

Romans 14:1-15:13: The Strong and the Weak – A Plea for Peace Among Jewish and Gentile Christians

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Background

The most likely scenario for the founding of the church in Rome is that Jews from Rome 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 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 change in ethnic composition was probably the result of Emperor Claudius's expulsion of the Jews from Rome in A.D. 49, the event mentioned in Acts 18:2. Jewish Christians who returned after Claudius' death in A.D. 54 found themselves in the minority.¹

The Old Testament 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.² And it may have been quite difficult to obtain kosher meat in Rome at this particular time, especially if, as some scholars suggest, the Romans shut down the Jewish slaughterhouses when they expelled the Jews in A.D. 49. The scarcity of kosher food would have been magnified if non-Christian Jews acquired the little kosher meat that was available and refused to share it with Jewish Christians.

Even wine sometimes was avoided by Jews out of fear it may have been tainted by idolatry. Augustine commented (Kruse, 512), "But some weaker ones abstained from meat and wine, so as to avoid unknowingly eating foods which had been sacrificed to idols. At that time the Gentiles sold all sacrificed meat in the butcher shops, poured out the first fruits of the wine as a libation to their idols and even made some offerings in the wine presses."³ But the conflict in Rome seems centered on food (14:2-3, 6, 15, 20, 23) and holy days (14:5-6). It is possible, as Cranfield observes, that drinking is mentioned in v. 17 simply because it is a natural concomitant of eating and wine is mentioned in v. 21 as an extension of the principle enunciated with regard to the disagreement about food.⁴

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

² 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.

³ Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 512.

⁴ 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.

These dietary rules and observance of holy days, especially the Sabbath, historically were considered very important matters of Jewish faithfulness. They were central to maintaining the unique and separate status of the Jewish people. So when Jews became Christians, it was difficult for some of them to accept in their hearts that it was fine to eat the things they had from childhood been taught were offensive to God and to accept that the prescribed holy days were no longer distinctively sacred.⁵

This attachment to the Mosaic law shows up in many places in the New Testament. 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 opposed so fiercely in Galatians and elsewhere. Others, like the Jewish Christians in Rome, continued to practice certain 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 hold at a distance those not following the dietary rules and observing the holy days, to view them at some level as less faithful or less devoted to God. Conversely, there was a tendency among those not following the law to look down on the law keepers as unenlightened and arrogant.

This is how most modern commentators understand the root issue behind Rom. 14:1-15:13.⁶ Colin Kruse, citing James Dunn, N. T. Wright, Douglas Moo, and Joseph Fitzmyer, states:

The most widely accepted view, and that adopted in this commentary, is that the 'weak' are Jewish Christians (including possibly proselytes) who practiced essentially Jewish customs, and the 'strong' were mainly Gentile Christians (including some Jewish believers who were liberated like Paul himself) who felt no obligation to practice these customs.⁷

Romans 14:1-15:13 is a plea for peace among these two groups.

Meaning of the Text

I. 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. 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. 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, not to be given a kind of contingent or probationary reception.

⁵ Dunn (1988), 800-801.

⁶ Moo (1996), 829 (fn. 13).

⁷ Kruse, 510.

²One person has the faith to eat everything, but the one who is weak eats [only] vegetables. ³Let 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. ⁴Who 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. 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, as meat eating is not wrong for the Christian.

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. ⁶The 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. As I indicated, 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 distinctively holy, 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, as long as each is fully convinced in his own mind that the conduct is acceptable to God.

It is crucial to note that the practices of both the strong and the weak in this matter 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 food laws and sacred days of the Mosaic law are not binding on the Christian is enjoying his freedom in the Lord. These things are like circumcision: it is not sinful to do them or to abstain from doing them.

When something is sinful, however, it doesn't become acceptable just because the one doing it believes it is not sinful. One's ignorance does not baptize sin. You may recall that some in Corinth justified eating sacrificial food at the cultic meals in pagan temples; they were convinced it was fine. Indeed, they pressed for the right to do so 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. In the case of morally neutral matters, if you feel it is wrong, then for *you* it *is* wrong.

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. He tells us that *implicitly* by the fact he labels the Jews "weak in faith" and leaves the issue as a matter of conscience (v. 5), which he would not do if it were objectively sinful to eat the meat. He also makes the point *explicitly* in vv. 14, 20. The Jewish Christian hears these words but has not yet internalized them so as to be free in his heart from the

conditioning of his upbringing. He does not yet have the consent of his conscience to engage in the practice.

