

The Bounds Of Christian Liberty

Introduction. Romans 14 is not easy to understand. It cautions against making external observances, opinions, and personal conscience the occasion of strife and division in the church. Romans 14 was designed to settle differences between brethren of differing degrees of spiritual maturity and understanding over matters of "indifference" before God.

Opinions are formed when God has not spoken on a subject and a conclusion is drawn from the scriptures (i.e., serving in the military, wearing a veil in worship, celebrating Christmas non-religiously, etc.). Alexander Campbell called opinions "persuasions without proof." The truth, which is revealed and taught by God, is necessary to salvation (John 8:32; James 1:21; 1 Peter 1:22-25). It is sufficient by itself to save us (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:3-4).

Opinions and personal conscience are always a hindrance to the work of Christ and to the church, never a help. No opinion or matter of "personal faith" is necessary to salvation. So much strife and division is caused by varied opinions among brethren. Opinions and personal conscience should be avoided as much as possible. We tend to think our opinions and conscience should be the standard for another person and we tend to think a person is "not sound" or "does not believe the truth" who does not believe our opinion.

Brethren need to be at peace with one another. They also need to be sound in the faith. For these two reasons, we will investigate how this chapter has been misused recently in the realm of fellowship along with the ramifications of that misuse, and then finish with a correct deliberation of the chapter's subject.

I. ***The Past Controversy***

- A. In the late '80s, Homer Hailey published a book called *The Divorce And Remarried Who Would Come To God*. This book, which advocated that the alien sinner is not accountable to Christ's teaching on divorce and remarriage, and subsequently that baptism washes away an adulterous marriage, started a firestorm of controversy. Many good brethren reviewed his book and rightfully labeled him as a false teacher.
- B. Ed Harrell, one of the editors of *Christianity Magazine*, wrote a series of 17 articles from 1988-1990 which used Romans 14 to allow fellowshiping those teaching error. Since then, Bob Owen, Harry Pickup Jr., and others have taught that Romans 14 allows brethren who have moral and doctrinal differences to fellowship one another without those differences being addressed, and to allow questionable or adulterous marriages.

- C. This is a blatant misuse of the chapter as we will see later. Over the last 20 years, there have been a number of harmful consequences of this teaching on Romans 14:
1. It has caused us to obscure false teachers.
 - a) Ed Harrell's initial article asked the question, "Is Homer Hailey A False Teacher?" Harrell made the application that unless he is unscrupulous, factious, and divisive, he is not a false teacher. If he is sincere, and his character is not described in 2 Peter 2 and Jude, he is not a false teacher.
 - b) Since Homer Hailey was a distinguished man with years of experience and interaction with thousands over the years, he was exonerated by many who admitted that he taught false doctrine (cf. 1 Timothy 5:20-21).
 - c) The issue is not the character of Homer Hailey. The question is whether the teaching is false, and whether the subject belongs in Romans 14.
 2. It has contributed to relativism.
 - a) This comes out of secular humanism which teaches that absolute truth and absolute error does not exist.
 - b) Everything must be a "gray area" now. We can no longer preach the truth on social drinking, dancing, and immodest apparel.
 3. It has contributed to a change in preaching.
 - a) More and more preaching goes without substance because people have lost their conviction of truth.
 - b) Sermons are developed more from the ideas of denominational preachers than from the Bible and strong, faithful brethren of old.
 4. It has lead to fellowship with all kinds of error.
 - a) More brethren have embraced those who are worldly-minded and are in sinful relationships.
 - b) Since a number of good people are on both sides, the thought in many congregations and in many saints' minds has become, "Let's back off the subject."

II. **An Examination Of Romans 14**

- A. There are "strong" brethren and "weak" brethren.
1. The "strong" are those who were taught and discerning and who did not form various opinions. These were most likely Gentile brethren (vss. 2, 5-6).
 2. The "weak" were those who formed opinions and personal conscience, especially Jewish brethren at that time, refraining from certain foods and observing certain days (vss. 2, 5-6). Opinionated brethren in the Roman church took what once were matters of the

faith (circumcision, dietary laws, feasts, etc.) and made them into opinions. Now most of our opinions have never had any basis in divine revelation.

- a) Brethren today confuse these terms. They think the "strong" brother is the one with the most vocal and tenacious opinions; and the "weak" brother is the one who has no such opinions and does not form matters of personal conscience.
 - b) Unfortunately, the "weak" brother often thinks he is the better Bible student, and knows and understands truth that no one else understands.
3. Considerations for the strong brother:
- a) He is to receive the weak as a brother, but not to judge his opinions (vs. 1).
 - b) He is not to put a stumblingblock or an occasion to sin in his way (vss. 13, 21).
 - c) He is to walk in love toward him; not grieve him with his liberty and understanding; and not destroy him, for Christ died for him (vs. 15).
 - d) He is not to let his liberty and privilege be evil spoken of by causing the weak to do what violates his conscience (vs. 16).
 - e) He is not to destroy the work of God in saving souls by food, days, etc. (vs. 20).
4. Considerations for the weak brother:
- a) The weak brother in Romans 14 considered some practices to be wrong, meaning they were wrong to him, although in actuality, his opinion was wrong (vs. 14).
 - b) He is not to violate his conscience, to "eat with offense" (vs. 2).
 - c) He is to keep his convictions to himself, and observe them quietly (vs. 22).
 - (1) This is what most opinionated brethren will not do. They will not keep their opinions and convictions to themselves. They feel like they must voice them and try to bind them on others. This is sinful and results in strife.
 - (2) This instruction shows Paul was not speaking of the revealed truth, for we can never keep that to ourselves. We must preach and teach it, publicly and privately, in season and out of season.
 - d) He is to do everything in "faith," not doubting, believing that what he does is right. Whatever is not of "faith" or personal conviction is sin (vs. 23).
- B. God will judge the relationship between the "strong" and "weak."
1. God receives either brother (vs. 3). Would God receive the one who lives in sin (1 Corinthians 5:5-7)?

2. We are not to judge or despise one another in indifferent matters (vs. 13).
 - a) God will judge His servant and can make him stand even when he is condemned by his brother (vs. 4).
 - b) We are the Lord's servants; He died and arose for us, and before Him we will be adequately and accurately judged (vss. 4-5, 7-9, 10-12).
- C. If it is advocated that "we can never know for sure," then we charge God with being less than clear in the Bible. The gospel is identifiable, knowable, and teachable. Someone's lack of understanding about a liberty does not change the clarity of God's revelation (1 Corinthians 8:7).
 1. Can we know the truth about meats and days?
 2. Can we know the truth about the veil or covering, going to war, Christmas, etc.?
 3. Can we know the truth about adulterous marriages?
 4. Does it follow that since we cannot agree on the covering, therefore we must allow adulterous marriages in our congregation?
 5. If we allow sin in our congregation, are we not violating the Bible (2 John 9:11)?

Conclusion. No one's opinion is right all the time. Anyone can be mistaken, and often is. The law of love demands that we be slow to form opinions, and not bind our opinions on others. There are greater considerations than food, days, opinions, personal convictions, etc. (cf. vs. 17). We are not to please ourselves, to have our own way, and to push our opinions and conclusions about indifferent subjects upon others. Even Jesus did not please Himself (15:1-3).

We have to live in love and peace with each other (Philippians 2:1-4, 14-15); and we must not destroy one another by bickering and striving over personal opinions and conscience. If you have opinions over a matter, cherish them and act on them in private, without disturbing God's church. May God help us to see this and to avoid this kind of conduct, but rather to love one another and put the cause of Christ above all else.