

“Receive The Weak”

Introduction. As we continue our consideration of fellowship, we must of necessity consider whether or not doctrinal differences and sinful practices are included in Romans 14. Are all differences that brethren have equal in nature? Must we tolerate sin and error among us? All these questions are vital to understanding the issue and correctly standing for the truth. This lesson will explore the boundaries of Romans 14 to see if we can have differences in matters of faith and still continue in fellowship. There has been no other passage put forth to justify differences in matters of faith; this assertion stands or falls on the interpretation of Romans 14.

I. ***The Broader Context Of Romans***

- A. The gospel will produce the “obedience of faith among all the nations” (1:1-7).
- B. The gospel reveals the righteousness of God and brings all to salvation by faith (1:16-17).
- C. There is no toleration for continued sin (6:1-23).
- D. There is no “provision for the flesh” (13:11-14).
- E. We must mark those causing divisions and offenses contrary to doctrine (16:17-19).

II. ***The Basic Divisions Of Romans 14***

- A. Introducing the problem (Romans 14:1-2).
 1. One brother was “weak in faith.”
 - a) His conscience forbade him from eating meat.
 - b) He probably was from a Jewish background.
 - c) The concern was not just the kind of meat, but the offering of the meat to an idol.
 2. One brother had “faith to eat all things.”
 - a) He understood that old regulations were no longer binding.
 - b) Therefore, he did not feel restricted in what he could do.
 3. They were instructed to “receive” one another.
 - a) This was not for the purpose of “passing judgment on his opinions.” A brief discussion of the difference of faith and opinion is in order.
 - (1) Faith.
 - (a) “The faith” is that body of teaching or doctrine which we must obey and follow in order to be saved. It is indicated in this manner many times in the New Testament (Acts 6:7; 13:8; 16:5; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Colossians 1:23; 2 Timothy 4:7; Jude 3). Therefore, it is necessary for salvation (John 8:32; James 1:21; 1 Peter 1:22-25).

- (b) "The faith" is identifiable, knowable, teachable and duplicatable (Jude 3; Ephesians 3:4; 2 Timothy 2:2; Matthew 28:18-20). "The faith" or the doctrine of Christ is also sufficient (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:3-4; 1 Peter 4:11). "The faith" is a firm conviction resting upon clear testimony from God's revelation. When we "walk by faith" (2 Corinthians 5:7), we are led by faith to do what God requires of us.
- (c) Does the Lord allow us to believe false teaching? Those who believe error are deceived and will be damned if they do not repudiate it (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 1 Timothy 1:3). We have no more right to teach error than we do to believe it. We cannot condone that which we cannot teach and preach as truth (Ephesians 4:15).

(2) Opinion.

- (a) Opinion is an impression resting upon human judgment, without clear and satisfactory testimony. An opinion may very well be a strong impression, but it is based upon a deduction, assumption and inference from a passage or passages of scripture.
- (b) Opinions and conscientious scruples or faith are always a hindrance to the work of Christ and to the church, never a help. No one has ever been converted nor edified by them. No opinion nor matter of "personal faith" is necessary to salvation. So opinions are merely matters where not God has not spoken and is a conclusion drawn from the scriptures. Alexander Campbell called opinions, "Persuasions without proof."
- (c) One man's opinion may be right or wrong, but it does not matter because it does not matter to God (Romans 14:1, 5, 14). How could these instructions be given if the matters under consideration were matters of essential truth?

(3) The phrase was not referring to matters lacking clarity.

- (a) Ed Harrell made this exact claim concerning the divorce and remarriage issue when he wrote 16 articles in *Christianity Magazine* in 1989-1990. He allowed for "matters of considerable moral and doctrinal import" to be included in Romans 14.
- (b) He wrote, "Within certain limits, God grants to Christians the right to a private conscience in matters of 'faith.' I believe that right is discussed in Romans 14. However, whether or not one accepts my exegesis of that passage,

honest minds must acknowledge the reality of a past and present Christian world that tolerates contradictory teachings and practices on important moral and doctrinal questions." He said further, "The subject of conscientious disagreement is addressed in Romans 14. Specifically, Paul teaches that those who retained conscientious scruples about various rituals of the law should understand that those issues were not matters bound by God. But the intent of the passage clearly encompasses more than clarification. The subject of Romans 14 is the question of brotherly disagreements.... Neither can one argue that the passage simply proves that we can disagree about indifferent matters ... The issue in Romans 14 is precisely the establishment of the right of brethren to differ in matters of faith."

- (c) Like Ed Harrell in many ways, Bob Owen followed essentially the same line of reasoning. He has used Romans 14 on the divorce and remarriage issue in sermons around the country. He admits in Romans 14 "that the cases here were matters that were indifferent," but denies the chapter "deals only with matters that are matters of indifference." He said, "Now the fellow who thought it could be a sin to eat those meats had to look at the other fellow and think he was sinning. Had to. In Rome, the fellow who thought it was a sin to eat any kind of meat would have to sin if you ate a piece of meat. And yet Paul taught them that they should accept each other." He stated, "I agree with those people who are critical of him on the Bible teaching with regard to divorce and remarriage, but I differ with them on their interpretation and application of the fellowship issue."
- (d) Other men such as Harry Pickup, Jr., Sam Dawson, Earl Kimbrough and Wallace Little have used Romans 14 to justify unity in doctrinal diversity.
 - i) Rubel Shelly wrote, "Some of us have been told that these verses [Romans 14, KAC] relate to the issues of taste, personal judgment and speculation. The things Paul had in mind here, we have been told, were 'mere matters of opinion' ... The three issues named by Paul in these verses were most definitely not issues on which people felt free to leave each other to their private opinions ... The doctrine -- note, *doctrine* -- held by either group was tolerable to Paul."

