

Sermon for Sunday, January 2, 2011
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Compromise and Convictions
Romans 14:1-12

Introduction

If you look at it with a skeptical eye, it seems that Christianity is destined to foster disagreements. Our faith is full of ideas and it insists that certain of these ideas are foundational and life-giving. Others are false and deadly. Biblical texts come with labels like "Here is a trustworthy saying" and "Have nothing to do with myths."

Christians are supposed to have convictions, strong convictions about the nature of God and humanity, life, death, and the future. Hinduism, Buddhism, and many other religions are loose about their beliefs and practices. Christianity has more doctrine, more ethical precepts.

Yet we disagree about all sorts of things. For example, how should churches be structured? Hierarchically, through popes and bishops? Or representatively, through leaders chosen by the people?

How much should Christians stay above or away from their culture and how much should they accept and blend in with their culture? Should we talk, work, dress, and entertain ourselves roughly like everyone else, or should we be different, should we aim to set ourselves apart?

We are prone to disagree about things for several reasons. First, God's word, the Bible, primarily comes to us in a grand, sprawling narrative. The narrative elicits an array of God-inspired commentary, written over fifteen centuries by prophets, wise men, and apostles. These writers demonstrate a variety of styles and interests. The Bible, in short, is not an easy book to master. Indeed, it defies complete mastery.

Second, therefore, the Bible does not come to us as a reference work: "Turn to page 782 for a definition of the Trinity." It has no table of contents or index, where we might look up answers to our doctrinal, ecclesiastical or ethical questions. Bible-reading is wonderfully complex.

Third, maybe most important, God ordained that the gospel message go to all nations and cultures. Since these cultures span every land, language, culture and century, and since every culture and era has its own debates, Christians will inevitably wrestle with the questions they bring to theological and ethical teaching of the Bible. People want to know: How do I live, what do I do, as I strive to live with integrity in life's baffling situations?

It seems that God wants us to grow by wrestling with hard questions. Since answers are elusive, it's inevitable that Christians disagree at times, often sharply.

Romans 14 teaches us how to handle our disagreements. It tells us how to have strong convictions without becoming obnoxious. We should learn how to get along without compromising our convictions. It teaches how to *get along with everyone without going along with everything*.

The background to Romans 14: The church in Rome had two parties, which Paul calls “the weak” and “the strong.” Romans 14 mentions two topics they debated:

- First, should believers be vegetarians, or can they eat anything?
- Second, is every day the same? Or are some days especially consecrated to God?

Meat: We debate the same question today, although for different reasons. We wonder if carnivores cause cruelty to animals, harm to the environment, and bad health in consumers. Reply: If God didn't want us to eat meat, why did he make it taste so good?

Days: Our work sport and activity crazed culture make us wonder if we really should establish a whole day for rest, leisure, and worship. We just might be the busiest, hardest-working culture of all time. To work and do, all the time, seems virtuous and good, so why set apart a day of rest?

The questions came up for a different reason in the church at Rome.¹ The church was about half Jew, half Roman. The Romans had no qualms about eating meat, no history of judging one day more important than another.

The Jews did. The Old Testament and Judaism had annual feast days, a monthly day of sacrifice and a weekly Sabbath. They were reluctant to eat meat because it was impossible to be sure if it was "clean" according to their laws of kosher food.

These laws had become essential to Jewish identity at the time, for reasons we can understand. Over and over, God told the Jews they were different from the nations, called out of the nations, his holy people, set apart for him (Exod. 19:5-6; Lev 20:24-26; Psa. 106:47; Isa. 63:3; Ezek. 20:34-41). To make the difference clear, God commanded the Israelites to dress and eat in ways that were distinct.

In short, the Jews believed they ought to observe social markers that set them apart from their culture. But should these rules endure for Jewish Christians? A Jewish Christian is still a Jew. All of us should have a certain loyalty to our heritage, our people. But is it still right to make an effort to be different?

