

# Some Thoughts on Respecting Another's Conscience in Corporate Worship

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## I. Introduction

Imagine that a segment of a congregation is pushing to add some new element to the corporate worship (e.g., instrumental music, whistling, stomping) and another segment is resisting because of its belief that it is sinful to worship God in a manner he has not authorized. The eldership concludes, contrary to the historical understanding of churches of Christ, that the proposed innovation is not sinful. Should they allow the practice or urge those who believe it is not sinful to abstain from it? I believe the latter is the course indicated by Scripture.

## II. Romans 14:1 – 15:13

### A. Background of section

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 393-398.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 830-831; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1988) 801. 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. See, e.g., C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) 2:718 (fn. 1), 725.

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.<sup>3</sup>

When Jews became Christians, it was difficult for some of them to accept in their hearts that it was proper 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 also was 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 Galatia and elsewhere. Others, like those in Rome,<sup>4</sup> continued to practice ritual aspects of Judaism as a matter of personal conscience without making it a test of salvation. 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 law keepers as unenlightened and arrogant. Romans 14:1-15:13 is a plea for peace among the Jewish and Gentile Christians.<sup>5</sup>

## **B. Rom. 14:1-12 – The strong and weak must receive one another**

**<sup>1</sup>But welcome the one who is weak in faith, [though] not for quarrels about opinions.**

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. 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. 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.

**<sup>2</sup>One person has the faith to eat everything, but the one who is weak eats [only] vegetables. <sup>3</sup>Let the one who eats not despise the one who does**

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<sup>3</sup> Dunn (1988) 800-801.

<sup>4</sup> That the Jewish Christians in Rome were not Judaizers is apparent from the fact Paul pleads for them to be understood and accepted.

<sup>5</sup> This is how most modern commentators understand the root issue in Rom. 14:1-15:13. Moo (1996) 829 (fn. 13). 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.

**not eat, and let the one who does not eat not judge the one who eats, for God welcomed him. <sup>4</sup>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.**

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.

**<sup>5</sup>[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. <sup>6</sup>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.**

The scrupulous Jew considered certain days, especially the Sabbath, as a distinctively holy day, whereas the Gentile believer considered all days equal in holiness.<sup>6</sup> The scrupulous Jew also considered it wrong to eat meat that may be ritually unclean. Paul says that either practice is acceptable as long as it is done with a clear conscience.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In suggesting that the observance of "holy days" is a matter of indifference to God, Paul is not denying that Sunday is an appointed day for Christians to gather for corporate worship. After all, Sunday is called "the Lord's Day" in Rev. 1:10, which shows that it is somehow distinctive from other days. 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. 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. As Andrew T. Lincoln comments in "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.

<sup>7</sup> 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 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. When something is sinful, however, it does not become acceptable just because the one doing it believes it is not

**<sup>7</sup>For none of us lives for himself, and none dies for himself; <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>For to this end, Christ died and lived [again], so that he might exercise lordship over both the dead and the living.**

The Christian must follow his conscience because he 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.

**<sup>10</sup>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, <sup>11</sup>for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, to me every knee will bow, and every tongue will acknowledge God." <sup>12</sup>So [then], each of us will give account of himself [to God].**

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.

### **C. Rom. 14:13-23 – Do not cause your brother to stumble**

**<sup>13</sup>Let us, therefore, no longer judge one another, but judge this instead: not to place a stumbling block for a brother or an obstacle.**

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 an obstacle. In other words, we are not to do something that will trip our brother or sister in their Christian walk, something that will harm them spiritually. 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 and that the Gentiles (the "strong") are the focus of his admonition.

**<sup>14</sup>I 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.**

This verse 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

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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.

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. The Jewish Christians, whom Paul labels weak in faith, have not been able to fully internalize that 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 that may be ritually unclean. Because of that personal conviction, they would be sinning if they consumed this kind of food. If one doubts that certain conduct is permissible, engaging in it dishonors God because it says that one values the conduct more than one values pleasing God (see v. 23).

**<sup>15</sup>For 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. <sup>16</sup>Therefore, do not let your good be blasphemed.**

Paul here explains v. 13b in light of v. 14. He says to the Gentile majority that certain ways of exercising their right to eat meat may lead their Jewish brother or sister into sin (may grieve them) by pressuring them to act contrary to their (albeit hyperactive) conscience. And that would be inconsistent with the cardinal Christian virtue of love. 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:

The *gar* [for] connects the sentence, not with v. 14 (which is a parenthesis inserted asyndetically, introduced for the purpose of making clear both Paul's own acceptance of the basic assumption of the strong and at the same time the fact that there is an important qualification of that assumption which must not be forgotten), 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.<sup>8</sup>

Moo likewise states:

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

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<sup>8</sup> Cranfield (1979) 2:714-715.

