

HOW CAN WE BE UNITED WHEN WE DISAGREE #2?

Romans 14:13-15:7

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.

CONFLICTING CONVICTIONS

Conflicting convictions threatened the unity of the church family in Rome. A group identified as the “weak in faith” believed they were still obligated to eat kosher and keep Sabbath. These were most likely Jewish Christians, raised as devout Jews under the Law of Moses. They did not believe eating kosher and keeping Sabbath were necessary for justification; in other words, they were not teaching a righteousness by the works of the Law (9:30-33). But they did believe eating kosher and keeping Sabbath were means by which they honored and served God. They were “weak in faith” in the sense they didn't believe Jesus had set them free from these requirements of the Mosaic Law. For the “weak” to eat meat, drink wine or fail to keep Sabbath was to sin against God.

The opposing group identified as the “strong” (presumably the “strong in faith”) were primarily Gentile believers who rightly understood Jesus death and resurrection brought the Law of Moses to an end. The “strong” understood the Mosaic Covenant has been replaced by the New Covenant. Christians are no longer obligated to keep many of the 613 commands of the Mosaic Law. We are no longer required to eat kosher or to keep Sabbath. We have liberty to eat all kinds of foods, drink wine and worship on days of our choosing.

The “weak” were not walking in the liberty they possessed in Christ, but retained restrictions no longer required. The Apostle Paul assumes they are doing so from honest hearts desiring to serve and honor God.

The “strong” were walking in the liberty they possessed in Christ. As with the “weak”, the Apostle Paul assumes the “strong” are exercising their liberties from honest hearts desiring to serve and honor God.

It is not difficult to understand the conflict this produced in the church family. The “strong” looked down on the “weak” as legalistic; the “weak” criticized the “strong” as worldly.

In Romans 14:1-12 Paul tells both groups to stop condemning one another. Neither side has the right to judge. God is Master. God is Judge. Both parties are seeking to honor and serve God; both groups are in good standing with God. Stop rejecting those whom God accepts.

In verses 10-13, Paul gives them another reason they need to stop condemning one another – the Judgment Seat of Christ. Each believer will give an account for their own life, not the lives of others. The main concern of the Judgment Seat of Christ will not be meat and wine, but love. They need to stop judging and learn to love one another.

The Apostle Paul continues in Romans 14:13-15:7 to guide the Roman church through this volatile situation. In 14:13-23 he tells the “strong” that the loving thing for them to do is to limit their liberties for the sake of their “weaker” brothers and sisters.

LIMIT YOUR LIBERTY FOR LOVE OF YOUR “WEAKER” BROTHER(14:13-23)

Forego Your Freedoms In The Presence Of Your “Weaker” Brother (14:13-19)

The first way we limit our liberty out of love is to forego our freedoms in the presence of our “weaker” brother.

Romans 14:13–19 (ESV)

13 Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. 14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. 15 For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. 16 So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. 19 So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

If we were members of Grace Community Church of Rome, 57AD, out of love for our “weaker” brothers and sisters we would limit what we eat and drink in their presence and we would be thoughtful as to when we invited them to socialize. If we invited our “weaker” brother and sister for dinner, we would serve Vegan Lasagna, not marinated pork chops. We would serve iced tea, not Zinfandel. We would invite them Sunday evening, not Friday or Saturday.

In our contemporary context using alcohol as an example. If I’m enjoying lunch with a Christian brother who considers alcohol sin, then out of love for him I will forego my freedom in Christ to drink a beer and I’ll order an ice tea.

Notice in verse 14 Paul shares his conviction – that all foods are clean. But, he says, for the person who thinks certain foods are unclean, those foods are unclean. In my understanding of what Paul is saying, God acknowledges and holds the person to their conviction about eating kosher. If they are fully convinced in their own mind they must kosher (14:5), then God honors their conviction and holds them to it. If they eat non-kosher, they, in fact, sin against God.

We don’t want to influence or cause a brother or sister to sin against God. To cause a brother to stumble is to influence them to violate their convictions and sin against God. Even though our conviction is correct – we are free to eat all foods – it is wrong to exercise our freedom to the spiritual harm of our Christian brother or sister. If we do, what we regard as good – our freedoms in Christ – will be spoken of as evil because through our freedom we harmed a fellow Christian. If we’re mature, we understand the priority in God’s Kingdom is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The priority in God’s Kingdom is not to selfishly exert our freedoms, but to selflessly love one another.

Out of love for our Christian brother and sister, we gladly limit our freedoms in their presence. Out of love for our “weaker” brothers and sisters verses 20-23 direct us to not make the “issue” an issue.

Don’t Make The “Issue” An Issue (14:20-23)

Once we discover we have different convictions about drinking alcohol, for example; don’t make the issue of drinking alcohol an issue by constantly talking about it. After you’ve had the discussion and discovered you disagree, drop it. Don’t bring it up anymore.

Romans 14:20–23 (ESV)

20 Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. 21 It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. 22 The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. 23 But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

The “strong” should not only be strong in their faith and freedoms, but more importantly they should strong in love. It is wrong to influence a fellow believer to violate their convictions even if their convictions are more restrictive than they need to be.

Once we discover we disagree on what freedoms we have in Christ, we need to keep it to ourselves and God. We should limit the discussion of our disagreement in this area of our freedoms. It should not become the mission of the “strong” to persuade the “weak” they are wrong. In fact, according to verse 23, if we were in the presence of a “weak” brother who was beginning to doubt his convictions about eating kosher, but wasn’t completely convinced of his freedom, we should encourage him *not to eat* until he is fully convinced in his own mind (14:5).

This section teaches us that out of love for our “weaker” brothers and sisters we are to limit our liberties. We forego our freedoms in the presence of our “weaker” brother and we limit our discussion of our disagreement so as not to make it an issue that divides us. Rather, we look for ways to encourage and build each other up in the Lord.

These kinds of conflicts can wear on a church family especially if, because of a steady influx of Jewish converts, the issue comes up over and over again. I rather wonder if that is the reason the Apostle Paul encourages particularly the “strong” to endure in their care of the “weak”.

KEEP FOLLOWING CHRIST’S EXAMPLE (15:1-7)

Romans 15:1-7 (ESV)

1 We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” 4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

In verse one, the “failings of the weak” does not refer to moral failings. The term is referring to the restrictions of eating kosher and keeping Sabbath resulting from their weak faith. Eating kosher and keeping Sabbath represent the ways the weak fail to embrace the liberty that is truly theirs in Christ.

That being the case, Paul calls us to build up our “weaker” brother rather than selfishly please ourselves. We are to mimic the example of our Lord Who did not please Himself, but suffered for the Father and did what was best for us.

Notice the emphasis on endurance in verses 4 & 5. The challenge of contrary convictions is ongoing in the church. We need to endure in loving one another by limiting our liberties. We need to endure in our commitment to be at peace with each other and united in our service for Jesus.

Instead of condemning those with contrary convictions, we are to accept one another and treat each other with kindness as Christ has accepted us and treats us with kindness.