Excursus on "Holy Days"

Paul's indication that the observance of "holy days" is a matter of indifference to God raises several issues. Is Paul denying that Sunday is an appointed day for Christians to gather for corporate worship? 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").

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, as the Judaizers did, they are in serious trouble.

That the "Lord's Day" is an appointed day of Christian worship does not mean it is a more sacred day, a distinctively holy 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 explained decades ago ("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.

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 Old Testament. 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 to feel that days never appointed or

sanctioned by God can be observed in honor to him.⁸ We are not in the same position as those Jews whose consciences were caught in the salvation-historical shift wrought by Christ.

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, such as offering animal sacrifices for sin.

⁷For none of us lives for himself, and none dies for himself; ⁸for 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. ⁹For to this end, Christ died and lived [again], so that he might exercise lordship over both the dead and the living. Paul says in vv. 7-9 that the Christian must follow his conscience in such morally neutral matters 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 under his lordship. Christ's lordship is so total that it includes both the dead and the living.

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

II. 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 pitfall. (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. 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 ("pitfall"). 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.

⁸ As God's working "behind the scenes" is implied throughout the Book of Esther, the reader is likewise to infer his working in the establishment of the Feast of Purim in Esther 9. This is supported by the fact its establishment is reported positively by God in the inspired text with no hint of disapproval. This is in stark contrast to the criticism of Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12:33 for, among other things, establishing a feast "in the month that he had devised from his own heart."

As indicated in the translation, 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.*

The Jewish Christians, whom Paul labels weak in faith, have not been able fully to 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, doing it dishonors God because it says you value that thing more than you value pleasing God (see v. 23 – the man who doubts stands condemned if he eats).

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.

Paul goes further in v. 15b 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 (v. 16), 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.

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. 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, as he is urging them to do, is pleasing to God and, rather than being blasphemed by the weak, is esteemed by them and respected in the larger society for having a generous spirit and respecting the rights of those with whom one disagrees.

¹⁹So then, let us pursue the things of peace and the things of edification for one another. 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.

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. 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.

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. 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. As the anonymous author (dubbed Ambrosiaster by Erasmus) of a fourth-century commentary on Romans put it (Kruse, 526), "It is true that if someone thinks it is wrong to eat but does so anyway, he is condemned. For he makes himself guilty when he does what he thinks he ought not to do. If someone acts against his better judgment in a matter of conscience, then Paul says that is a sin."

III. 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." 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. 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 (2:733):

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!

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. 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.

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. 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.

IV. Final appeal (15:7-13) - ⁷Therefore, welcome one another, just as also Christ welcomed you for the glory of God. 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.

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." 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. He says in vv. 8-9a that 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.

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. 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

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 is not convinced the conduct is acceptable to God 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 acceptable to do so, which would be sinful for him. Pushing a brother to sin by violating his conscience is a grave wrong because it not only is deeply distressing – the cause of the brother's grieving (14:15a) – but can begin a hardening process that leads to spiritual ruin (14:15b – "destroy"). That is why Paul generalizes the principle in 14:21. Love will neither grieve nor endanger another for the sake of a personal preference (Rom. 13:10).

Paul says the same thing in 1 Cor. 8:7-13 in relation to the consciences of certain Gentile Christians. 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.

A complicating factor in applying Paul's teaching today is that we have no apostle or inspired interpreter to answer definitively whether the matters of personal conduct over which we dispute are in fact matters of indifference to God. Whereas Paul, speaking by the Spirit, specified that consuming ritually contaminated meat and wine was a morally neutral matter, we continue to disagree over whether certain conduct, such as dancing, playing cards, or consuming alcohol in any amount, is prohibited.

The good news is that this complicating factor, this lack of certainty about the sinfulness of certain conduct, does not affect the duty the strong owe the weak regarding that conduct. The position of the strong, those with the wider conscience, is that the conduct is indeed a matter of

indifference to God – otherwise they would not be engaging in it – so they agree it is a Romans 14-15 situation. One simply needs to apply to them what Paul taught the strong in our text.

