

What About Romans 14?

by Casey Head

Sadly, it is common for Christians who disagree on doctrinal issues to say at the conclusion of their debate, “Well, let’s just agree to disagree...after all, Romans 14 says that we can disagree and still maintain fellowship.” While this may sound very nice, it is wrong to place all doctrinal issues under the umbrella of Romans 14. The “grace-unity” movement and those who claim that we MUST agree on gospel issues but NOT doctrinal issues rely heavily on the words of Paul in Romans 14. Let us take a few minutes to correct this common error.

We are told in Romans 14:4, “Who art thou that judgest another man’s servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand, “ and again in verse 13, “Let us not therefore judge one another anymore: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way.” Finally, Paul says in verse 19, “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.” These three verses are often highlighted by those who argue that we should seek “unity in diversity” when it comes to doctrinal issues. After all, Paul tells us here not to judge our brethren but rather to establish peace and unity...despite our differences. But is the apostle speaking here of all doctrinal issues? Or, is his application limited?

In the context of Romans 14, Paul is limiting his application to matters of liberty. In verse one, for example, it says, “Him that is **weak** in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.” The issues under discussion in this chapter are ones that divide the weak from the strong, not the strong from the strong. In the following passage, the point is made abundantly clear that matters of liberty are being considered- liberties that separate the weak from the strong. It says in verses 2-3, “For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth judge him that eateth: for God hath received him.” In other words, strong Christians understand that both vegetables and meat may be consumed, but some weaker Christians, for whatever reason, may not feel comfortable eating meat. It does not matter either way! If a person chooses not to eat meat because it violates their conscience to do so, then they shouldn’t eat meat; but they are the weaker brother. We are told in verse 20, “For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offense.” This is not a matter of law, as it does not make a difference either way. Rather, it is a matter of liberty.

Another illustration is given in verses 5-6 regarding the observance of days. Paul says here, “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” Throughout the book of Romans, Paul addresses the universality of the gospel of Christ, showing that we have been delivered from the curse of the law of Moses. No longer are Jews the special people of God. Now, Gentiles have the same access to God. When Paul speaks of the observance of days in Romans 14, he is likely referring to the tendency of some Jewish Christians to observe certain aspects of the Hebrew holidays and feast days. These weak Jewish Christians were not observing the days religiously, but nevertheless, it was habitual for them to do certain things on these days. Perhaps it would have violated their conscience to work on the Sabbath day, or Saturday, and so as Christians, they elected not to labor. Paul says in Romans 14:6, “He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doeth not regard it.” As with the previous issue, it ultimately does not make any difference whether or not one works on Saturday. It is a matter of liberty, and for some, a matter of conscience, but it was not a part of the doctrine of Christ. That is the point.

As you can see, the point of Romans 14 is to settle disagreements among Christians regarding matters of liberty. In no way can we use this chapter to promote “unity in diversity” when disputes arise over doctrinal matters. After all, we are told in 2 John 9, “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God.”