

ROM. 14:1 – 15:13

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VI. A Plea for Peace Among Jew and Gentile Christians (14:1-15:13)

Background

The most likely scenario for the founding of the church in Rome is that Jews who were converted on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:10) brought their faith in Jesus back with them to their home synagogues. That faith then spread among the Jews and also among the "God fearers," Gentiles who were interested in Judaism and attended the synagogue without becoming Jews. By A.D. 57, when Paul wrote Romans, the church in that city was predominantly Gentile. That probably happened when Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in A.D. 49. Jewish Christians who returned after Claudius' death in A.D. 54 found themselves in the minority.

The O.T. prohibited Israelites from eating certain kinds of meat (Leviticus 11, 20:25; Deut. 14:3-21) and any meat not slaughtered in such a way as to drain the blood (Lev. 17:10-16, 19:26; Deut. 12:15-25), while only Nazirites and priests on duty were required to abstain from wine (Num. 6:2-4; Judg. 13:4-5; Amos 2:11-12; Lev. 10:9). Scrupulous Jews sometimes would avoid all meat when they were in an environment where they could not be sure of the kind of meat it was or how it had been prepared or used beforehand. Even wine sometimes was avoided out of fear it may have been tainted by idolatry, but the conflict in Rome seems centered on food (vv. 2-3, 6, 15, 20, 23) and holy days (vv. 5-6). Drinking may be mentioned in v. 17 simply because it is a natural concomitant of eating, and wine may be mentioned in v. 21 as an extension of the principle enunciated with regard to the disagreement about food.

These dietary rules and observance of holy days, especially the Sabbath, were considered very important matters of Jewish faithfulness. They were central to maintaining the unique and separate status of the Jewish people.

When Jews became Christians, it was difficult for them to accept in their hearts that it was O.K. to eat the things they had long been taught were offensive to God and to accept that the prescribed holy days were not distinctively sacred. It was also hard because those rules were an important social link with their fellow Jews. This tension shows up in many places in the N.T.

Some Jews insisted that people must submit to the Mosaic law, in all its particulars, to be saved in Christ (e.g., Acts 15:1, 5). These are, of course, the Judaizers whom Paul so fiercely opposed in Galatians and elsewhere. Others, like those in Rome, continued to practice ritual aspects of Judaism as a matter of personal conscience, without making it a test of salvation (if they were Judaizers Paul would not have pleaded for them to be understood and accepted). Even among this group, however, there was a tendency to think that those not

following the law were less faithful or less devoted to God, to hold them somewhat at a distance. Conversely, there was a tendency among those not following the law to look down on the lawkeepers as unenlightened and arrogant.

Romans 14:1-15:13 is a plea for peace among the Jewish and Gentile Christians. There no doubt were some Gentiles among the law keepers (converts to Judaism) and some Jews among those who recognized their freedom from the law, but for the most part the divide was between Jews and Gentiles.

A. The strong and weak must receive one another (14:1-12) - **But welcome the one who is weak in faith, [though] not for quarrels about opinions.** ²**One person has the faith to eat everything, but the one who is weak eats [only] vegetables.** ³**Let the one who eats not despise the one who does not eat, and let the one who does not eat not judge the one who eats, for God welcomed him.** ⁴**Who are you who judge another's house slave? To his own lord he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.** ⁵**[For] one person judges [one] day in preference to [another] day, but another person judges every day [alike]; let each be fully convinced in his own mind.** ⁶**The one who esteems the day, esteems [it] to the Lord; and the one who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and the one who abstains from eating, abstains to the Lord and gives thanks to God.** ⁷**For none of us lives for himself, and none dies for himself;** ⁸**for whether we live, we live for the Lord; and whether we die, we die for the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.** ⁹**For to this end, Christ died and lived [again], so that he might exercise lordship over both the dead and the living.** ¹⁰**But you, why do you judge your brother? or you too, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God,** ¹¹**for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, to me every knee will bow, and every tongue will acknowledge God."** ¹²**So [then], each of us will give account of himself [to God].**

1. In v. 1 Paul tells the Gentile majority that they are to welcome or receive the one who is "weak in faith," meaning the Jewish Christian who is weak in his grasp of the implications of the faith, who has underdeveloped convictions about what the faith allows.

a. These weak Christians are not merely to be tolerated but are to be accepted into the fellowship of the family of God. They are not to be mocked or disparaged for their convictions, as that would make them feel like outsiders.

b. Moreover, they are to be accepted with the right motivation and spirit. They are not to be received provisionally for the purpose of quarreling with them over their misguided convictions. That does not mean that teaching them is forbidden; it means that they are not to be received with the ulterior motive of setting them straight.

