

Disagreements are inevitable in the church, even over important matters. But they must not be allowed to divide us and they will not if we keep first things first.

“When Christians Disagree”

Romans 14:1-12

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Having completed his general description of the Christian life in what are our chapters 12 and 13, Paul now turns to a specific problem he knew was complicating life in the Roman church.

Text Comment

- v.1 By “weak in faith” Paul means, as we shall see, the one who has scruples he does not need to have. He is compelled to a certain obedience that the gospel does not, in fact, require of him. He trusts the Lord Jesus for his salvation, but he imagines that his faith requires him also to believe certain things and to observe certain practices that, in fact, the true faith of Christ does not require. Obviously “weak” Christians do not refer to themselves as “weak.” They imagine that they are strong. “Weak” is Paul’s judgment of their position. In terms of their doctrinal and ethical position, Paul obviously does not agree with them; they are, in fact, wrong. But, as Paul makes clear from the outset, that is beside the point. And Paul goes on immediately to say that the welcome to be extended to them by the strong is not to be feigned, as if the strong Christians were warmly inviting a brother into their fellowship only to disabuse him of his opinions. The particular issues seem very clearly to be those that divided Jewish practice from Gentile and we know from other evidence that many Jewish Christians thought it necessary to continue to observe Jewish practices, practices that Gentile Christians were not required to observe. It wouldn’t surprise me, knowing human nature, that even some Gentile converts began observing these Jewish practices, feeling that they ought to as loyal Christians. That’s what they would have been taught by some of these “weak” Jewish Christians.
- v.2 The one who ate only vegetables did so in order not to eat meat that may have been consecrated to pagan gods or that had not been slaughtered according to the ritual law. People whose consciences are particularly scrupulous often go the extra mile to be sure that they have not violated God’s will. If we shouldn’t eat certain meat, the safest program is to eat no meat at all.
- v.4 Whether a Christian is weak or strong, the Lord having welcomed him, the Lord will sustain him.
- v.5 As many of you will be aware, this verse is often cited to prove that Christians are no longer required to observe the Sabbath day. But that argument proves too much. The New Testament itself refers to the Lord’s Day – obviously, therefore, there is a day that is distinct from other days – and the NT also furnishes evidence that the church worshipped on Sunday, the first day of the week. It is not the case that there is no distinction of days in the New Testament. What is most likely, of course, given the fact that the dispute here

clearly has to do with the Church's change from a Jewish to a Gentile spiritual culture, is that some Jews continued to feel it necessary to observe the Sabbath on Saturday, the seventh day, as they had always done before, as well as celebrate the new Lord's Day on Sunday, just as they thought it necessary to continue to observe circumcision even as they observed baptism. We know this was a practice for some Jewish Christians well into the 2nd century: to observe both days. Others, of course, were happy to accommodate themselves to the change introduced by the Lord and his apostles and observed the Lord's Day – an OT name for the Sabbath, by the way – only on Sunday. In Colossians 2 we read that other Jewish feast days were also sometimes an issue, some insisting on observing them, others willing to let them go as belonging to a particularly Jewish spiritual culture that the church was no longer obliged to maintain.

- v.6 That is, the weak Christian who considers himself bound to these requirements is observing them for the best possible reason, because he feels that it honors the Lord. That holy intention should matter a great deal even to the Christian who doesn't consider himself bound to the same obligations.
- v.9 That is, no true Christian lives or dies to himself but always to please the Lord and it was to have such a people devoted to him that Christ saved his people from their sin.
- v.12 Paul sums up his argument so far: it is not our place to judge another brother or sister and we will have much less zeal to do so if we remember that we too must stand before God and give an account of our conduct toward one another. That such a statement should be found in Romans is clear enough evidence that there is no conflict between the doctrine of justification by faith and the judgment of our works on the last day. We are saved by grace but God will still reckon with the lives we live as his children and still make appropriate distinctions between us based on how faithfully we served him while in the world.

Paul addressed problems created by the change of epoch and of the form of ancient custom in the Church in a number of his letters. The transition from Jewish church to Gentile church caused many problems. Whether Gentiles had to be circumcised, even whether Jews any longer had to be, was one such question. The continuing validity of the seventh day Sabbath was another. The observing of dietary regulations still another. With both Jews and Gentiles in the Roman church, no wonder the problem surfaced there as well. The weak Christians in the Roman church – most of them Jews, of course – were not legalists. They did not imagine that their obedience put God in their debt or earned merit toward the Judgment Day. Had they thought *that* Paul would have given short shrift to their concerns, as he did, for example, in his letter to the Galatians. But these saints did feel that they could not, with a clear conscience, give up such ancient obligations as the distinction between clean and unclean food or the keeping of holy days, perhaps the Saturday Sabbath in particular. These observances had for ages been a precious part of their piety. They found it impossible to believe that they were no longer to live as their fathers had lived. They thought and they said that this obedience was an expression of their loyalty to Christ whom they trusted alone for their salvation. And so the makings of a church controversy were present: some Christians thinking one way about things, others another; some Christians insisting on practices

that others understood to be unnecessary; each looking down on the other for what they took to be a failure of faith. How many times has *this* happened in church history!