- ii) Leroy Garrett said, "Lest we forget that the earliest church, which we may think of as united amidst substantial diversity, had no New Testament Scriptures upon which to unite. If the little band of saints in Philippi were of 'the same mind in the Lord,' as the apostle's letter to them would indicate, it was not because they had read the New Testament and agreed upon its contents, for the writings that make up that portion of the Bible were not yet determined and some were not yet written. So, it was something else (or someone else) beside doctrinal conformity to a book that united them, and so, when Paul wrote to them he could refer not only to the fellowship of the Spirit but also to their abundant joy in Jesus Christ."
- iii) Carl Ketcherside proclaimed, "All of the brothers I have are 'brothers in error.' There are no other kind. Those who think they are not are in the worst error of all. But if they were good enough for God to accept they are not too bad for me to acknowledge. They can be my brothers on the same basis they are His children, and I will not stigmatize them as causing division when they are simply victims of it like the rest of us."
- iv) Cecil Hook wrote, "In Romans 14 and 15, Paul taught the saints to love and respect each other and to live in harmony even though they had some differing convictions ... Those who have gained freedom in Christ are free to accept brothers who bear the fruit of the Spirit even though they are not in total doctrinal agreement."

(4) Note that the KJV rendering ("doubtful disputations") was not meant as a "gray area." Other versions render it as "decision of scruples" (ASV), "passing judgment on his opinions" (NASV), "disputes over opinions" (RSV), "quarreling over opinions" (NRSV) and "arguing over his scruples" (Phillips).

B. Instruction to the weak (Romans 14:3-12).

1. The herb-eater was told that God receives the meat-eater.
2. The problem was with a scruple of conscience, not law.
3. The weak of conscience was not to condemn the strong.
4. God received the meat-eater in his practice.
5. Regardless of the herb-eater's own thoughts about the issue, God declared His acceptance of the meat-eater as His servant.

- C. Reasons for the weak to receive the strong.
 - 1. God received him while eating meat.
 - 2. He was a servant of God in the action.
 - 3. God was able to make him stand in judgment.
 - 4. The matter depended on the full assurance of one's mind.
 - 5. The strong engaged in his practice "unto the Lord" and with thanksgiving to God.
 - 6. No man has a right to reject his brother in such matters which God has allowed.
 - 7. The standard for judgment is God's prerogative.
- D. Instruction to the strong (Romans 14:13-15:2).
 - 1. Paul reaffirmed the fact that the practice is inherently good.
 - 2. The strong was not to put a stumbling-block before the weak.
 - 3. The souls of brethren were more important than liberty.
 - 4. The strong must seek after matters which edify.
 - 5. Private conscience is always allowed before God.
 - 6. The strong must help bear the burdens of weak.
- E. Responsibilities of the strong brother.
 - 1. He was not to despise the weak brother.
 - 2. He was not to put a stumbling block in his way.
 - 3. He was to love his weak brother over his liberties.
 - 4. He was to keep his focus on the kingdom, not on physical matters.
 - 5. He was to seek for peace and the edification of others.
 - 6. He was not to destroy God's work for the sake of his liberty.
 - 7. He was to exercise liberty between himself and God.
 - 8. He was not to allow liberty to condemn himself.
- F. The nature of the strong brother's action.
 - 1. God received him in the action.
 - 2. It was done with full assurance of mind.
 - 3. It was done unto the Lord.
 - 4. It was done giving God thanks.
 - 5. "Nothing is unclean of itself" and "All things indeed are clean."
 - 6. The action was "good."
 - 7. He was serving Christ while engaged in it.
 - 8. He was called "strong" together with Paul.

III. ***Could The Same Be Said Of The One In Sin?***

- A. Could we receive the homosexual?
- B. Could we receive the adulterer?
- C. Could we receive the social drinker?
- D. If one does not fit, neither do the others! No sinful action is included in Romans 14!

IV. *Could The Same Be Said Of The Teacher Of Error?*

- A. Could we receive the justifier of abortion?
- B. Could we receive the justifier of adultery?
- C. Could we receive the justifier of immodest apparel?
- D. If one does not fit, neither do the others! No sinful tolerance is included in Romans 14!

V. *The Same Principle Is Taught In 1 Corinthians 8-10*

- A. 8:4 -- One knows an idol is nothing.
- B. 8:7 -- Another views meat as worship to idol.
- C. 8:8 -- Not better or worse by either practice.
- D. 8:9-13 -- Liberty must not be a stumbling-block.
- E. 9:1-27 -- Example given of apostolic liberty.
- F. 10:1-22 -- Danger of idolatry's influence in sin.
- G. 10:23 -- Act may be lawful, but not edify.
- H. 10:24-33 -- Our liberty may be limited by one weakened to sin due to his wrong views.

Conclusion. This teaching of error is a real and present danger. We cannot allow the justification and tolerance of error to continue. To do so puts our own soul in jeopardy. We must "contend earnestly" for the proper bounds of fellowship and for the proper use of Romans 14 in the face of a more permissive society and more permissive brethren.