So I first want to look at applying Paul's teaching about the strong's duty toward the weak. If I have time, I will say a word about what an unresolved dispute regarding the sinfulness of certain conduct means for the weak's duty to accept the strong.

In a culture that glorifies freedom and majority rule, Paul's teaching on the strong's obligation to the weak 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 this misguided notion 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 notion sometimes trumps the biblical injunction to love, and Paul's admonitions are rationalized away in the process.

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.

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. First, Paul is speaking about matters of *conscience*, not matters of *preference*. For his teaching to apply, the conduct in question must be something the other person feels at some level is *wrong* for him to do. It does not apply to disagreements over matters of preference no matter how strong those preferences may be.

One 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, and on and on. One may have good reasons for one's 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 wrong, something that violates one's conscience to engage in.

Second, Paul is speaking about *conduct*, not teaching, that is done *in the presence* of the brother or sister with the narrower conscience. 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 you* eating in the temple. The strong are free to enjoy the liberty they have in Christ when they are away from brothers and sisters with a narrower conscience. Indeed, Paul in 14:22b labels as "blessed" the man who can enjoy his liberty with a clear conscience.

The restriction is limited to conduct done in the other person'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. It is a different social and psychological dynamic. Paul was quite willing to *teach* the Jewish Christians they were wrong in thinking they needed to abstain

from meat and wine, which would influence them toward consuming it, but he forbid eating and drinking in their faces. So if, for example, one's brother cannot play cards with a clear conscience, one is free to tell him he is wrong and to play cards outside of his presence, but one may not invite him over and play cards in his face.

Third, Paul is speaking here and in 1 Corinthians of *personal* conduct, something the brother with a narrower conscience can be induced to imitate, like eating meat, drinking wine, or participating in temple feasts. Some things are thought by some to be wrong only for the church, the local *community* of believers, to do. A person may believe, for example, that it is sinful for a congregation to incorporate or to have a kitchen. He has no problem with individual Christians incorporating or having kitchens; he just thinks it is wrong for *the church*, the collective entity, to do so. I see those situations as being outside the scope of Paul's teaching in Romans 14-15 and 1 Corinthians 8 because an individual cannot act as a community, as a congregation, and thus the Christian with the narrower conscience cannot be induced to imitate the behavior he thinks is wrong so as to violate his conscience.

It is like someone who believes it is wrong (constitutionally speaking) for a public school to endorse a religion but not wrong for individuals to do so. If his public school endorsed Christianity, he would think the school had done wrong, but he would not thereby be induced to imitate the behavior he thinks is wrong because he cannot act as a public school. He can only act as an individual.

A person's conscience may be bothered less directly by being a member of a congregation he feels is doing wrong, but God does not seem to require abstention from conduct that may disturb another's conscience merely by his or her congregational affiliation. You never see the inspired writers or Jesus in the letters to the churches in Revelation bolstering their ethical admonitions to a church by saying that, in addition to being wrong, the uncorrected conduct may disturb the consciences of others through their congregational affiliation and therefore they need to comply for the additional reason of love for their brothers and sisters. Rather, the effect of one's behavior on the conscience of other Christians is given as a basis for restricting that behavior only where the behavior is done in the presence of one with a narrower conscience so as to risk inducing its imitation. This seems to be where God has struck the balance between the eldership's duty and ability to direct the affairs of the congregation in accordance with its best judgment and its duty to protect the weak.

The fourth thing to keep in mind is that Paul is speaking of optional conduct (assumed to be so in 1 Corinthians 8 for purpose of argument) the foregoing of which does not leave one with only a substantially more burdensome way of obeying a divine command. I would put the dispute over one cup versus multiple communion cups in this category. Unlike abstaining from meat and wine (or pagan temple feasts in 1 Corinthians 8) for the sake of a brother's narrower conscience, abstaining from multiple cups leaves only the one-cup option for obeying the command to participate in the Lord's Supper, which for many is a significant hindrance to taking the Supper or to doing so with the required mindset.