2. He says in vv. 2-4 that those whose faith is strong enough to eat meat are not to have a disdainful, condescending attitude toward the law-observing Jewish minority, but neither is the Jewish minority to judge those who eat meat, for God has welcomed them. Since God accepts the meat eaters, then so must the Jewish Christians. After all, it is the

Lord's judgment of his servant that matters, and the meat eater will stand in the Lord's approval.

3. As I've said, Jewish and Gentile Christians differed in the observance of holy days and in the eating of meat. In vv. 5-6 Paul notes that the scrupulous Jew considered certain days, especially the Sabbath, as a distinctively holy day, whereas the Gentile believer considered all days equal in holiness. The scrupulous Jew also considered it wrong (or at least inferior or less pious) to eat meat or drink wine that may be ritually unclean. Paul says that either practice is acceptable as long as it is done with a clear conscience.

a. The practices of both the strong and the weak are acceptable to God because *neither is sinful*. The one who observes holy days and abstains from meat and wine because he erroneously, but sincerely, believes it is God's will to do so is doing more than the Lord requires by restricting his freedom. The one who correctly understands that the ritual or ceremonial aspects of the law are not binding on the Christian, is enjoying his freedom in the Lord. It is like circumcision: one is free to do it, but it is not sinful not to do it.

b. When something is sinful, however, it doesn't become acceptable just because the one doing it believes it is not sinful. Some in Corinth justified eating sacrificial food at the cultic meals in pagan temples; they even pressed for the right in the name of knowledge, but Paul would have none of it (see esp. 1 Cor. 8:1-13 with 10:14-22). It is only when something is a matter of indifference to God that one's conscience is the controlling guide.

c. Of course, the scrupulous Jew believes at some level that this is a matter of God's will; that is why his conscience is disturbed by it. In this case, however, we know the scrupulous Jew is wrong because Paul tells us so, both implicitly, by the fact he labels the Jews "weak in faith" and leaves the issue as a matter of conscience (v. 5), and explicitly (vv. 14, 20).

d. There are a couple of facts worth noting that will help us think clearly about this in terms of current disputes among Christians.

(1) First, we have no apostle or inspired interpreter to answer definitively whether a disputed matter of personal conduct is in fact a matter of indifference to God. For the Christians in Rome, the issue was how they would treat one another in light of *the fact* revealed by the Spirit through Paul that consuming ritually contaminated meat and wine was a matter of indifference to God. For us, the issue often is how to treat one another in light of *an unresolved dispute* whether the conduct is a matter of indifference to God.

(2) Second, Paul is here addressing matters of personal conduct (eating meat, drinking wine, and esteeming certain days), not corporate worship practices. Though what he says here and especially in what follows has significant

implications for respecting another's conscience in corporate worship, there is a difference between personal conduct and corporate worship.

(a) One who fails to persuade a brother that some aspect of his personal conduct is contrary to God's will has no concern that he is a participant in that brother's conduct. His question is whether he should continue to receive that person as a brother despite the disagreement.

(b) But corporate worship is a communal enterprise; it is something offered to God as a whole by a united body of believers not the separate offerings of individuals who happen to be in proximity to others. It is congregational not individual. So we all share in what the congregation accepts and willingly practices in its worship – it is *our* worship. If half the congregation strums guitars or blows police whistles, those not engaging in that conduct are implicated in it in a way they would not be if that same conduct was done personally or privately.

(c) That's why worship is always such a sensitive issue. As Howard Norton observed years ago (1993) in the *Christian Chronicle*:

The public worship assembly is critical to our unity as a brotherhood. It always has been. Because of this we must be exceedingly careful when we tamper with it in any way. We are very resilient in churches of Christ when the issues on which we disagree fall outside the public assembly of the saints. When controversial practices enter the public assembly, however, everyone is affected; and the possibility for division and shattering is scary.

e. So what about disagreements today over Christian ethics? How are we to treat one another when we disagree over whether certain personal conduct is acceptable to God, given that there is no apostle to assure us that the conduct is in fact a matter of indifference to God?

