

HOW CAN WE BE UNITED WHEN WE DISAGREE #1?

Romans 14:1-12

During college I had the privilege to lead international tours with Continental Singers and Orchestra. 40 young people ages 16 to 26 from all over the United States and from just about every denomination imaginable. We had Mennonites, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Assemblies of God, Pentecostals and lots of Southern Baptists.

One tour included a week of concerts in Holland. I'll never forget that first concert in Holland. The church was packed and the congregation was really getting into it. Our program included an intermission during which we went back to our changing rooms and changed outfits. When we came out to the foyer for the second half, I couldn't believe my eyes. The foyer was blue with cigarette smoke and people everywhere were either drinking a beer or sipping a glass of wine. What I thought was an information counter was actually a bar!

Some of my Southern Baptist kids thought they were in the bowels of hell.

Needless to say, devout Christians sometimes have very different convictions.

Conflicting convictions threatened the unity of the church in Rome to whom the Apostle Paul wrote the letter of Romans. Romans 14:1–15:13 is Paul's plea for mutual acceptance and unity. Before reading the passage, let's consider the historical situation.

THE "WEAK" AND THE "STRONG"

In this passage the Apostle Paul will refer to two groups in the church at Rome: those who are "weak in the faith" (14:1) and those who are "strong" (15:1). These two groups had contrary convictions concerning food, wine and holy days. The "strong" ate all kinds of food while the "weak" ate only vegetables. The "strong" treated all days alike while the "weak" observed certain religious days. The "strong" drank wine while the "weak" did not.

The church in Rome included both Jews and Gentiles. The "weak" were primarily Jewish Christians who believed they were still bound to obey certain requirements of the Mosaic law. This group may also have included Gentiles who had come under the influence of these Jewish Christians. The Apostle Paul's instruction to welcome the "weak" (14:1) indicates they were in the minority and that they were not teaching justification by works of the Law. Rather, eating kosher and keeping Sabbath was related to sanctification; to being a faithful servant of Jesus. In actuality, the Law of Moses did not prohibit eating meat and drinking wine. But conscientious Jews would abstain from eating meat if they couldn't verify it was prepared in a "kosher" manner. Similarly, conscientious Jews would sometimes refuse to drink wine concerned that it had been first offered to pagan gods. The Mosaic Law did stipulate many religious days such as the weekly Sabbath and the Feasts of the Lord which the "weak" believed were necessary to observe in order to honor the Lord.

So the "weak" were primarily Jewish Christians who believed they were still bound to obey certain requirements of the Law of Moses in order to serve the Lord and honor Him.

The "strong" on the other hand correctly understood that the Law of Moses was no longer operative. They correctly believed they were not bound to eat kosher or keep the Sabbath. This group was probably composed mainly of Gentile Christians, along with some more "liberated" Jewish Christians, such as Paul himself (15:1). The "strong" correctly believed that the coming of Jesus had brought an end to the ritual requirements of the Mosaic law; and, like many such "enlightened" majorities, they tended to "despise" and look down on the "weak" (14:3). But the criticism went both ways (14:3); the "weak" likely criticized the "strong" for their lack of spiritual commitment.

THE ISSUE: VIOLATION OF A FELLOW BELIEVER'S CONSCIENCE

It is important to understand this issue correctly. The convictions of the "weak" were not in the category of personal opinion or personal preference. The convictions of the "weak" were in the category of their

conscience; their beliefs about right and wrong. For them, to eat meat or drink wine or fail to keep Sabbath was to dishonor God and to sin against God. To do these things was to “fall” and to fail as a servant of Christ.

Paul will instruct the “strong” to welcome and not reject the “weak”. In addition, Paul will strongly instruct the “strong” to limit their liberty and do nothing that will cause their weaker brothers and sisters to stumble. Here is where we often misunderstand this passage and 1 Corinthians 8-10 that deals with meat sacrificed to idols. The weaker brother “stumbles” when he violates his convictions and eats meat, drinks wine or fails to keep Sabbath. To “cause a brother or sister to stumble” is to influence them to violate their convictions and sin against God.

A contemporary example is alcohol. A careful study of Scripture reveals we are free to drink alcohol but we are not to get drunk. Some Christians, however, are convinced that drinking alcohol is a sin. If they drink alcohol they believe they are sinning against God.

Let’s play this out.