The correct answer is "No." Christians should not eat, dress or wear their hair in distinctive ways to demonstrate that we are different. This is explicit in Mark 7. And Paul says so, later in Romans 14:14. "As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself." We are called to moral and spiritual distinctiveness (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9-11), but not to separate clothing or food.

Someone will say: "We should eat differently in a way – we must not be gluttons or get drunk. And the Bible says believers should dress modestly, not ostentatiously." True! But we should not strive to look different per se. If everyone is wearing jeans, wear jeans. Or ties, if everyone wears ties. Why? Because we don't live in fear of pollution by the world. We're confident. We believe we can have good influence, so we want to draw closer to people instead of setting ourselves apart from them.

¹ Scholars debate the root of the disagreement, offering at least four options. 1) the weak cannot be pure legalists – auto-soterists, or Paul would rebuke them. 2) Nor can they be Judaizers, for they would also be rebuked. 3) It's possible that the weak are simply ascetics, since asceticism was a wide-ranging cultural value in Greco-Roman religious/philosophical/ethical schools. But this doesn't account for the debate about days. 4) It's possible that the weak were new converts who feared pollution by idols and meat offered to idols. While that is the issue in 1 Cor 10, Romans never mentions idols. And the "idols" view doesn't explain days, either. 5) above is #1 among scholars

This is the potent message of Romans 14: "the strong" are right and "the weak" are wrong. Still the debate continued, so Paul moves to his greater concern: Since "the weak" don't see their error, how can we get along? How can both parties stand firm without becoming quarrelsome, without ruining the good spirit of God's family? *How can we be right without being obnoxious?* How can we get along with everyone without going along with everything?

"The strong" took the correct position. All food is clean and every day is holy, but Christians must never conduct themselves in ways that destroy others over relatively minor matters. Whatever our convictions, we must "walk in love" (14:15).

1 The first command: Accept others Accept those who are weak in faith

Paul's opening command is firm and clear. "Accept, welcome those who are weak in faith" (14:1). Treat them as brothers, sisters, respected friends. We just defined "weak," as Paul uses it here. The weak have needless scruples. They think they have to keep rules that they do not actually need to keep. They think they are not free, morally, to eat meat (14:2). But we must accept them even if it frustrates us that they don't know the freedom they have in Christ.

Acceptance means no condescending attitudes and pointless judgments (14:3)

For Paul, carnivorous or vegetarian practices matter less than the way we handle our differences. The strong, the carnivores and omnivores, "must not look down on" or "despise" (14:3b, New International Version (NIV), English Standard Version (ESV)) the weak for abstaining from meat or for other needless scruples. The strong must not *scorn* the weak for refusing.

Paul also has a command for the weak. They must not "condemn" or "pass judgment on the one who eats [meat]" (14:3b, ESV). The weak must not condemn the strong for actions that are not, in fact, sinful (14:3-4).

The big idea is clear: Each party should accept people with whom we disagree because God accepts them. We shouldn't despise or condemn each other because God does not condemn us. We must not condemn people whom God has accepted. We live together, but each is accountable to God as judge, not to each other. Let's apply this to some topics believers have debated.

1950-1970. Should Christians go to movies? The scrupulous say, "The screen will show violence, sensuality, cursing, blasphemy. That's not entertainment, it's sin, temptation." So they judged/condemned all who went to movies. The "free" said, "But you watch the same movies at home when they appear on TV. Besides the world is a violent place. We can't hide from reality." So the "strong" scorn or despise those who have scruples. And the weak condemn those who are free.

Take alcohol. The scrupulous refuse to touch alcohol. "It leads to drunkenness, alcoholism, destruction of lives. Some folk can discipline themselves, but others are prone to alcoholism. Why take such a risk? See how often the Bible warns against drunkenness. It says, 'Wine is a mocker.'" The free reply, "But the Bible says 'Praise the Lord... [for] wine that gladdens the heart of man' (Psa. 104:15). And if possible abuse stopped us, no one would ever do anything. People die in auto accidents but we still drive. People get addicted to all sorts of things - work, exercise, chocolate, spectator sports. But I don't hear calls to boycott chocolate or baseball. Look at all the prescription drugs that amp people up or calm them down."

