgment, intolerance, and general bad behaviour but, alas, we do not. Christians have never disagreed with one another particularly well, and the Internet has only made this worse, I fear.

### **This is our world.**

This is the world in which our formation as followers of Jesus takes place.

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Of course the situation in Rome was not the same as in our age of social media, but I think we see something like "filter bubbles" at work here as well.

We have two camps with different understandings who seem not to be living well together.

A bit of context: In 49 AD, Jews and Jewish Christians were kicked out of Rome by Emperor Claudius because of their fighting over whether Jesus really was the Messiah.

Fast forward to 54 AD – Claudius dead, and the new emperor, Nero, says Jews and Jewish Christians allowed back in. But by then the church had developed a largely Gentile character, and there was conflict with the returning Jewish Christians about the role of the law, ritual, and what the freedom of Christ actually looked like.

Paul was dealing with two groups of people who had come to different conclusions about how the reality of Jesus Christ and what he had accomplished was to be related to their social reality.

The one group—possibly mainly Gentile believers—was convinced that Jesus had ushered in a new era of freedom—that where in the past certain things had been labeled “clean” and “unclean,” Jesus had changed things. He had broken down old walls, old divisions, old ways of looking at things. He had demonstrated that the **whole world** belonged to God and was in the process of being redeemed.

The other group—possibly mainly Jewish believers—was inclined toward preserving some of the old commandments as an expression of devotion to God and moral duty. They were quite sensitive to the evils all around them, and thought that the best response to this was strict avoidance of anything that might be inappropriate.

Both groups thought they were right. Both thought that their approach to being formed in the new reality of Jesus was the best one.

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So what can we learn about Christian formation in **our** context from Paul’s response to the reality in **his** context?

I want to identify three things:

### **1. Christian formation is not just about *information***

In Rome, both groups had access to the same information; they just interpreted it differently. They saw it as having different implications for how they were to live and think.

Christian formation is about much more than just presenting a body of information about Jesus and church and morality to people, and then expecting them to agree about it and put it into practice.

One of my professor’s in graduate school referred to this approach to Christian formation as something like the “freezer” approach.

The content of Christian belief and behaviour is pretty much static, and our only job, from generation to generation, is to kind of take it out of the freezer, unthaw it, and plunk it down on the table and expect it to do its work.

This simply isn’t how life or discipleship works.

What we see in Romans 14 (and elsewhere in Scripture), throughout Church history, in our own lives, and in the life of the church, is that **sometimes Christians disagree about stuff**.

Christian formation does not equal 100% uniformity on every question of belief and practice.

I should be clear: I think there really are better and worse ways of understanding matters of belief and practice, and that it really is possible to make progress in what we understand about things.

I think how slavery was understood in 2011 compared with 750 AD, for example, really **does** represent an improvement, a truer approach to the implications of faith. I'm sure you can think of other examples.

I think that it is possible to be too easily satisfied with diversity of belief when we should be working harder at figuring out what the truth is.

But other times, the right answer (if there is singular one) just isn't that easy to figure out.

Sometimes, the Bible doesn't speak specifically to a issue (what does the Bible say about whether or how I should use Facebook?).

Sometimes we're not sure if what the Bible *does* say was a culturally specific command or a universal principle for all time (this has been a big one throughout the history of how the church has wrestled with the role of women).

And to top it all off, we are all imperfect knowers—we don't see things clearly, and what we do see is tainted by our own self interest, fear, and insecurities.

Given this big picture, it seems to me that the church will **always** be characterized by a plurality of ideas and understandings.

## **2. Life with God is a dynamic, not a static reality**

The church in Rome was wrestling with how to work out what the work of Jesus meant **in their context**.

How did it relate to what they had previously understood about God and religious practice? Did it add to it? Did it cancel some obligations? Did it open certain doors that had previously been closed?

**How were they to fit this new thing God had done and was doing into their previous categories?**

What is clear was that figuring out how to understand and follow the God of Israel was an ongoing process that took place in the community of faith.

It wasn't always pretty and it wasn't always obvious what the right thing to do was.

But that's part of what it means to follow a *living* God whose story in and for the world is always unfolding.

The same is true for us. Christian formation always means asking the same question the believers in Rome were asking: **How are we to understand and apply what God has done and is doing in our reality?**

### **3. We Do Not Live to Ourselves (Romans 14:7)**

Given that Christian formation is about more than correct information and we do not and cannot know perfectly, and given that we are always in the process of learning and discovering the implications of following our living God in our context, Paul reminds us of the one non-negotiable that ought to guide our formation as Christians.

**We do not live to ourselves.**

**We ought always to put the needs of others ahead of our own.**

Paul puts it interestingly in 14:3-4 when he says that the very people that we might condemn (inwardly or outwardly) are the ones that God has accepted, and who God is able to make stand.

I want you to imagine the Christian with whom you most strongly disagree. Perhaps it is over some issue that you consider to be an absolutely crucial part of Christian belief or practice, and in your view they are completely out to lunch.

God is able to make them stand.

Your judgment is not necessary.

Eugene Peterson puts it this way in his translation of this passage in *The Message*:

For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume he should only be a vegetarian and eat accordingly. But since both are guests at Christ's table, wouldn't it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other ate or didn't eat? God, after all, invited them both to the table. Do you have any business crossing

people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help.

Paul is clear that we will all have to give an account of ourselves to God (14:12).

But we are not the measure of orthodoxy, God is.

### **God is our judge, not one another.**

Whatever we might think about someone's understanding of faith, we have a duty as Jesus' followers to love them and treat them with respect and dignity as an image-bearer of God, dearly loved—a fellow person for whom Christ died.

In other words, it really is all about love.

Romans 13 says this:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

### **I am convinced that this is a crucial part of what it means to be formed as a follower of Jesus.**

And I am equally convinced that a church that knows and shows how to treat people who think differently, who loves and listens even during disagreement, will be a desperately necessary model in a culture where we increasingly shout at or past each other.

Christians have been disagreeing about things for a *long* time. This isn't going to change. But what *can* change, and what *must* change, and what is changing (thanks be to God!) is how Christians treat those with whom they disagree.

Information is important, belief is important, but as Paul reminds us elsewhere in another letter to another church (1 Cor 13), without love, knowledge (and faith, service to the poor, self-discipline, etc) is **worthless**.

This is what all of our education, all of our fellowship groups, all of our service opportunities ought to be geared towards: **making us a people who love well, in imitation of and obedience to Christ.**

Kids, if our instruction during this year of Sunday School and other activities leads to you knowing all kinds of cool facts about the Bible, or being able refute the arguments of friends who do not share your convictions, but doesn't lead to you being more committed to LOVING like this, then we will have failed you.

Adults, if we learn a lot of information about the Bible, or if a book we study in SS revolutionizes our faith (or causes us to ask some questions), or if a service project fulfills us in amazing ways, or if a fellowship group meets our needs for acceptance and friendship, but we look down and pass judgment on those who don't think or believe like us—in this church or other churches—we will have missed the most important part of Christian formation.

**We do not live to ourselves.**

May all that we do in the year ahead be guided by love.

May the debt to continually love and accept one another as we have been loved and accepted by God be our true north, as Christ is formed in us in the days ahead.

Amen.