

The Gospel According to Paul: Romans

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The Role of Liberty in Matters of Opinion (14:1-15:13)

Here we come to the last segment of this apostolic counsel section of material. Paul has addressed himself at length to the issue of relationships, speaking in broad terms. Here in this material he moves to specifics. One becomes convinced that Paul has some specific knowledge of controversies going on within the church of Rome. Because Paul mentions the issues of abstinence from certain foods and the observance of certain days, it is assumed that the controversy concerns a debate over Jewish dietary law and the keeping of the Sabbath. Both were problems to Jews converted to Christianity in the first century; and they became major areas of conflict between Paul and the Judaizers of Jerusalem, as is reflected in the letter to the Galatians.

The issue Paul addresses here, however, does not develop out this way. The first issue is a matter of vegetarianism verses the eating of meat. This would not indicate a Jewish problem, unless the meat was pork and nothing in the text implies this. Observing special days may be a controversy over observing the Jewish Sabbath, but this is not clear from the text. Defining the problem is not as easy a matter as appears at first sight.

Paul's major concern is not theological error; rather, it is attitudes and the behavior resulting from those attitudes. The issue Paul addresses is not that of food and days, but determining the authority by which they resolve any issue which may be considered a matter of faith or practice and how one should behave toward those with whom he disagrees in matters of faith?

1. The Authority in Matters of Faith (14:1-12)

Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes (dialogismos – debating) over doubtful things (diakrineis – matters of difference).² For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables.³ Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.⁴ Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.⁵ One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.⁶ He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself.⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.⁹ For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.¹⁰ But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.¹¹ For it is written: "As I live, says the LORD, Every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall confess to God." (Isaiah 45:23)¹² So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.

The Disputants

This text develops as follows. First, there are two categories of disputants: the weak and the strong. The Greek word for weak is *asthenes* (14:1) meaning to be inefficient or deficient. In this context the weak would be those not adequately informed in matters of faith or those not matured through their experiences as believers. The word for strong (15:1) is *dunatos* meaning to have power, ability, or capability. This is not the usual Greek term for strong; rather, this word has to do with functional ability; i.e., being adequate to the task, developed. Both “weak” and “strong” are to be understood in relation to faith (i.e., strong faith verses weak faith [14:1]). Strong (*dunatos*) faith is faith which is more fully developed; it is well informed and consequently has more substance or content. One weak (*asthenes*) in faith is one whose faith is not very well informed nor very well developed; consequently it is deficient in content and inefficient in

informing one in matters of faith.

Secondly, Paul identifies the disputants as those who believe they may eat all types of food, and those who will only eat vegetables. Those who believe that they may eat all things could be Gentile Christians who see no reason to abstain from eating certain foods. Those who eat only vegetables could be Jewish or Gentile Christians who refuse to eat meat on the basis of conscious. These could be Jewish Christians who refuse to eat pork, certain seafoods, or reptiles, or meat offered to idols. However, they could also be Gentile Christians who abstain from eating meats because the meat comes from animals sacrificed to Pagan idols, or because they are strict vegetarians for health reasons, which would make eating meat a matter of conscious to them.

There is also a group (possibly the same) who esteems certain days and celebrates or observes them as special or holy days. This could be Jewish Christians who have continued to observe the Sabbath day and the Jewish feast days as holy days. Then again, they could also be Gentile Christians who insist on observing certain days associated with traditions of their past.

The Matters of Difference

Here in 14:1-2 the weak Christian is defined as the one believing that it is wrong to eat meat. Paul addresses this same issue in 1 Cor 8, where the controversy concerned eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol of a Pagan deity. Paul's line of reasoning there is very helpful in understanding his reasoning here. In 1 Cor 8, Paul argues that there is nothing wrong in eating meat offered to idols if one is knowledgeable of the fact that an idol is nothing and cannot influence the life of the one eating meat sacrificed to it. But, Paul reasons, not all have this knowledge (1 Cor 8:7) and, consequently, they believe that eating such meat would give the god/goddess to whom the meat was sacrificed power over them or would in some way defile them.

The key word here in 1 Cor 8 is "knowledge," and Paul calls those whose faith is not well informed on this issue "weak" (i.e. *asthenes*, cf. 8:7, 9, 10, 11, 12), the same Greek word found in Rom 14. The weak faith here then is faith (or "a belief") that is not well informed and this ill-informed belief is determining this persons behavior.

This is the same problem Paul addresses here in Rom 14. Certain Christians held beliefs concerning meat that were not well informed, as was the case in 1 Cor 8. Those of the Roman church who refused to eat meat ate only vegetables (*lachana* - garden herbs, cf. 14:2). There were certain Jewish sects of the first century period who were vegetarian (e.g., the Essenes), but such abstinence was not the norm for a Jew.

In addition to the issue of meat is the issue of special days (14:5-7). Many scholars are of the opinion that since this controversy appears to be between Jews and Gentiles, the special days are most likely Jewish Holy Days (e.g., the Sabbath and special Jewish feast days). It is also possible that certain Gentile believers were participating in festivals associated with their Greco-Roman background. If the observance of these special days did not involve the recognition of Pagan deities, Paul may have seen little harm in them. If, however, the special days were observed in honor of false gods and goddesses, Paul could not have viewed observing them as acceptable or harmless. He says in 14:6, "he who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord." From this statement it would be impossible for Paul to sanction Christian participation in a holy day observed in honor of a false deity. To a Jew who received rabbinic training at the feet of Gamaliel, this would be nothing short of idolatry.