I recently overheard a debate that will make people squirm: Many single Christian men and women live chastely in separate parts of an apartment? Can five girls recruit two ugly guys to share the rent and protect the doors in a rough part of the city? Traditionalists say: "Are you insane? The Bible says 'Flee temptation.' You may start as friends, but something is bound to happen."

Younger folk reply: "The world has changed. We lived with step-brothers in high school and in co-ed dorms in college. Nothing happened. Our friendship with these guys cannot lead to romance. They're ugly, immature dorks, but they're big. The issue is safety, not morals."

We see how easily each group could become upset with the other. The scrupulous are tempted to condemn the free: "Are you insane? This is plain sin." The free are prone to despise the scrupulous: "These legalists refuse to think. They certainly don't understand Christian freedom."

Sidebar: We don't bend on the essentials

We don't bend on the essentials. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) has a list of essentials of the faith, things *every Christian believes*. It begins: "We believe in one God, the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." It ends, "The Lord Jesus Christ commands all believers to proclaim the Gospel... and to make disciples of all nations. Obedience to the Great Commission requires total commitment to 'Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.'"

The EPC's explanation of the essentials *wisely adds* that it is sometimes necessary to take a stand on strategic secondary issues. Suppose someone wants to become a Presbyterian pastor. Interviews are rigorous. In the interview, he says "I believe the church in each city should be led by a bishop who oversees and coordinates the efforts of all churches." We would say, "We love you my friend, but we don't have bishops. If you want to report to a bishop, then may the Lord lead you to a hierarchical church: Lutheran, Methodist, Roman, or Episcopal."

The EPC says "the 'Essentials of Our Faith' document is not intended to be the exclusive test of orthodoxy for ordination. It's not intended to be used as minimal core beliefs for ordination." We have the right to ask leaders to believe more than the essentials. We can take stands on vital secondary issues. But some things truly are minor, fourth rank. We can disagree and live together in peace.

2 The reasons to accept others

First, God accepts all of us (14:1)

There are two reasons to accept and welcome believers, even when we differ on lesser issues. First God accepts all of us, when we repent and believe, errors and all. Glory! The Lord Jesus, who knows all our false ideas, every hidden sin and bad habit, every character flaw, loves and receives us. We cannot be wiser or more restrictive than the Lord. Therefore we must welcome each other.

Second, God is the judge; you and I are not (14:4, 10-12)

God is the judge, we are not. In 14:4, Paul uses an analogy: Does anyone judge his neighbor's servants? We would say, "Do I do annual reviews for the folks at the grocery store or the bank?" No, the leader judges whether his or her own people "stand or fall." Much more does the Lord determine if we will stand or fall? Blessed word, "And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand."

Jesus forgives our sins and pleads our innocence, on the basis of his righteousness, reckoned to us (14:4). As Paul says in Rom. 14:9, "For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living." Since Jesus died and rose to have the right to declare his people righteous, we must not presume to judge or condemn:

"You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat" (14:10). Every knee bows before God (14:11). Indeed "Each of us will give an account of himself to God" (14:12). It is enough to prepare ourselves for that.

3 We can accept others and yet disagree, due to strong convictions (14:5-6)

Case One: Days - Romans 14:5-6 states the first disagreement: "One man esteems one day as better than another; while another esteems all days alike." Some say every day is sacred, consecrated to God. We can always say, "This is the day the Lord has made" (Psalm 118:24).

The Bible says everything counts: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart" (Col. 3:23). If everything we *do* counts, then every minute counts and every day is equally important. Romans 14:23 ends, "Everything that does not come from faith is sin." If everything we do should come from faith and we're supposed to live by faith all the time, then every day, every hour counts. Work, rest, play, worship are equally important. Besides the Bible says we should always be ready for the opportunities that present themselves: "Be ready in season and out of season.... Make the most of every opportunity" (2 Tim. 4, Eph. 5:17).

It's possible to argue that **some days are more important** than others. The Bible calls Sunday "the Lord's Day." The Lord himself ordained special days of feasting, sacrifice, and celebration. Again, Paul says this view is incorrect. That is, there is a day of worship and rest, but it is not "more important" than other days.

