

NOTES ON ROMANS 14-16

14:1-12

(1) Paul's discussion of the "strong" and the "weak", which runs from 14:1-15:13, probably began in 12:3-21. If the latter does not directly address the issue it does provide a context in which it can be addressed.

(2) The "weak" are people who are weak in faith. They are Christians who have not yet grasped the radical nature of the Gospel which Paul has just set forth. They have not quite grasped the notion that our relationship with God is based solely on God's electing grace and that our righteousness is based upon God's righteousness. The "weak" seem to hold the belief that our relationship with God involves some pre-conditions which we must meet first. Three things are mentioned about the "weak": (a) they abstain from meat (14:2, 21), (b) they regard some days as having religious significance (14:5) and (c) they do not drink wine (14:17, 21).

(3) 14:1-3 is an appeal to charity (as in 13:9). Both the "strong" and the "weak" are in spiritual danger. The "strong", while they understand the implications of the Gospel better, are in danger of viewing their faith as a sign of superiority—thus overthrowing the whole doctrine of grace. The "weak" are in danger of identifying their abstentions with God's righteousness, also overthrowing the doctrine of grace.

(4) 14:4: This places the judgments of the both parties in perspective. It is God who decides the acceptability of his servants' service, not the "strong" or the "weak".

(5) 14:5-6: One issue dealt with here is probably that of the Sabbath. There may be Jewish Christians who keep the Sabbath while there are Gentile Christians who do not do so. The "strong" are not to condemn this practice because those who follow it believe themselves to be honoring the Lord; they understand themselves to be following a divine command. The point is that they are not merely pleasing themselves. Likewise, the "strong" are not to be condemned for eating meat (which most likely came from a sacrifice in a pagan temple as did most meat) because they do so "in honor of the Lord" (14:6). The "weak" abstain from eating meat "in honor of the Lord" (14:6) are so are not to be condemned. The "strong" exercise their freedom in Christ (which Paul considers to be a good thing) and the "weak" abstain from such freedom in the belief that they are honoring the Lord (which Paul considers to be a good thing). While Paul shares the outlook of the "strong" (cf. I Corinthians 8:1-13), he is unwilling for such a minor issue to become a point of division. Charity demands that each party understand the real motives of the other and to honor honorable motives. This is not to say that Paul is a proponent of "unity for unity's sake". His teaching on excommunication in I Corinthians 5:1-5 suggests that Paul was uncompromising on fundamentals.

(6) 14:7-12: The disputants in Rome, both of whom have failed to grasp the doctrine of grace, need to be reminded of a cardinal point: because of Jesus' death and resurrection Christians belong in life and death to God. Neither the presumptions of freedom nor the reservations of scruples govern our relationship to God; neither our "freedom" nor our "scruples" commend us to God. In such matters it is wrong, Paul says, to make a judgment that what another person is doing is unacceptable to God. Because we shall all be judged by God, God is capable of determining what he finds acceptable for himself. By exhorting the Romans to abstain from judgment in such matters, Paul is not advocating a kind of relativism but underlining the principle of 12:4. If the both parties had heeded this principle, the present dispute would not have occurred. We will all stand before the "the judgment seat of God" (cf. II Corinthians 5:10) and so will have to account for our own actions; presumably we will not be asked to evaluate the motives of other people, motives about which we may be completely wrong. Paul thus comes to a position which does not neatly fit into our categories of either "loving" or "judgmental" (a great thing). The "strong" are in fact right but if they believe their rightness to be the source of their relationship to God they are wrong. The "weak" are wrong but still accepted by God.

14:13-23

(1) This section is concrete illustration of what Paul says in 13:9-10: "The commandments...are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself...love is the fulfilling of the law.'"

(2) Instead of passing judgment on one another (by which Paul means making a judgment about another person's status before God) must be replaced with a determination, a decision, to not hinder a fellow Christian. A new focus is needed, that of 12:5—transformed judgment (12:2) is absolutely essential. It is important that Paul makes his own position unambiguously clear: "I know an am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself" (14:14). Paul is clearly in sympathy with the "strong" though he is very critical of their actions.