Believe me; you would be amazed to discover how many earnest, serious, thoughtful Christians have had scruples you would think unnecessary, even foolish. You will not remember the name Lydia Grenfell, but she was the young woman whom the great missionary Henry Martyn fell in love with – and she with him – before he left for India in the early 1800s. Lydia had been engaged before but when she discovered that the man was not all that she had thought him to be, she broke off the engagement. The problem was created by the fact that Lydia then felt it was necessary for her, as a Christian woman, to remain free from any other ties until this man married someone else. It was this scruple that kept her from marrying Henry Martyn and going to India with him, a loss that nearly broke both their hearts. And so utterly unnecessary. Where do we find such a requirement in Holy Scripture? But Lydia had a scrupulous conscience and felt she was honoring the Lord and doing what she ought to do and could not be persuaded otherwise. I know Christians who have remained unmarried after a divorce – even though they were the innocent party – because they felt that the Scripture required them to remain single for the rest of their lives. It was not the view of their church; most interpreters of the New Testament do not think it the view taught by Christ and his apostles; but *they* thought it was and they acted accordingly. What Paul saw happening in the Roman church has happened in many ways at many times.

It has certainly happened times without number in our own tradition. As you may remember, a small group of northern Presbyterians left the large denomination in 1936 to form a new church when some of their leaders were dismissed from the ministry of the Presbyterian Church for their unwillingness to acquiesce in their denomination's toleration of open unbelief in the church's ministry. It is an important point to remember: these men didn't leave, they were drummed out for doing nothing but standing up for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints, much as the apostles were drummed out of the Jewish church for the same reason and the Reformers out of the Catholic church for the same reason. Luther didn't *leave* the Catholic church; he was excommunicated! That fact is often forgotten. And that was what happened in the 1930s to some good and faithful men. That part of our history as conservative Presbyterians I don't think anyone loyal to Holy Scripture can say is in any way impeached by Paul's teaching here in Romans 14.

But a year later, in 1937, that small group divided again over a set of issues that Reformed Christians still argue about today: 1) whether it was proper for Christians to drink alcoholic beverages; 2) whether there is but one true way to defend the faith; and 3) whether Reformed Christians can be premillennialists. Even some of the men who were the agents of that division later admitted that they had done precisely what Paul forbids us to do in Romans 14. They allowed their disagreements between them, Christians all, to cause bitterness and eventually division. At the time, in 1937, Dr. J. Oliver Buswell, a wonderful man and a fine theologian, delivered a speech the oratorical climax of which was "I will not be a part of a wet church!" Years later I heard him ruefully explain the division of 1937 by saying simply, "After the death of Dr. Machen, the church fell into the hands of lesser men." He was speaking of himself. It *was* a disaster, in fact. The conservative Presbyterian movement was still national news in 1937, still the subject of articles in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. After that second split its

testimony for a fully biblical Protestant Christianity simply disappeared. We had proved ourselves, in the view of the press, not orthodox but simply cantankerous; precisely what the liberals had all along said we were.

What is particularly ironic about the dispute about the drinking of alcohol was that we – the teetotalers – argued our case from Romans 14. We argued that the weak Christian was the one who had or who might have problems with alcohol. So the strong Christian should abstain from drinking alcohol for fear that a weaker Christian might be persuaded to drink himself by observing the strong Christian doing so and then, in his weakness, be led into drunkenness and alcoholism. We used the same argument to argue that Christians should not go to movies. If we went to see *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* some weak Christian might see us going into the theater and think it was alright for him to see films that were salacious and undermined Christian morality.

But, of course, that is not Paul's point here. In fact it is precisely the reverse of Paul's point. The weak Christian is not the one who might be led into sin by the example of the strong Christian enjoying his freedom. The weak Christian is the one who thinks he shouldn't drink even though he has perfect freedom to drink, so long, of course, as he does so in moderation. The weak Christian is the one who thinks he is forbidden to do what he is free to do and the strong Christian is the one who knows he has the liberty to do as he pleases in regard to some particular practice. The strong Christian is the one who knows that, while there is no sin in worshipping God on both Saturday and Sunday, he isn't obliged to observe the Saturday Sabbath, nor is he obliged to eat only vegetables in order to ensure that he is not eating meat that was sacrificed to idols. In other words, *we* were the weak Christians in thinking we should not drink alcohol at all, but we imagined that we were the strong Christians. We got Paul here exactly wrong.