Some people simply cannot overcome the sense of disgust and concern over disease in drinking after scores or 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 – it nevertheless is a reality that significantly hinders their obedience. For them, using multiple cups is not a mere preference; rather, the alternative of one cup is a genuine emotional or psychological barrier to their obedience. Since Paul's directive in Romans to abstain from meat and wine (and from temple feasts in Corinth) carried no such spiritual cost, did not leave the abstainer with only a substantially more burdensome way of obeying a command, the one-cup dispute is outside the scope of Paul's teaching. Therefore, the proponent of using one cup cannot rightly claim that Paul's teaching on abstention mandates that the elders shift to one cup for the sake of his conscience. The burden that practice places on others' obedience is a distinguishing factor of which the elders must take account.⁹

So has Paul's instruction died a death of a thousand qualifications? Is there nothing left that applies today? His teaching regarding the strong's duty to the weak applies to a host of disagreements – playing cards, drinking alcohol, dancing, celebrating holidays, etc. – but the one that is perhaps most pressing today is the case of instrumental music in worship (although clapping during the singing of songs in worship may be a close second). Many people are convinced it is sinful to worship God with instrumental accompaniment, and yet we see elderships in our brotherhood switching their congregations to instrumental worship. These leaders insist on engaging in the purely optional conduct of worshipping God with instruments in a community of saints that includes some who deny or are not fully satisfied that doing so is acceptable to God.

These Christians certainly are being *pressured* to worship God contrary to their consciences through conduct that is done in their faces, which Paul makes clear love will not do. But it is worse than that. They are having their consciences *actually violated* because corporate worship is a *communal activity*. 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 one another. It is congregational not individual, corporate not singular. It is *our* worship. This is not a matter of mere congregational identification; it is a matter of communal offering. If half the congregation burns incense or blows whistles, those not engaging in that specific conduct share in it in a way they would not if that same conduct was done personally or privately.¹⁰

That's why worship is always such a sensitive issue. As Howard Norton wisely 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

⁹ The proponent of using one cup may grant the inapplicability of Paul's teaching on abstention and still argue that the nature of love obligates a fellow believer to burden his own obedience rather than push the one-cupper to violate his conscience. But that alleged requirement of love is not specified in Scripture.

¹⁰ This is true for the one-cupper in a multi-cup assembly, but again, that situation is distinguishable because abstaining from the use of multiple cups leaves one with only the one-cup alternative, which for some is a substantial burden on their obedience to the command.

practices enter the public assembly, however, everyone is affected; and the possibility for division and shattering is scary.

I have heard the claim that Rom. 14:1-15:13 has no applicability to instrumental worship because "stumbling block" (*proskomma*) and "pitfall" (*skandalon*) in 14:13 refer only to that which costs someone their salvation and the disagreement over instrumental worship does not fall in that category, so one is told, because it does not involve one's trust in Christ. That claim is mistaken. Leaving aside the fact "stumbling block" and "pitfall" can have a more general meaning,¹¹ if that which may lead one to violate one's conscience regarding food laws constitutes a stumbling block and a pitfall, as it clearly does, then certainly that which may lead one to violate one's conscience regarding worship practices also qualifies. The spiritual danger lies in defiling one's conscience – that is the sin that is condemned by God (14:23) and the cause of the brother's grieving and destruction (14:15) – not in defiling it only regarding food.

One technique used to justify riding roughshod over the more restrictive consciences of brothers and sisters in the matter of instrumental worship is to pit the duty not to harm them against the duty to evangelize. It first is asserted that love for the lost requires Christians to change any optional behavior in order to maximize the attractiveness of the gospel (often citing 1 Cor. 9:19-23). Instrumentalists then leap from that assertion to the claim that the principle of abstention set forth in Rom. 14:1-15:13 does not apply in cases where the narrow conscience of the weak is thought to be limiting the attractiveness of the gospel. In other words, if 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 consciences of brothers and sisters.

That strikes me as misguided for several reasons. First, in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul made clear that, even if the Corinthians were correct in arguing that attending temple feasts was a morally neutral matter (he makes clear in 1 Cor. 10:14-22 that they were not correct) love for weaker brothers still would require them to forego the practice. It did not matter that temple feasts would have been an ideal place for making and building ties with non-Christians in the community for purposes of evangelism. That potential outreach benefit, its evangelistic utility, did not trump the obligation of love for the weaker brothers and sisters.

Second, 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 which results from failing to respect the tender consciences of brothers and sisters more than offsets the attraction of any superficial lure. Paul says as much in Rom. 14:18. 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

¹¹ See, e.g., Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 882, 926.