(3) It is fairly clear that 14:15-23 is addressed to the "strong". In matters which are not essential one has to adopt the view that one's actions will not be governed simply by what one knows to be correct (Paul sees no problem in eating meat from animals sacrificed in pagan temples) but by the effects of one's action on a fellow Christian. Love, thus, is not an act of mere "tolerance" but a matter of trying to understand the effects of one's own words and actions on a fellow Christian. The "strong" may be exercising a genuine liberty, but this liberty should not be exercised if it causes grief to another Christian who might either be scandalized by the sight of a fellow Christian doing what something he/she is convinced is immoral or be led to do the same thing him/herself in violation of conscience. What if the fact that the "strong" eat "pagan" meat causes one of the "weak" to conclude "Well, I guess that there really is no difference between paganism and Christianity!"? The "strong," while claiming to have faith do not actually reflect the "obedience of faith". Their insistence that "I have a right to..." is simply self-assertion that will "destroy the one for whom Christ died" (14:15). The "strong" need to be reminded that "the kingdom of God is not a matter of

eating and drinking but of righteousness [1:16-17] and peace [5:1] and joy [8:26-30] in the Holy Spirit" (14:17).

(4) The "transformed mind" (12:2) sees things in a different way. Instead of pushing a private agenda (however legitimate and even worthy), we are required to see things from a new perspective. What must be uppermost in our minds is what will edify and build up the Body (14:19) not "my rights" or "what I personally think is important". Once again, this is not relativism or "peace at all costs". In matters which are not essential we must avoid making other "stumble" (14:21). Paul's question to the "strong" is something like this: For the sake of insisting on your freedom to eat any kind of food would you undermine the work of God in a fellow Christian? Loving your neighbor means looking out for their spiritual well being even when it means a limitation of your own proper freedom: "It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble" (14:21).

(5) The "strong" have an obligation to the "weak" (12:10!). The "strong" must exercise self-restraint lest the "weak" adopt their habits not because they have come to see them as good and proper but because they are afraid of ridicule and exclusion.

15:1-13

(1) 15:1-6: With this section Paul concludes his attempt to guide the "strong" and the "weak". In 15:1 Paul now explicitly identifies himself with the "strong" and says that this group must "bear with the failings of the weak". Once again, this is not mere tolerance and Paul's argument is grounded in theology. The warrant for the "strong" to give up their freedom to accommodate the weak is the example of Christ's life considered as a whole: "For Christ did not please himself..." (15:3). Because Christ's actions were not aimed at his own happiness or benefit, those who really are "strong" but follow the same path. This is made very clear by quoting Psalm 69:9 in 15:3. In the Psalm, the reproaches of sinners fall upon God's representative and this underlines Christ's innocent suffering. Christ most certainly did not please himself but became obedient to please God. This is what should guide the "strong". The aim of Paul's advice is not to protect some type of artificial "unity" but to attain something much more profound, "that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:6). This takes us back to 14:1-12 where the Lordship of God relativizes all human attempts at pleasing oneself.

(2) 15:7-13: Once again Christ is the foundation for the life Paul commends. Christ "became a servant to the circumcised" (15:8), meaning that Christ became a servant of the Jews in that through him God's design for all people could come about, thus fulfilling the promise to Abraham. Jesus' service to the Jews was literally self-sacrificial and in him the promises to "Israel" (Jewish and Gentile Christians) are kept. To make this point, Paul cites four Old Testament texts: Psalm 18:49 (=15:9), Deuteronomy 32:43 (=15:10), Psalm 117:1 (=15:11) and Isaiah 11:10 (=15:12). This chain

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of Scripture citations is designed to underwrite trust in God's faithfulness. Paul expects not grudging accommodation of the "weak" but that they will be filled with "all joy and peace" (15:13).

15:14-33

(1) 15:14-21: This section offers a preface to the real purpose of this whole letter. Here, Paul offers a summary of what he has attempted to develop. Paul's ministry is "in the priestly service of the gospel of God" (15:16) and its aim is to present "the offering of the Gentiles" (15:16) to God so as to be "acceptable". Note that all this terminology describing Paul's ministry is borrowed from Israel's worship. The purpose of this ministry is to bring the Gentiles to "obedience" (15:18=1:5). The theme of this section was presented in 10:13 and it explains Paul's missionary strategy and logic. This strategy and logic are summarized by a quote from Isaiah 52:15 (15:21).

(2) The next phase of Paul's mission will take him to the far western end of the Roman Empire and it is his hope "to be helped on my journey there by you" (15:24).

16:1-27

(1) The thing to note about this chapter is that it indicates that Paul knows quite a number of people in Rome. 16:22 tells us that this letter was dictated by Paul. 16:23 tells us that this letter was probably written from Ephesus since Gaius is mentioned in Acts 19:29 as being in Ephesus. Note how the final doxology in 16:25-27 returns to the themes of 1:1-6 and echoes the themes of Ephesians 1.