(1) There is no easy answer to this, and there are many difficult cases, but the end of v. 3 seems crucial – "for God welcomed (or received) him." That says to me that before we can rightly refuse to accept a brother for engaging in conduct that he contends is acceptable to God, we must conclude that the conduct is condemned with sufficient clarity to warrant the presumption that engaging in it a denial of Christ's lordship.

(2) The question, it seems to me, is not whether I'm convinced that the conduct in question is wrong but whether I'm convinced that a "reasonable" or "good faith" handling of the word requires that conclusion. It's one thing to disagree over whether things like playing cards, social drinking, dancing, celebrating holidays, attending R-rated movies, or how to dress for corporate worship are matters of indifference to God; it's another thing to disagree over whether homosexual conduct is a matter of indifference to God.

4. Paul's suggestion that the observance of "holy days" is a matter of indifference to God raises several issues.

a. Is Paul denying that Sunday is an appointed day for Christians to gather for corporate worship?

(1) I don't think so. After all, Sunday is called "the Lord's Day" in Rev. 1:10, which shows that it is somehow distinctive from other days. In 1 Cor. 16:1-2 we see that Paul told both the Galatian churches and the Corinthians to set aside a sum of money for the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem on the first day of each week. And we see in Acts 20:7 that the saints gathered together on the first day of the week specifically to take the Lord's Supper ("to break bread").

(2) What Paul is saying is that, under the new covenant, the Jewish practice of considering certain days as distinctively *holy* is a matter of indifference to God. No day is holier than another to those in Christ; rather, all days are equally holy. So Christians are not obligated to observe the Sabbath or other Jewish holy days. The same truth is indicated in Gal. 4:9-10 and Col. 2:16-17. That means that those who seek to bind Sabbath observance on Christians are wrong, and if they are making it a test of salvation, they are lost.

(3) That the "Lord's Day" is an appointed day of Christian worship does not mean it is a more sacred day in the sense the Sabbath was a more sacred day. I realize that some believe Sunday is a Christianized version of the Jewish Sabbath, but I think that is incorrect. As Andrew T. Lincoln comments ("From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective," in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 389-90):

[T]he Lord's Day need not be understood in terms of a sacred day. . . . The day can be said to be the Lord's because it is the appropriate day for worshipping Him, and this is significantly different from the view that sees the day, by analogy with the Jewish Sabbath, as a full twenty-four hour period belonging to the Lord in a distinct way from that in which all the Christian's time belongs to the Lord. Whereas the latter is in conflict with the sentiment approved in Rom. 14:5, the former need by no means be. There is a sense in which all of life should be a prayer, and yet a recognition of this does not detract from the need for specific prayer at specific times. Similarly the notion that all of one's time is devoted to the Lord does not detract from the necessity of specific worship at specific times. To claim that specifically Sunday is the appropriate day for a gathering of the Christian community for worship is not to imply that somehow in itself that day is holy.

b. Is Paul saying that Christians are free to make up their own holy days and observe them? I don't think so. The holy days he was speaking about had been prescribed by God in the O.T. It is one thing for the Jew who had been trained in the law all

his life to feel that observing these days was an honor to God; it is another thing altogether to feel that days not appointed or sanctioned by God can be observed in honor to him. We are not in the same position as those Jews whose consciences were caught in the salvation-historical shift wrought by Christ.

c. What about Jewish converts today? Would their observance of holy days and food laws still be a matter of indifference to God? It may be that more is expected in light of the completed revelation, and I would certainly try to teach them, but maybe they could have the same hyperactive conscience as the Jews of Paul's day. In any event, they must be careful not to bind their weak conscience on other believers, and they must not adopt other elements of the law that are inherently contrary to the gospel.

5. Paul says in vv. 7-9 that the Christian must follow his conscience because he or she lives to please the Lord, not his fellow believers. We are the Lord's from start to finish, and every aspect of our lives, even our death, is lived under his lordship. Christ's lordship is so total that it includes both the dead and the living.

6. In vv. 10-12 he explains that refusing to accept one another because of disputes over matters of indifference to God is absurd in light of the fact we will each answer to God not only for our practices but also for our refusal to receive one another.