Still the one thing we can't do is "luxuriate in indecision and vacillation." Life doesn't allow us the luxury of revisiting debates. Life requires that we act. We can't stand around incapacitated by uncertainty. No human ever has absolute certainty. All decisions are made on insufficient evidence. Whether our faith leads us to adopt the practices of the strong or the weak, we must be ready to choose a course and act – firm, decisive, resolute, courageous, and joyful.²

We dare not say, "Even the experts can't agree. How can I ever know what is right?" No, "Each one must be fully convinced in his own mind" (14:5). That is, each one must think, read, consult, come to conviction and then live by it. If your faith requires you to abstain from meat, then abstain (14:2). And practice your convictions, if you can. If you can't, change jobs or change your life so you can. But whatever we do, we aim to serve the Lord.

Case Two: Are disciples omnivores or vegetarians? (14:6)

Again, we study, conclude and act. In Paul's day people asked, "May I eat food that has been who knows where, so it's unclean?" The weak said, "No" and became vegetarians. In Corinth, much of the meat in the market had been presented to an idol that morning and was now being sold with all other meat.

Christians asked, "May I eat meat that was offered to an idol? Some said, "No, it's defiled." Paul said "Eat it. Idols are nothing, they don't exist, because there are no other gods. Nothing happened because the meat was presented to someone that doesn't exist." That is the correct answer, the "strong" answer - Eat the meat.

² Cranfield, 343

But Paul knew some people saw it differently: "I used to worship idols and I have to stay away from everything that has to do with them. I can't eat such meat." Paul would say, "If you're convinced it's wrong, don't eat it." To quote: "I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean" (14:14).

We must never do things we believe to be wrong. Suppose someone thinks he should give thanks, in prayer, before eating or drinking anything – every glass of water, every carrot stick. Let's posit that this is a false conviction. But if the man with this view stops praying over his carrots out of social embarrassment, then he is sinning. It isn't objectively a violation of God's law. But because he thinks it's an act of cowardice and infidelity, then he is acting unfaithfully.

If Jason deliberately does something that he thinks defies God's will, then he has sinned, even if the act is otherwise OK. Romans 14:23 says, "Everything that does not come from faith is sin."

If God's people find it easy to get sideways with each other, imagine how easy it was in Paul's day, as Jew and Gentile, pagan and monotheist came together in one city-wide church. Paul's counsel to them applies just as surely to us today:

First, may the Lord help us recognize the difference between disputable and indisputable matters, between what is clear in Scripture and about what we can honestly disagree. We need to accept that God's people will disagree on many issues until Jesus comes again.

Second, all of us, but especially those who are prone to judge, should ask the Lord to give us the humility to tremble before his Word, instead of trying to make other people tremble at our words.

Third, may the Lord show each how to relate to the other. The strong can grow weary of the weak, the scrupulous, the "vegetarians," who find fault and appoint themselves as prosecuting attorneys who crush the liberty of the Christian.

And the free frighten those who love the law. They can turn Christian liberty into Epicurean fantasies—"Eat, drink, and be merry, for the gospel lets us do almost anything!" Having escaped legalism, some feel free to indulge themselves.

Sometimes each party just wants to shout a critique and run away. May the Lord give us the grace to engage and trust each other. That will be easier if we see each other aright – as striving to live for the Lord.

Every disciple lives for the Lord (14:7-9)

Here is the core principle: "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone" (14:7). Everything we do affects everyone else.

"If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." (14:8). We should serve the Lord in everything. Have you set New Year's goals, prayed over them with family and friends? Let this be your first goal: To know that you live in the presence of the Lord, who gave himself for you, and glorify him in all you do.

Even if we should die this year, we "die to the Lord." He sets the time, even the way we die, and we peacefully give our loved ones to him - or enter his presence ourselves.

For "Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living" forever and ever. If we remember who Jesus is, what he has done for us, all the rest will fall into place. Blessed be the name of the Lord.