Christian? You don't get along with each other, so why should I think becoming a Christian will bring peace or happiness?"¹²

And third, edification or upbuilding 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 using or foregoing his freedom from Jewish food laws so as not *needlessly* to alienate Gentile or Jewish non-Christians, respectively. He certainly was not suggesting that a Christian should, out of concern over alienating non-Christians, conduct himself in a worship assembly in a way that defiles another believer's conscience. Any alienation of non-Christians that results from honoring the conscience of one's brothers and sisters is anything but needless.

Is it not clear what Paul would say to a Gentile Christian in Rome who insisted on eating meat at a church fellowship meal because doing so would attract non-Christians? After all, he wrote in 1 Cor. 8:13, "Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will *never eat meat forevermore*, so that I not cause my brother to stumble." That is about as emphatic as it gets. Paul says much the same in Rom. 14:21.

Some think they can outflank the problem by splitting congregational worship into instrumental and noninstrumental services. But valuing an admittedly optional practice over the church's unity in worship, forcing a divide in that fundamental aspect of the church's being for the sake of a personal preference, is to misjudge the extent to which God's pleasure in our praise is tied to the peace and unity of the Spirit, to the one voice with which it is offered. What human father would be pleased if some of his children insisted on holding his birthday party in their preferred garden spot knowing that his other children could not attend because of allergies? The intended expression of love for the father would be ruined by the division and lack of brotherly love it reflected. It would be the antithesis of Psalm 133: *Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! ² It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! ³ It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.*

Moreover, splitting the congregation's worship by insisting on an optional practice that excludes others broadcasts to the very community they desire to reach how little they love and value each other. As I already noted, that devastates the church's witness. Church splits are a black eye, and I would say all the more so when they are forced over personal preferences rather than convictions of conscience.

And finally, I submit that splitting the church this way is contrary to the edification and upbuilding that is central to the worship assembly. The division and the lack of love that produced the separation would haunt each assembly and be a constant source of discouragement.

¹² Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 369.

Each segregated gathering would proclaim that personal preference is more important than Christ's desire for love and unity and thus would be a tacit repudiation of the truth that Jesus is Lord. If maintaining socioeconomic divisions *within* an assembly caused Paul to declare that the Corinthians' gatherings did more harm than good (1 Cor. 11:17), would he not say the same about assemblies that are split for the sake of one group's musical preference?

Before concluding on the strong's duty to the weak, 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 a person who *joins* the congregation knowing that the existing practices are unacceptable to his conscience. In the former case, the conscience-pressuring or conscience-violating practice is *imposed* on the member by the change. In the latter case, the person *voluntarily exposes himself* to the unacceptable 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 it is wrong to worship with instruments is in a different position from one who is a member of an *a cappella* congregation that goes instrumental.

I also want to add a footnote about Paul's use of the term "weak" in Romans 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 is misleading and I think needlessly alienating.

Now, what about the weak's duty to accept the strong? How are those with a narrower conscience to relate to those with a wider conscience when they disagree whether the conduct in question is morally neutral? Unlike the matter of ritually contaminated meat and wine that Paul established definitively was morally neutral, in these cases those with the narrower conscience are convinced those with a wider conscience simply are sinning, living in disobedience to the Lord. And we have no authoritative arbiter to settle the dispute.

There is no easy answer to this, but one must steer between the twin dangers of arrogance and relativism. That is, one must maintain a healthy degree of humility regarding one's own understanding of God's will, recognizing that one is a fallible interpreter, but at the same time one cannot drain Scripture of all objective meaning such that all interpretations are deemed legitimate and valid. Not everything is ambiguous and up for grabs. The fact it is possible to "twist" the Scriptures, as Peter says in 2 Pet. 3:16, means there are interpretive boundaries that cannot be transgressed. If, for example, the Galatian Christians embraced the Judaizer's heresy, it would be of no help to them that they had been deceived into doing so.

The question, it seems to me, is not whether one is convinced subjectively that the conduct in question is condemned by God but whether one is convinced, in light of standard interpretive methodology and the history of interpretation, that a "reasonable" or "good faith" handling of the word *requires* that conclusion. The more strongly one believes that is the case,

the more one is obligated to consider the conduct as beyond the Christian pale. It is one thing to make room in the body of Christ for disagreements over the sinfulness of things like social drinking and dancing. It is another thing altogether to do so regarding something like homosexual conduct. These disputes are different in kind.