

The Gospel According to Paul: Romans

Maurice W. Lusk, III

Concerning Those Who Are Strong and Those Who Are Weak (15:1-4)

We then who are strong ought to bear with the weakness of the ones not strong, and not to please ourselves. ²Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. ³For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me," (Psalms 69:9) ⁴For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

The problem with the faith of the weak disciples of the church of Rome, as well as the church at Corinth, was that their beliefs were not well informed. Everyone has beliefs and disbeliefs that conflict with others. The difference between strong faith and weak faith is that strong beliefs are those that accomplish the greatest amount of good in our lives. Poorly or ill-informed beliefs never affect great good in our lives and, most usually, they cause more harm than good. This was the case here in the church at Rome.

Paul's advice was not that the believers with a better-informed faith should simply win out over those with whom they differed (i.e., those of the weaker or lesser developed faith). Rather, his instruction was that the believer with the greater development of faith should behave with the maturity befitting strong faith and not seek to have things his way.

Here Paul says that eating meat or not eating meat, keeping a day or not keeping a day, is not right or wrong in and of itself. Paul's greatest concern here has to do with what the controversy does to the relationship of the persons involved in the conflict.

The Meaning of “Weak” and “Strong”

Looking carefully at 15:1, we see a curious move being made on the part of Paul. He says, "**we the strong** (*dunatos* – those having ability, capability) **ought** (*opheilo* – moral oughtness) **to bear** (*bastazo* – to lift, to raise, to carry, to endure, to bear with, tolerate) **the weakness** (*asthenos*, [*a* + *sthenos*]- without strength) **of the ones not strong** (*ton adunaton* – not having the ability or *capability*); **and not ourselves to please** (*aresko* – to please or find acceptable). **15:2, each one of us his neighbor** (*plesion* – from the Classical *pelas*, neigh at hand, near or close by) **let him please** (*areskeio*, find acceptable), **for good toward edification** (*pros oikodomen* – *building up through instruction*)."

The admonition here is given to those who consider themselves *dunatos*, i.e., those able or capable of accepting the attitudes of those with whom they differ. If it is not a matter of faith (i.e., something one must do to be pleasing to Christ), then don't force the issue with others and don't force it on others.

But the admonition doesn't end here; in 15:2 Paul says, "**each one of us, his neighbor** (those neigh at hand, near or close by- those of our fellowship) **let him accept** (*areskeio*, find acceptable), **for the good of edification** (*pros oikodomen* – building up through instruction).

What is meant by “for the good of edification?” Edification (*oikodomen*) occurs when one is built up through instruction. How does this happen? The key is found in 15:1, ". . . and not to please ourselves." Then in verse 3, Paul cites Christ as the absolute paradigm of a completely unselfish existence and strongly encouraged his readers to follow that paradigm. Paul is saying, put your unacceptable attitudes away and talk to one another. Study the issue as if you were in conversation with Jesus. Talk to your brother or sister the way you would talk to him. If you can't do that, ask God to help you to understand why, and to help you change whatever is broken within yourself that prevents you from being at peace with a brother who thinks differently than you do. Then, in verse 4, he says,

“For whatsoever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.” The study of Scripture will bring the answers, once the attitudes are under the control of the Spirit of Christ.

4. A Plea For Unity to the Gentile and the Jewish Segments of the Church at Rome 15:5-13)

Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus,⁶ that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Glorify God Together⁷ Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.⁸ Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers,⁹ and that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: "For this reason I will confess to you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." (2 Samuel 22:50; Psalm 18:49) ¹⁰And again he says: "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people!" (Deut 32:43) ¹¹And again: "Praise the LORD, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!" (Psalm 117:1) ¹²And again, Isaiah says, "There shall be a root of Jesse; And he who shall rise to reign over the Gentiles, in him the Gentiles shall hope." (Isaiah 11:10) ¹³Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul's plea for these brethren is that God would give them the same mind (*phroneo*). In Rom 12:3-8 says, "Do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought." "Think" is from the Greek word *phroneo*, which means, "to think, consider, take thought." The expression, "think more highly" is the Greek word *hyper-phroneo* and literally means, "high thinking, to have high thoughts, or to be high-minded." As used here it means to have an overly high opinion of oneself.

The rabbinic scholars Hillel and Shammai exemplified for Paul the dangers of "thinking more highly of oneself than one ought." They both loved the *Torah*, but could not love one another because of their differences in interpretation of the *Torah*. In Paul's thinking, a change of thinking (*phroneo*) must occur before unity could be possible. The Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians were at enmity with one another because of a

difference in thinking. It was not a racial issue between Jews and Gentiles, it was as a theological issue.

The issue of the relationship of Judaism to Christianity was a most difficult problem for the early church. Does one first become a Jew before he becomes a Christian? If a Jew becomes a Christian, does he cease the practice all his Jewish tradition? In Acts 21:17-26 we see Paul engaging in certain Jewish practices without considering himself disloyal to his Christian beliefs. From the book of Acts we learn that the earliest Jewish Christians continued their relationship to the synagogue after their conversions, a practice which lasted for many years, even into the second century.

At the heart of Paul's theology lies the doctrine of reconciliation (i.e., the restoration of the broken relationship between God and man). That reconciliation is not only vertical (God to man) it is also horizontal (man to man). Christ's death and resurrection was not only to bring peace between God and man, it was also to bring peace between man and his fellowman (Luke 2:11-14).

This is what is so ironic about this situation between these Christians at Rome. Their attitudes toward one another marked the clear failure of their Christianity. This has been the sad story of Christianity down through the centuries, as it is also today. Brethren feeling ill-will toward one another because they do not think alike on a given issue is completely inconsistent with what Christianity is all about.

Our different "belief/disbelief systems" may keep us from being able to share the same fellowship or even engage in the same acts of worship together, but they need not cause us to have ill-will toward one another or to wish God's punishment on those with whom we differ. What kind of spirit do we possess when this kind of attitude is present in our midst? Or maybe we should ask whose spirit do we possess or whose spirit possesses us.

Conclusion

Paul's line of argumentation on this issue ends at 15:12. Verse 13 is, in effect, a plea or, perhaps, a short prayer for joy and peace in believing. His prayer for these brethren in Rome should ever be our prayer,

Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that

you may abound in hope, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

God grant that we may always be a people who know more of **joy and peace in believing** than the **ill-will and conflict resulting from our beliefs** that has so characterized so much of Christianity through the centuries. This was Jesus' prayer and Paul's prayer, may it be our prayer and may we pray it with all of our hearts.

MWLIII