B. Do not cause your brother to stumble (14:13-23) – ¹³Let us, therefore, no longer judge one another, but judge this instead: not to place a stumbling block for a brother or a cause for offense. ¹⁴I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, except to the one who considers something to be unclean; to that one, it is unclean. ¹⁵For if your brother is grieved on account of [your] food, you no longer are walking in accordance with love. Do not by your food destroy that one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶Therefore, do not let your good be blasphemed. ¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸For the one who in this serves Christ as a slave is pleasing to God and approved by people. ¹⁹So then, let us pursue the things of peace and the things of edification for one another. ²⁰Do not for the sake of food demolish the work of God. All things are indeed clean, but it is evil for the person who eats with stumbling [to eat]. ²¹It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine or [anything] by which your brother stumbles. ²²The faith which you have, keep to yourself before God. Blessed is the man who does not bring judgment on himself by what he approves, ²³but the man who doubts stands condemned if he eats, because it is not from faith; and everything that is not from faith is sin.

1. In v. 13 Paul tells the Jewish and Gentile Christians that rather than judge each other, they ought to decide (or judge) not to place before their brother or sister a "stumbling block" or a spiritual trap ("cause of offense"). In other words, we are not to do something that will lead to the spiritual downfall of our brother or sister. It becomes clear in the following verses that Paul is speaking specifically of the differences between Jewish and Gentile Christians regarding the old covenant food laws.

2. Verse 14 is somewhat parenthetical in that it gives the basis on which one's behavior can be a stumbling block and an obstacle, can lead to another's spiritual harm. The fact of the matter is that no food is "unclean," meaning ritually defiled as defined by the Mosaic law. Those aspects of the law have no continuing validity. Indeed, the Lord himself taught this, as Mark points out in Mk. 7:19b. *But that is not the end of the story.*

3. The Jewish Christians, whom Paul labels weak in faith, have not been able to fully internalize this truth. Their consciences have been so firmly trained regarding the Mosaic food laws that many of them cannot escape the sense it is wrong to eat meat or drink wine that may be ritually unclean. Because of that personal conviction, they would be sinning if they consumed this kind of food or drink. If you believe God forbids you to do something, your doing it dishonors God because it says you value that thing more than you value pleasing God (see v. 23).

4. In vv. 15-16 Paul explains v. 13b (decide not to place a stumbling block for a brother) in light of v. 14 (violating one's conscience is sinful). He says to the Gentile majority that certain ways of exercising their right to eat meat and drink wine may lead their Jewish brother or sister into sin by pressuring them to act contrary to their (albeit hyperactive) conscience. And that would not be consistent with the cardinal Christian virtue of love.

5. Paul goes further and commands them not to exercise their freedom to eat in such a way that it will "destroy" their weaker Jewish brethren for whom Christ died. They are not to let their good liberty be reviled, which is what would happen if they exercised it without regard for the tender consciences of their brethren.

Cranfield comments (2:714-715):

The *gar* [for] connects the sentence, not with v. 14 . . . but with v. 13b. The weak in faith will be grievously hurt, he will have the integrity of his faith (i.e., faith in its deepest sense of *fides qua*) and obedience destroyed, and his salvation put at risk, if he is led by his strong fellow-Christian's insistence on exercising the liberty, which he (the strong Christian) truly has, into doing something for which he as yet does not possess the inward liberty. The strong will therefore not be acting in accordance with Christian love, if his weak brother is thus seriously hurt on account of the food which he (the strong Christian) eats.

Moo likewise states (pp. 853-854):

Verse 14, supplying the theoretical basis for Paul's use of the language of spiritual downfall in v. 13, is somewhat parenthetical. Verse 15, accordingly, probably relates back especially to v. 13: Don't put a stumbling block in the way of a brother (v. 13b), . . . "for" this is just what you are doing – by insisting on exercising your freedom to eat food, you bring pain to your fellow believer and thereby violate the cardinal Christian virtue of love. The "pain" that the "strong" believer causes the "weak" believer is

more than the annoyance or irritation that the "weak" believer might feel toward those who act in ways they do not approve. Its relationship to the warnings about spiritual downfall in vv. 13b and 15b show that it must denote the pain caused the "weak" believer by the violation of his or her conscience.