The Problem

It appears that those who saw nothing wrong with eating meats were treating those who did with contempt; and those who believed it was wrong to eat meat were condemning those who did not share their belief (14:3). In 14:4, Paul says that the behavior of both groups was unacceptable in that both were attempting to lord their views or beliefs over the other. The Greek text here says, "You, who are you, the one judging (*ho krinon*, present, active, participle – the one judging or condemning) another's servant?" The pronoun is in the emphatic position and is repeated in the verb, which, grammatically speaking, means he is speaking emphatically - "Who do **you** think **you** are?" In 14:10, we see the same emphatic construction, "And **you**, why do **you** judge your brother?"

Every member of the Roman church was a servant to Christ. It was Christ who was "Lord of the community" and every member, without exception, was servant to, and only to, "him." For anyone in the congregation to be lording his beliefs over the others was, essentially, a

usurpation of the lordship of Christ. The only authoritative figures in the church are the elders of the church and even they are instructed not to "lord it over" (*kurieuo* - to exercise lordship) those entrusted to them (1 Peter 5:3).

The Issue of Lordship

This is a very critical point. In 14:4, Paul says that every member of the church, "to his own Lord stands or falls." He is under the authority of his Lord, not his brethren or anyone who may assert himself or his view to a lordship status. If brethren differ in their beliefs so as to make it impossible for them to have fellowship (*koinonia* – to have in common) in their beliefs, they may have to form different communities of faith for expedient or practical reasons, but they are not to resort to condemnation (*krisis*) of those with whom they differ. Jesus says in John 5:22, "all judgment (*krisis*) is given to the Son, that all may honor the Son" (i.e., esteem him as Lord). In 14:8, Paul says that in both life and death we are the Lord's (cf. Col 3:17). Then in 14:9, he argues that Christ died and arose again that he might reign as Lord (*kurieuo* - to exercise lordship) of both the living and the dead. Because he is our Lord, Paul reasons, we must stand before his judgment seat not the judgment seat of one another.

An immediate question here is: how does Paul justify his role as judge and corrector of the brethren in such matters as he is addressing here. Is he not doing exactly what he is forbidding them to do? The answer lies in Paul's role as an apostle of Christ. In the Greek language an *apostolos* is one who stands in the stead of another - one who acts in the name of another and is invested with the authority of that name. Those of the church of Rome were not apostles of Christ, they were all servants of Christ. None were lords in the community of believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, they were all one "in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28; Eph 2:14-22).

Other than the apostles of Christ, the only persons invested with authority in the early church were those called the *presbuteroi* (elders) or, as they are called in some places, the *episkopoi* (guardians or overseers) or *hoi poimenes* (shepherds), who function as a plurality and whose authority extends only to the congregation in which they serve as elders. The authority they are to exercise is only in matters of expediency; i.e., decisions concerning the most advantageous means of "expediting" or fulfilling the teachings of Jesus). They are not authors of doctrine; rather, they are the

older ones (*presbuteroi* - elders) of the community whose faith is strong in content and experience and have taken on the responsibility of shepherding the flock of Christ. Their responsibility is to the lordship of Christ and to see that the lordship of Christ is faithfully acknowledged and followed by the flock. They have no authority to establish their own authority except in matters of earthly expediency with reference to the function of the local community of believers of which they are a part (cf. Acts 20:17-31, esp., vv 28-30; also 1 Peter 5:14). No earthly figure stands in the stead of Christ since the death of the apostles of Christ of first century AD.

If an individual is engaging in activity that is harmful to the flock, they are to remove him/her from such opportunities as would allow them to do harm to the flock over which that eldership has authority (Rom 16:17-18; Acts 20:28-31; Titus 3:9-10). Acting to secure the well-being of their flock is their responsibility, not condemnation of the brother. The teacher must give an account of himself to the Lord not the elders, not the community of believers, or to the brethren at large (Rom 14:10-12; 2 Cor 5:9-10).

Conclusion

The problem Paul addresses here is not that of eating meat and observing certain days; rather, it was showing ill-will toward those who did not believe and practice the faith the same as others. This text is conspicuously absent of a discussion of meats and days, but there is a great deal of discussion of the issue of lordship. A re-reading of his text with a focus on this issue will readily evidence the issue Paul is addressing.

Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. ²*For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables.* ³*Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat **judge him who eats**; for God has received him.* ⁴***Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.*** ⁵*One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.* ⁶*He who observes the day, **observes it to the Lord**; and he who does not observe the day, **to the Lord he does not observe it**. He who eats, **eats to the Lord**, for he **gives God thanks**; and he who does not eat, **to the Lord he does not eat**, and **gives God thanks**.* ⁷*For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself.* ⁸*For if we live,*

*we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.*⁹*For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*¹⁰*But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.*¹¹*For it is written: "As I live, says the LORD, Every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall confess to God."*(Isaiah 45:23)¹²*So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.*

As to the question of the standard of right and wrong behavior in matters of faith and opinion, the answer lies in Paul's Christology. The key word in this whole discussion is "Lord," which is Paul's point of emphasis throughout 14:1-12.

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