

Fully convinced in their own minds

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My roommate in seminary was and still is a vegetarian. I grew up eating, and still occasionally enjoy, Spam. Our understanding of food could not have been any more different, and those first few months of negotiating our shared kitchen posed some challenges.

We both agreed, however, that we loved to eat. And once we found some common ground—namely ice cream and Thai food—we got along famously. She continues to be one of my closest friends and colleagues in ministry.

The food issues Paul brings up in his letter to the Romans were not so easily solved. They created deep rifts and divisions in the early church. The decision to eat or abstain from certain foods pointed to deeper understandings of the faith, and both sides believed they were right.

Oftentimes when we encounter two differing viewpoints, we research, debate, and discuss the merits of each. Then, either as a church or as individuals, we choose one side over the other.

Paul, however, does not discuss why one side is right and the other is wrong. He doesn't weigh the merits. Instead, he instructs the church to stop judging and despising one another. And he lifts up two central tenets of the faith that should guide their life together: that in life and in death we belong to God, and that God has welcomed even those with whom we disagree.

The church should be a place where those with differing opinions are welcomed and encouraged to live out their faith. The church should be a place where dialogue and

discussion lead to respect and mutual forbearance.

Too often, the church instead becomes a haven for the like-minded. Paul affirms that even those who we believe are wrong can be “fully convinced in their own minds,” and that when they stand before God they will be upheld. This is similar to Anne Lamott's observation: “You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

There is room for difference and diversity in God's church. We just have to be willing to make space for it.