6. He explains in vv. 17-18 that the kingdom of God in which we participate is not essentially a matter of eating and drinking but a matter of righteousness, peace, and joy that are produced by the Holy Spirit. Here I think Paul is referring to moral living, support of and harmony with fellow Christians, and joy in the life and fellowship with which God has blessed us. The one who serves Christ with these priorities on straight is pleasing to God and, rather than being blasphemed by the weak, is esteemed by them.

7. In v. 19 he exhorts them to pursue peace and mutual edification. As Cranfield explains (2:721), "What is required is an altogether earnest seeking to promote among brethren such a true peace (based on the fundamental peace with God which God Himself has established in Christ) as must manifest itself in mutual upbuilding." This applies to all, but the strong especially needed to hear it because of their insensitive treatment of the weak.

8. In vv. 20-22a Paul rephrases the same points he made in vv. 13-15. The believer should not eat meat, drink wine, or do anything else when to do so will harm his brother or sister by pushing them to act ahead of their conscience. The strong should not exercise their convictions in their weak brothers' faces, thereby placing a stumbling block in their path, but should abstain in those situations. That is what it means in v. 22 to keep the convictions (faith) you have to yourself before God. Since Paul clearly stated that all food is clean, he obviously is not forbidding all teaching of the weak. He is, however, restricting the strong's exercise of liberty until the weak among them genuinely have been enlightened.

9. In v. 22b-23 Paul says blessed is the strong believer whose conscience does not condemn him when he exercises his liberty, but the weak believer who eats with doubts about its propriety is sinning and is therefore under God's condemnation.

C. The example of Christ (15:1-6) - Now we, the strong, ought to bear the weaknesses of those who are not strong, and not to please ourselves. ²Let each of us please [his] neighbor in what is good for the purpose of edification. ³For even the Christ did not please himself, but just as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you fell on me." ⁴For as much as was written beforehand was written for our instruction, in order that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures we might hold hope securely. ⁵And may the God of endurance and encouragement give you a like mind among yourselves in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that unanimously with one mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Rather than the strong pleasing themselves by insisting on the unfettered exercise of their liberty, they ought to bear the weaknesses of the weak, meaning they ought

to ease the burden of the weak by accepting them and doing what love requires toward them.

2. Each of the strong should please his weak "neighbor" (fellow believer) for the neighbor's spiritual benefit, which results in the growth and solidarity (edification) of the community of faith. For even the Christ did not please himself but went to the cross where he bore for others the ultimate insults against God. As Cranfield remarks on v. 3:

The purpose of the quotation [of Ps. 69:9] is to indicate the lengths to which Christ went in His not pleasing Himself. If He, for men's sakes, was willing to bear, as one element of his sufferings, the concentration of all men's hatred of God, of all their futile, inane contemptuous, insolence against God, how absurdly ungrateful should we be, if we could not bring ourselves to renounce our self-gratification in so unimportant a matter as the exercising of our freedom with regard to what we eat or whether we observe special days – for the sake of our brothers for whom He suffered so much!

3. Having quoted Ps. 69:9, Paul in v. 4 reminds them that the Scriptures were written for their instruction, so that with endurance and by means of the encouragement provided by the Scriptures, they might remain steadfast in their hope. Though written in the past, it is God's word for us today.

4. Verses 5-6 contain a prayer of intercession that Paul offers to God and records for the benefit of the Roman Christians. It serves as an indirect way of exhorting them. His prayer is that they may have a "like mind" among themselves, meaning that, despite their differences over food laws and holy days, they might remain united in their devotion to the Lord and to serving him in the world. Only when such unity exists are we able to glorify God in the way he deserves to be glorified. Division over matters of indifference diverts the church from its purpose.

D. Final appeal (15:7-13) - ⁷Therefore, welcome one another, just as also Christ welcomed you for the glory of God. ⁸For I say Christ has become a servant of the circumcision for the sake of God's truth, in order to confirm the promises to the fathers, ⁹and the Gentiles glorify God for [his] mercy, just as it is written, "On account of this I will acknowledge you among the Gentiles and sing praise to your name." ¹⁰And again it says, "Rejoice, Gentiles, with his people." ¹¹And again, "Praise the Lord, all the Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him." ¹²And again Isaiah says, "He will be the shoot of Jesse, the one who arises to rule the Gentiles; on him the Gentiles will hope." ¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

1. In v. 7 Paul urges the saints to accept one another as fellow members of a family because they have been received by Christ and therefore *are* fellow members of a family, the family of God. This kind of acceptance and unity redounds to the glory of God.