I understand I’m free to drink alcohol. I’m having lunch with a Christian brother who is a recovering alcoholic. He, too, understands his Scriptural freedom to drink alcohol, but he is fighting to get free from the addiction. If I have a beer at lunch and as a result he rationalizes ordering a beer, have I caused him to stumble as described in Romans 14? No. I have not influenced him to violate his conscience and sin against God. But have I acted in a loving and supportive way knowing his fight against alcoholism? Certainly not. The loving thing to do would be to limit my liberty out of sensitivity and support and forego the beer.

If I’m having lunch with friends and drinking a beer and a church member happens by and is upset to see me drinking a beer, have I caused that brother or sister to “stumble” as described in Romans 14? No. They may be displeased because they disapprove of drinking alcohol, but unless they are directly influenced by my example to drink alcohol, violate their conscience and sin against God, then I have not caused them to stumble.

Let’s say we go to lunch with a group and I know you believe drinking alcohol is sin. At lunch all of us order beers and I order a beer for you. When it arrives I chide you for being “legalistic” and encourage you to drink up. Others in the group join in pressuring you and finally you give in. Have I caused you to “stumble” as described in Romans 14? Absolutely. I have influenced you to violate your convictions and sin against God.

Another contemporary example is the Sabbath. Many Christians believe Sunday is the Sabbath and that Sundays should be reserved for going to church and resting at home. There are a number of problems with this belief not the least of which the biblical Sabbath is from the moment three stars can be seen on Friday evening until the moment three stars can be seen on Saturday evening. The second problem is that according to the Law of Moses, the Sabbath was a day of rest, not corporate worship. Sunday is actually the first day of the week. We are no longer under the Law of Moses. We are not obligated to keep the Sabbath, but we’re free to keep it if we desire. But we are not sinning if we don’t keep the Sabbath. Nevertheless, there are many Christians who are convinced that missing church on Sunday is a sin and going to a restaurant or grocery store on a Sunday and making other people work is a sin and working one’s self on a Sunday is a sin.

Christians have some very different convictions. How do we pursue peace and unity if contrary convictions exist in our church family?

Romans 14:1-12 teaches us that both the “strong”¹ and the “weak”² Christians need to stop condemning each other because it is the Lord, and He alone, who has the right to evaluate and approve a believer’s service.

¹ Christians walking in biblical liberty.

² Christians bound to non-mandated requirements.

STOP CONDEMNING EACH OTHER (14:1-12)

Romans 14:1-12 (ESV)

1 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. **2** One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. **3** Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. **4** Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

To “stand” means to be approved by God as a faithful servant. It means to be in good “standing” with God. Verse four teaches that both the “weak” and the “strong” are approved by God as faithful servants. The “weak” Christians eat kosher and observe Sabbath because they sincerely believe these are means by which to faithfully serve and honor God.

It is inappropriate for us to condemn our brother or sister with whom we disagree on issues like alcohol or the Sabbath knowing that only God has the right to judge and that He accepts and approves believers of both convictions who are sincerely seeking to serve and honor Him by their convictions.

5 One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

This is fascinating. We would expect the Apostle Paul (who sides with the “strong”) to correct the error of the “weak”. Instead, he encourages members of both parties to be “fully convinced” in their own minds. Having no convictions is not the solution to disagreements in the church family. Rather, God encourages us to carefully study out an issue like Sabbath keeping and define our convictions. As we will see, God honors those convictions and encourages us to live out those convictions even if they are not quite on the mark.

Similar to verse 4, verses 6-9 make the point that we must not condemn those with whom we disagree because we all are seeking to honor the Lord and to live our lives for Christ. It is not as if those who eat kosher are arguing that stealing is acceptable. They sincerely believe, based on the Law of Moses, that keeping a kosher kitchen honors God – and God appreciates that! Therefore, we must not condemn those whom God approves!

6 The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. **7** For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. **8** For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. **9** For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Finally, we must not condemn those with whom we disagree because its not our place. Jesus will straighten out our differences at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; **11** for it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall confess to God.”

12 So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Rather than condemning our brother we should be loving our brother. At the Judgment Seat of Christ love will be the issue, not our freedom to drink alcohol or eat meat. Jesus will ask us, “Did you love your sister even though you disagreed?”

In closing, this passage teaches us to adjust our expectations and accept the fact that we might disagree with each other in the church family. Rather than be upset we have contrary convictions, we need to commit ourselves to the principles given in Romans 14 & 15 so that we might pursue peace and unity.

Thus far we've learned that both the "strong"³ and the "weak"⁴ Christians must not condemn each other because it is the Lord, and He alone, who has the right to evaluate and approve a believer's service.

³ Christians walking in biblical liberty.

⁴ Christians bound to non-mandated requirements.