Now Paul is going to go on to say in the next paragraph that strong Christians are never to use their freedom to the detriment of a brother or sister, but, even there, he is going to argue that the weak Christian is precisely the one who is incorrect, who has scruples he does not need to have, and the strong Christian is the one who knows he has liberty to do things other Christians think he should not do. We never thought we had the freedom to drink alcohol. That was something we shouldn't do!

As a matter of fact, as Paul explains here and elsewhere, there was no remaining obligation, for Jews or Gentiles, to keep the Saturday Sabbath in addition to the Sunday Lord's Day, or to insist on circumcision in addition to baptism, or to maintain the dietary regulations of the Mosaic law. The Lord Jesus himself had taught that those regulations had served their purpose and were passing away and had taught Peter in a vision that it was perfectly proper for him to have his first ham on rye. The Jewish Christians, and perhaps some Gentile Christians, who thought it necessary to continue these practices were, in fact, incorrect. That is why Paul calls them "weak."

The practices Paul is speaking of here in Romans 14 are sometimes referred to as *adiaphora*, a Greek term meaning "things indifferent." That is, the practices are neither right nor wrong. It is a matter of indifference whether one observes them or not. But that is not right. Paul is clear here. One position is right, the other is wrong. This makes the passage much more important and much

more useful. For most of our disagreements with other Christians concern things we think, on the strength of the Scripture's teaching, are right or wrong. Paul is not saying here that there is not a right position and a wrong one. Quite the contrary; the strong are right and the weak are wrong.

But he is very definitely talking about positions that people not only felt deeply about but appealed to the Bible to support. These groups of people, as we know from other material in the New Testament, did not think they were arguing simply about tastes and customs. These were not men who would have said, "We agree, of course, as to the biblical teaching, we are disagreeing only with respect to our individual preferences in matters that the Bible does not specifically address." No, they felt strongly that biblical teaching was at stake. And in that some of them were right and some of them were wrong. Indeed, in 15:1 Paul will place himself among the strong and speak of the position of the weak Christians as their "failing."

And it was into *that* sort of situation that Paul spoke in Romans 14, the very sort of situation we face all the time, indeed whenever we disagree with other believers about matters of doctrine and behavior. And what makes Paul's argument so important and so bracing is that he does not say that Christians must learn to agree. He does not require that the weak correct their mistaken impression, though, of course, he hopes they will. His argument is of a different kind altogether and has three primary features.

- I. *First, Paul says, Christians disagree about important things. It is and will remain a fact of life in the church.*

It is the most striking and significant feature of this paragraph that Paul doesn't attempt to change anyone's mind about the issues in question. He seems to accept the reality of disagreement in the church. We wish it weren't so, but the fact of the matter is it is so and has been so from the beginning. We don't have as much evidence of this kind of disagreement in the Old Testament, but no doubt believers disagreed about many things in those days too. Such is our situation in this world, such is the effect of sin upon our thinking, such is our finitude and weakness.

Before too long such disagreements began to surface and to disturb the unity of the infant church. By the second century separate Christian sects began to appear who insisted upon this practice or that or this view or that of some biblical teaching. As the years passed new issues surfaced that divided Christians from one another. The early church had its Montanists and Novatians and Donatists in the same way we have our Presbyterians, Methodists, and Lutherans. It also had its Gnostics and Marcionists, in the same way we have had our Unitarians or liberals. All disputes, to be sure, are not between weak and strong Christians; some are between Christians and those who do not deserve the name of Christian at all. Paul makes that distinction clear by the very different tack he takes with the legalists in Galatia or the deniers of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians or those who forbid marriage in 1 Timothy.

It is humiliating that we Christians present so many different faces to the world. If indeed there is but one faith, one hope, and one baptism, why does it seem that Christians can't agree about anything! Surely we have given comfort to the enemy if such a one as Voltaire can make mockery of the disunity of the church.