2. In vv. 8-12 he says they also are to receive one another because Christ has acted to bring God's blessings to both Jews and Gentiles in fulfillment of Scripture.

a. Christ became a servant of the Jew (e.g., Mat. 15:24 – he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel) in order to show that God is faithful, which he did by fulfilling the promise of blessing that God had made to the Jewish patriarchs.

b. He also became a servant of the Jew in order that the Gentile might glorify God for the sake of his mercy through their subsequently being grafted into the people of Israel.

c. In vv. 9b-12 Paul quotes various Scriptures to show that the inclusion of Gentiles with Jews in the praise of God has always been part of God's purpose.

3. In v. 13 Paul rounds off his exhortation to the weak and strong with another prayer report. He prays that, despite their differences, they will be filled with joy and peace in their believing, because it is only in this kind of community that the hope produced by the Spirit abounds. The more joy and unity there is in our fellowship, the more the Spirit generates a genuine expectation of eternal glory. Moo (p. 833) summarizes 15:7-13 this way: "Both 'strong' and 'weak' Christians should receive each other as full and respected members of the Christian community, for God himself has shown, in fulfillment of Scripture, that he accepts both Jews and Gentiles as his people."

Some Application Issues

1. Romans 14:1-15:13 makes clear that it is God's will for a Christian to abstain from optional conduct when engaging in it may encourage a Christian who believes the conduct is sinful to engage in it contrary to his conscience. It would be unloving to exercise one's liberty in such a brother's presence because that would put undue pressure on him to act ahead of his conscience, to engage in that conduct before he was convinced internally that it was really acceptable to do so, which would be sinful. Pushing a brother to sin by violating his conscience is a grave wrong because it not only is deeply distressing but can begin a hardening process that leads to spiritual ruin.

2. Paul says the same thing in relation to the consciences of certain Gentiles 1 Cor. 8:7-13. He says there that even if the arguments of some in the congregation that it was acceptable to eat cultic meals in pagan temples were correct, which they were not (as he makes clear in 10:14-22), the principle of brotherly love still would require that they forego the practice so as not to push their brothers who were former idolaters into violating their "weak" consciences (there meaning idol-sensitive consciences) by participating in the meal.

3. In a culture that glorifies freedom and majority rule, Paul's teaching on this subject meets much resistance.

a. Those with wider consciences often cannot bear restricting their freedom for the sake of those they believe are in error, especially when those thought to be in error are a minority. There is this sense that liberty is negated by any condition on its exercise and that practices of the majority should not be circumscribed by a minority. Unfortunately, that sense sometimes trumps the biblical injunction to love, and Paul's admonitions are rationalized away in the process.

b. We fear the truth that we are to restrict our liberty out of love for Christians with narrower consciences because we fear it will lead inevitably to a church that is captive in everything to the narrowest conscience in the group. Even if that were the case, which I am convinced it is not, it is no justification for avoiding what Paul taught. Paul delivered the word of the Lord not only to the Romans and Corinthians but also to us.

4. I grant that wisdom is required, sometimes great wisdom, in moving from Paul's reasoning and instruction regarding the situations in Rome and Corinth to the kinds of cases that most often concern us today. *But let's first allow Paul's teaching to sink in and have its effect on our hearts.* Then we can wrestle with some of the stickier questions in moving from first-century Rome and Corinth to the church today.

5. I do not have all the answers, but in applying Paul's teaching I think it helps to keep a number of things in mind. Don't stone me for these, okay? I just offer them for your consideration, as I think they can be helpful.

a. First, as I noted last week, Paul is speaking about matters of *conscience*, not matters of *preference*.

(1) For Paul's teaching to apply, the conduct in question must be something the other person feels is *sinful*, wrong for him to do. It does not apply to disagreements over matters of preference no matter how strong those preferences may be.

(2) You may prefer topical preaching over expository preaching; discussion Bible classes over lecture classes; taking the Lord's Supper before the sermon over taking it after; one kind of worship song over another kind of song; more worship songs over fewer worship songs, and on and on. You may have good reasons for your preferences, but however good they are the situation is outside the scope of Paul's teaching. He is dealing with what is believed, at least at some level, to be sinful.