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.<sup>9</sup>

**<sup>17</sup>For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup>For the one who in this serves Christ as a slave is pleasing to God and approved by people.**

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 is esteemed by the weak rather than blasphemed by them.

**<sup>19</sup>So then, let us pursue the things of peace and the things of edification for one another.**

As Cranfield explains, "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."<sup>10</sup> This applies to all, but the strong especially needed to hear it because of their insensitive treatment of the weak.

**<sup>20</sup>Do 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]. <sup>21</sup>It is good not to eat meat nor to drink wine nor [anything] by which your brother stumbles. <sup>22</sup>The faith which you have, keep to yourself before God.**

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.

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<sup>9</sup> Moo (1996) 853-854.

<sup>10</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) 2:721.

**Blessed is the man who does not bring judgment on himself by what he approves,<sup>23</sup> but the man who doubts stands condemned if he eats, because it is not from faith; and everything that is not from faith is sin.**

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.

#### **D. Rom. 15:1-6 – The example of Christ**

**<sup>1</sup>Now we, the strong, ought to bear the weaknesses of those who are not strong, and not to please ourselves.**

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.

**<sup>2</sup>Let each of us please [his] neighbor in what is good for the purpose of edification.**

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.

**<sup>3</sup>For even the Christ did not please himself, but just as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you fell on me."**

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:

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, inanely 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!<sup>11</sup>

**<sup>4</sup>For 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.**

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<sup>11</sup> Cranfield (1979) 2:733.

Having quoted Ps. 69:9, Paul 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.

**<sup>5</sup>And may the God of endurance and encouragement give you a like mind among yourselves in accordance with Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>so that unanimously with one mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

These verses 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.

### **E. Rom. 15:7-13 – Final appeal**

**<sup>7</sup>Therefore, welcome one another, just as also Christ welcomed you for the glory of God.**

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.

**<sup>8</sup>For 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, <sup>9</sup>and 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." <sup>10</sup>And again it says, "Rejoice, Gentiles, with his people." <sup>11</sup>And again, "Praise the Lord, all the Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him." <sup>12</sup>And again Isaiah says, "He will be the shoot of Jesse, the one who arises to rule the Gentiles; on him the Gentiles will hope."**

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. 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. 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. 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.



**<sup>13</sup>May 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.**

Paul rounds off his exhortation to the weak and strong with another prayer report. Paul 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 heaven. Moo 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."<sup>12</sup>

### **III. Application to Proposed Worship Innovation**

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 mistakenly believes the conduct is sinful to engage in it contrary to his conscience. The question is how this principle applies to adding an unauthorized element to the corporate worship when some members of the congregation believe it is sinful to worship God in a manner he has not authorized.

Some assert that Rom. 14:1-15:13 has no applicability to worship innovations because "stumbling block" (*proskomma*) and "obstacle" (*skandalon*) refer only to that which costs someone their salvation and disagreements over allegedly sinful forms of worship do not fall in that category because they do not involve one's trust in Christ. That assertion is groundless. Leaving aside the fact *proskomma* and *skandalon* can have a more general meaning,<sup>13</sup> if that which may lead one to violate one's conscience with regard to food laws constitutes a stumbling block and an obstacle, as it clearly does, then certainly that which may lead one to violate one's conscience with regard to worship practices also qualifies. The spiritual danger lies in defiling one's conscience – that is the sin that is condemned by God (v. 23) and the cause of the brother's grieving (v. 15) – not in defiling it only with regard to food. Violating one's conscience regarding any perceived duty is not only deeply distressing but can begin a hardening process that ends in spiritual ruin. That is why Paul generalizes the principle in v. 21. Love will neither grieve nor endanger another for the sake of a personal preference (Rom. 13:10).

Moreover, there are at least two reasons for believing that the principle of abstention set forth in Rom. 14:1-15:13 applies with even greater force to worship innovations. First, in the case Paul was addressing, the Jewish Christians had an alternative to violating their consciences that is not available in the case of worship innovations. They could have remained steadfast in their commitment not to eat unclean

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<sup>12</sup> Moo (1996) 833.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 882, 926.

food and to observe the holy days despite what the Gentile Christians were doing. That would have preserved their consciences while allowing the Gentile Christians to exercise their liberty. But Paul did not prescribe that remedy. Rather, he said, in essence, that love will not even pressure one to defile one's conscience for the sake of a mere personal preference.