“I know to be sure that the church is infallible; but is it the Greek Church, or the Latin Church, or the Church of England, or that of Denmark and of Sweden, or that of the proud city of Neuchatel, or that of the primitives called Quakers, or that of the Anabaptists, or that of the Moravians? The Turkish Church has its points, too, but they say that the Chinese Church is much more ancient.” [Cited in Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, 22]

I do not myself know how some of our divisions could possibly have been avoided. Calvin thought that there was no need to divide the Reformation Church between the Lutherans and the Reformed, even though there were striking differences of practice in regard to worship and some very significant differences in regard to theology. But the division occurred nonetheless and it is hard to imagine how it might have been avoided.

Calvin, supposedly the champion of all champions of predestination and sovereign grace, even provided a warm introduction to a later edition of Philip Melanchthon’s popular manual of theology, *Loci Communes*, when Melanchthon had long since abandoned Calvin’s doctrine of grace in exchange for something close to what we would call Arminianism today. Calvin wanted above all things to preserve the unity of the church. Unity was more important to him than agreement in every doctrine. But, alas, it was not to be, and the Reformation produced a vast array of different churches, not one united body of believers. On the other hand, I don’t think even Calvin ever imagined that the Reformation Church could contain the Anabaptists!

But, and here is the point, these differences were not over nothing. They were not about inconsequential matters. They often concerned doctrines we regard as fundamental, teaching that is particularly precious to us, and they often concerned practices of immense importance to the Christian faith and life; practices such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the government of the church. That is how the weak and the strong thought of their differences in the Roman church. These were important matters. They had to do with the history of salvation and the practice of the Christian life. They had to do with the teaching of the Word of God. The issues here were not petty and they concerned practices of piety that had been very precious to God’s people for ages. We are not talking about the color of the carpet here.

That is the first thing we take away from Paul in Romans 14. He manifestly does not say that the solution to the problem of differences of thought and behavior between Christians is to be found in Christians learning to agree about everything even about every important thing. Such would be the counsel of despair.

II. *Paul’s second point is that what Christians share is more important than their differences.*

What believers share, of course, is, as Paul puts it so beautifully here, is God’s *welcome*. Every Christian has been, by the grace of God, made a member of the family of God and the body of Christ. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have received him or her. That means that this person is loved of God, has been redeemed and justified in Jesus Christ, and renewed by the Holy Spirit. *That* fact puts our disagreements in an entirely different perspective.

I want you to notice how often the words *God* and *Lord* appear in vv. 3-12. [Cf. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 174] Some fourteen times! There is throughout this text a pervasive emphasis on how considering the Lord's will in all of this must profoundly change our viewpoint and our thinking about one another when we disagree. If the Lord has received a man or woman, who are we, of all people, to behave as if there is something unworthy about that man or that woman, as if he or she did not belong. If Christ says he belongs, *he belongs!*

And if God the Father and Jesus Christ have welcomed a man or woman who are we, of all people, to pass judgment on that person? The Lord knows those who are his. He will judge their lives. How much gall does a person need – a sinner saved by grace who still has many sins that have not yet been put to death – I say, how much gall does it take for such a person to behave as if he or she were this other Christian's judge.

No one who is thinking about giving an account of his or her behavior to God will be passing judgment on other Christians for their failure to think or behave rightly in some way. The danger of hypocrisy is far too real. Let's worry about our own failings, and not concern ourselves with those of others. That is Paul's second point.

III. *Paul's third point is that it is the attitude toward one another that is the key.*

When Paul says in v. 3 that the strong are not to *despise* the weak and when, in v. 10, he repeats his exhortation not to "despise your brother" he is telling us what was happening in the church and he is reminding us what always happens in the church. There is a feature of our pride that inclines us to despise those with whom we disagree. How dare they not think as we do!

One reason, I'm sure, that the Lord permits such substantial disagreement in the church is that our faith might be tested by this means and we might learn humility before God and others. *You* can't change what others think most of the time. I am a preacher. It is my job to change people's minds about things. But even I can do that only now and then. But you and I can change, you and I are responsible to change *our attitude* toward those Christian brothers and sisters with whom we disagree. The disagreements are not nearly so important or as destructive as the pride and the hatred, the alienation and the division that these disagreements cause. And they wouldn't cause such division if only there were a Christ-like love for all whom Christ loves and a Christ-like humility toward those whose failings are no greater than our own.

Paul doesn't require these Christians to change their theological opinions, but he does require something of them. There is something here that is *absolutely forbidden* both groups: to look down upon or despise one another because of their differences. Paul's point is that if we love one another *through and in spite of our disagreements* the divisions will actually purify the church and more powerfully demonstrate the love of God to the world.

There is a wonderful challenge here, brothers and sisters. A clarion call that every one of us can understand without any difficulty. All you have to do is govern your attitude and your behavior toward other Christians in light of two facts: God loves *them* and is going to judge *you*! That should clear matters up!