(3) I think it is appropriate and necessary for elders to explore alleged matters of conscience to satisfy themselves that it is not merely a matter of preference that is mistakenly being forced into the conscience category. Here they simply are looking to see if the brother has *any kind of basis* for believing the issue is a matter of God's will not whether they agree with the brother's understanding.

b. Second, Paul is speaking about conduct that is done *in the presence* of the brother or sister with the narrower conscience.

(1) That is why in Rom. 14:22a he tells those with a broader conscience to keep the convictions they have to themselves before God and why in 1 Cor. 8:10 he speaks of the one who *sees* them eating in the temple. They are free to enjoy the liberty they have in Christ when they are away from brothers with a narrower conscience. Indeed, Paul in 14:22b labels as "blessed" the man who can enjoy his liberty with a clear conscience.

(2) The restriction is limited to being in the other's presence presumably because doing something in someone's presence increases the pressure on that person to engage in it before he or she is truly ready. So if, for example, one's brother cannot play cards with a clear conscience, one is free to play cards outside of the brother's presence but not to invite him over and play cards in his face.

c. Third, Paul is speaking here and in 1 Corinthians of conduct that *can be imitated* by the brother with a narrower conscience, which is a qualification that is not always recognized.

(1) When conduct that a brother with a narrower conscience can imitate (like eating meat, drinking wine, eating cultic meals in pagan temples) is done in that brother's presence the social dynamic creates unacceptable pressure on him to engage in the conduct, to copy it, before he is fully convinced it is acceptable to do so. Paul says that love will not subject a brother to *that risk* of sinning, will not risk pushing him *in this way* to act contrary to his conscience. Teaching him that his belief is incorrect also pressures him to engage in the practice, but that is acceptable because it is a different kind of pressure than modeling the behavior in his presence.

(2) But some disagreements about sin are over things that are not matters of personal conduct, not behavior that a brother can be induced to imitate.

(a) A person may believe, for example, that it is sinful for a church building to have a kitchen. He has no problem with kitchens per se. He thinks it is fine for individual Christians to have kitchens; in fact, he has one in his home. He just thinks it is wrong for there to be one in the *church* building.

(b) Now, this brother is free to make his case to the elders about the sinfulness of church kitchens, and if he succeeds in convincing them then they are obligated as servants of Christ to remove (or not include) the kitchen. But the question is whether, *having failed to convince them* that church kitchens are sinful, the brother can fairly appeal to Paul's teaching to claim that the elders *still* are biblically obligated to refrain from having a kitchen in the building to protect his narrower conscience.

(c) I see that situation as being outside the scope of Paul's teaching in Romans 14-15 and 1 Corinthians 8. I think that because the brother believes it is sinful only for a *church* to have a kitchen, but he as an individual cannot act as a church, as a congregation, and thus he cannot be pressured to emulate the practice of a *church* having a kitchen.

(d) Let me give you another example that might make this distinction clearer. If the elders decided to incorporate the church and you thought it was sinful to do so but were unable to convince them you were correct, you may need to leave the congregation rather than give tacit approval to its "sin" by remaining a member. But the act of incorporating the congregation is not something you can be pressured to imitate because you are not an eldership or a congregation. Yes, you are involved in the action through your tacit approval if you remain a member, but you are not pressured to violate your conscience by imitating the action. The pressure you feel from the elders' disagreement with you is more akin to someone teaching something that contradicts your convictions, which we see Paul has no objection to doing.

d. Fourth, Paul's instruction was that the Gentile Christians abstain from engaging in certain optional conduct – eating and drinking in the presence of a brother with a narrower conscience – not that they forego less burdensome ways of obeying a divine command.

(1) Abstaining from the purely optional conduct of eating and drinking has no counterbalancing negative spiritual consequences. It involves only giving up self-gratification, the enjoyment of meat and wine, for the blessing of brothers and sisters. The situation can be different, however, when a brother's narrower conscience relates to the way in which a command is to be obeyed. In that case, deferring to the narrower brother can make obeying the command so burdensome as to become a roadblock to obedience. There is now a negative spiritual consequence that must be taken into account, which was not present in the situations addressed by Paul.