One who believes it is sinful to worship God in a manner he has not authorized does not have a comparable alternative for preserving one's conscience in the face of worship innovations. He cannot simply remain steadfast in his commitment not to worship in unauthorized ways because when such worship is offered in an assembly of which he is a part his conscience is violated through his union with the group. Corporate worship is a communal enterprise, something that is offered to God by a body of believers not by isolated individuals occupying the same general space. We offer our worship to God as a whole, and thus we all share in what the congregation accepts and willingly practices in its worship. So one who believes unauthorized worship is sinful can find no solace in the fact one is not personally strumming an instrument, whistling, stomping, etc. As Howard Norton wisely observed (*Christian Chronicle*, Jan. 1993, C-16):

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.

If love demands abstention where the conduct merely pressures or tempts another to act contrary to his conscience, then it demands it even more where the conduct itself violates another's conscience through his communal involvement in it.

Second, we know for a fact that the conduct under discussion in Rom. 14:1-15:13 was a matter of indifference to God (i.e., was not a matter of sin); the inspired Apostle makes that clear. But we have no equally definitive answer about whether proposed innovations in Christian worship are matters of indifference. Indeed, that debate is at least as old as the Reformation.

The issue for the Christians in Rome was how to treat one another in light of *the fact* revealed by the Spirit through Paul that violating Jewish food laws and holy days was not sinful. The issue in the case of worship innovations is how to treat one another in light of *an unresolved dispute* about the sinfulness of adding new elements to the corporate worship.<sup>14</sup> If love demands abstention where a brother's convictions clearly are

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<sup>14</sup> Those who believe unauthorized worship is wrong 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 in that only the "weak ones" in Rome certainly were misguided. To the

mistaken, then it demands it even more (or certainly no less) where a brother's convictions may be correct.

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

One technique used to justify riding roughshod over the more restrictive consciences of brothers and sisters is to pit the duty not to harm them against the duty to evangelize. The claim is that love for the lost requires one to change any optional behavior in order to maximize the attractiveness of the gospel (often citing 1 Cor. 9:19-23), so in cases where one's erroneously narrow conscience is limiting the gospel's attractiveness the principle of abstention set forth in Rom. 14:1-15:13 does not apply. In other words, if some innovation like instrumental music is thought to make the worship assembly more appealing to the lost, it is deemed acceptable to introduce it regardless of whether it defiles the conscience of brothers and sisters.

This is misguided. Few things are more devastating to the church's witness than dissension and a lack of love for its own. The maligning of the name of Christ that results from failing to respect the tender consciences of brothers and sisters (Rom. 14:16, 18) more than offsets the attraction of any superficial lure. As Grant Osborne writes:

Above all, believers must live on the basis of love by respecting the honest convictions of other Christians and honoring those convictions when in the presence of such "weak" brothers and sisters in Christ. This certainly has been proven true in our own day as well. Many non-Christians say, "Why should I be a Christian? You don't get along with each other, so why should I think becoming a Christian will bring peace or happiness?"<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, edification of the saints is a crucial concern of the worship assembly. Everything in that assembly is to be done with their upbuilding in mind (1 Cor. 14:26). There is no way to square that concern with defiling the consciences of brothers and sisters. That is the opposite of building them up (Rom. 14:19, 15:2); it is tearing them down. Paul's statements in 1 Cor. 9:19-23 suggest nothing to the contrary. He there was speaking of personal ethics not of conduct in the corporate assembly that defiled a believer's conscience.

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extent the label "weak ones" connotes that one's view is erroneous, applying it to those opposed to worship innovations is unwarranted.

<sup>15</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 369.

Some resist Paul's teaching in Rom. 14:1-15:13 out of a (perhaps subliminal) fear that it will lead to the church being held hostage by a crank. However, the principle Paul enunciates applies only to bona fide matters of conscience not to matters of taste. Not every claim of conscience is genuine, and elders must assess whether alleged matters of conscience are in fact merely matters of preference. If one cannot identify the biblical basis of an alleged duty, it is a clue that preference is being mistaken for conscience. If the biblical basis put forth is novel and eccentric, it is a clue that it is being used as cover for a preference.

In addition, there is a difference in what love owes to a congregational member whose conscience is violated by a change in practice and what it owes to one who joins the congregation knowing that the existing practices are unacceptable. Love will not impose a conscience-violating practice on another, but in the latter case the person is voluntarily exposing himself to the practice for the purpose of changing it. So one who, for example, joins an instrumental congregation is in a different position from one who is a member of an *a cappella* congregation that goes instrumental.

Whatever difficulties exist in the application of Paul's teaching, they cannot be used to ignore what he taught. Certainly in the case under discussion, the addition of unauthorized elements to the corporate worship, there is every reason to believe that claims of conscience are genuine. The understanding that Christians are to worship God only in ways he has indicated he desires or accepts has a long pedigree and is the historical view of churches of Christ.