(2) Imagine that someone in the congregation comes to the conviction that it is sinful to participate in the Lord's Supper when multiple cups are used for the fruit of the vine; he thinks the juice must be drunk by all from the same container. If he fails to convince the elders that using multiple cups is sinful, the question is whether Paul's teaching mandates that the elders shift to one cup out of love so as not to pressure this brother to violate his conscience. I am not convinced Paul's teaching requires that.

(3) Unlike deferring to the narrower brother in the matter of eating meat, deferring to the narrower brother in the matter of communion cups creates for others a significant obstacle to obeying the command to take the Lord's Supper. Some people simply cannot overcome the sense of disgust and concern over disease in drinking after hundreds of people. Granted that their gut-level aversion to doing so is not a matter of conscience – they do not believe it is sinful to use one cup – but it is a reality that seriously burdens their obedience. So in this case, the effect of the brother's narrow conscience, because of this aversion to drinking from one cup, is to pressure the other brothers and sisters not to share in the Supper, which *is* a matter of conscience.

(4) I do not believe Paul's teaching requires the elders in such a case to close their eyes to this reality and pretend that people will not be pressured by the use of one cup to violate their consciences about sharing in the Supper. As I said, in the cases

Paul addressed there was no countervailing spiritual cost; the Gentiles were instructed to abstain from purely optional conduct not to abstain from all but the most burdensome way of obeying a command.

(5) Note that the pressure that is put on those with an aversion to using one cup to violate their consciences in the matter of the Lord's Supper is not pressure to imitate what is done in their faces (the practice of using one cup), so Paul's teaching in Romans and 1 Corinthians cannot be appealed to as a protection of their consciences. But they are not claiming Paul's teaching in those texts as protection. Rather, they are claiming that putting a substantial burden on others' observance of the Supper (the countervailing spiritual cost) removes the one-cuppers from the scope of Paul's teaching, and thus the elders are not biblically obligated to defer to their narrower conscience in the matter.

6. So has Paul's instruction died a death of a thousand qualifications? Is there nothing left that applies today?

a. His teaching can apply in various situations, but the one that is perhaps most relevant today, at least in my judgment, is the case of instrumental music in worship. Many people, myself included, are convinced that it is sinful to worship God with instrumental accompaniment. I have explained why I think that in a paper on my website (theoutlet.us) titled "Music in Christian Worship." That does not mean that I believe those who disagree with me on the matter are for that reason bound for hell. I trust the grace of our Lord will cover this error, whichever of us turns out to be wrong. But the fact I do not judge it to be a "salvation issue" does not mean it is a trivial thing; no aspect of God's will is trivial.

b. What we see happening in our brotherhood are elders switching their congregations to instrumental worship. These men insist on engaging in the purely optional conduct of worshiping God with instruments in the assembly of the saints, in the presence of their brothers and sisters, who at the very least are not fully satisfied that doing so is acceptable to God. These Christians with the narrower conscience are being greatly pressured to sin by running ahead of their consciences in the matter, but as far as I can tell, few people care. Paul's teaching on this point is a threat to an agenda, and it gets swept under the rug.

7. Before moving on, I should mention what I see as a more general qualification of Paul's teaching. I think there is a difference in what love owes a congregational member whose conscience is put at risk by a *change in practice* and what it owes one who *joins* the congregation knowing that the existing practices are unacceptable to his conscience. Love will not impose a conscience-pressuring or conscience-violating practice on another, but one who joins a congregation knowing that the existing practices are unacceptable to his conscience is *voluntarily exposing oneself* to the practice for the purpose of changing it, for the purpose of setting the others straight. So one who, for example, joins an instrumental congregation believing instrumental worship is wrong is

in a different position from one who is a member of an *a cappella* congregation that goes instrumental.

8. Finally, let me just add a footnote about Paul's use of the term "weak" in Romans 14, then it is on to the letter closing that beings in 15:14. Those who believe it is wrong to worship God with instrumental music, for example, are *similar* to the "weak ones" in Rome in that the convictions of both are relatively restrictive. That is why both need those with broader consciences to limit their liberty. They are *dissimilar*, however, in that only the "weak ones" in Rome were *for certain* misguided. There is a longstanding, unresolved dispute about the propriety of instrumental music in worship. So to the extent the label "weak ones" connotes that one's view is erroneous in addition to being relatively narrow, applying it to those opposed to instrumental music and other worship innovations is misleading and I think needlessly alienating.