

The letter to the Romans was written quite likely between A.D. 54 and 58 by the Apostle Paul. Several facts point to Corinth as the place where the Apostle "dictated" the epistle to the Romans (note: Rom. 16:22). One theory suggesting that Paul was in Corinth, at the time of its composition, is: Paul calls Gaius his "host." This person may well have been the one of that name mentioned in 1 Cor. 1:14, where the Apostle informs the Corinthians that he had baptized this member of their congregation. In Romans 16:23 Gaius is sending greetings.

Now, the reasons for Paul coming to Rome was to raise money for the Jerusalem church (see Rom. 15:25-29). Therefore, he writes to the Romans, preparing the way for them to become his new base of operations in the West, as Philippi had been for his Macedonian and Achaian mission (Phil. 4:15; 2 Cor. 11:9).<sup>1</sup> And since he obviously has financial expectations, he probably thought his request would be better received -- if not granted -- if he would discuss and/or delineate the core of his theology. Paul knew, being reasonably intelligent, that before he could ask a new community to support his mission westward (to Spain), he had to let it know what it would be backing.<sup>2</sup>

It should also be noted that Paul had neither established (see Acts 28:15) nor even met the Roman churches (Rom. 1:10-13). And, since Paul had not established the church at Rome, this may explain why Paul's letter to the Romans is so remarkably different from his other epistles. For example, unlike epistles, this is a letter of "action" rather than reaction; i.e., all of the other epistles contain a Pauline response to a problematic situation that Paul had either been "informed" of (see esp. 1 Cor. 1:10; 7:1; 8:1; 12:1, etc.), or "inspired" to address.

Here in this epistle, Paul is probably using situations already encountered in communities where his theology is in place to anticipate "questions from" and "situations in" the Roman community. The believers in our community are guilty of contempt and condemnation. And they have ceased to walk in mutual unity and love. Therefore, Paul is giving an illustration and/or paradigm to underscore his demands for mutual acceptance. The major characters in our text are the "strong" and the "weak." In light of 1 Corinthians, the strong are "probably" enthusiasts who practice the motto of 1 Cor. 6:12: "all things are lawful," whereas the weak (cf. 14:14 ff, and 1 Cor. 8:10) are those who are concerned about questions of clean and unclean.

#### Exegesis

Romans 14:1. Paul's focus in this verse is on the person who is "weak in faith" (RSV). In comparison, the King James Version (KJV) reads: "Him [sic] that is weak in the faith . . ." The KJV is translated with a definite article "the" before faith; which suggests that Paul is referring to the gospel, the planks of doctrine(s), of the Christian religion (see: 1 Tim. 1:9; 4:1; 5:8). On the other hand, most modern translations, like the RSV and NIV, delete the definite article "the," because the noun (faith) is abstract. Therefore, if we accept (and I do) modern translations, then the word faith carries a different connotation. With this in mind, let us pause and define "faith" since its elucidation is crucial to the entire argument of this paper. The word "faith" (pistis in Greek) denotes several things. In its broader literary context it means to trust (see Rom. 4:8), to obey (see Rom. 1:5), and to respond (see Rom. 3:24-25, 28) to the freedom (from the "law," "sin," etc.) made available in and through the Christ event.

It can be assumed, then, in our immediate context, that those who are "weak in faith" are those who have defective and/or distorted knowledge of the liberty that exists presently in Christ. In the context of this passage, and without a clear conception, the "weak in faith" are quite likely those who see Christianity as a list of rules and recognition. The weak believe that they can procure a status of righteousness before God by abstaining from meats (see v. 2) and observing special days (see v. 5). Last, and most important, the weak in faith are those who are failing to conceptualize that he or she is justified by faith and not by the efficacy of works.

Nonetheless, Paul urges the strong to welcome the weak, despite their ignorance or stubbornness or prejudice. Why? Because God has welcomed not only the strong but also the weak (see v. 3). Paul goes on to suggest that the strong should not use this (welcoming) as an opportunity to engage the weak in unedifying debate, i.e., "doubtful disputation."

Romans 14:2. In this verse, Paul perhaps avoiding further debate explicitly delineates who are "the weak," and who are "the strong."

The weak are vegetarians whose faith will only allow them to eat vegetables. Whether the weak are Jews or Gentiles is ambiguous; although the evidence seems to point to those reared on an Old Testament diet. E. Kasemann, on the other hand, states that even though the Jews at one time did observe rigid food laws (see esp. Lev. 11:f1-45; Deut. 14:3-21), general abstinence from meat cannot be found in Jewish orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> "The strong" whom Paul identifies himself with (cf. v. 14) are those whose faith will not only allow them to eat meat and vegetables, but *anything*!

Romans 14:3. In this verse, Paul warns both groups against contempt and condemnation. First, Paul warns the strong -- the eater -- not to despise (*exoutheneithō* in Greek) the weak -- the ascetic. *Exoutheneithō* is also used in Rom. 14:10, which sometimes means "to make of no account or to regard as nothing," because the weak belong to the Lord (see v. 8).

Next, Paul warns the weak -- the vegetarian -- not to pass judgment upon that one that eats for two reasons: One, God has welcomed him/her; Two, only God has the right to judge (see v. 4 for further comments). Ecclesiastical discipline must not be harsh and condemnatory; it must use the methods of edification and pastoral care. The very seriousness of divine judgment preserves the church from legalistic judgmentalism. Kasemann puts it like this:

Theological condemnation of others, which breaks off fellowship in either judgment or contempt, is impossible. The fronts must remain porous and leave the brother [sic] for maneuver.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, any believer tempted to judge another believer must face Paul's devastating question: "Who are you to judge someone else's servant?"

Romans 14:4a. Since it is "the weak" who is doing the judging in v. 3., then, it can be assumed that the person being questioned in this verse is also the weak. It can also be assumed that whatever the response was in this provocative question, Paul quite likely answered it like this: "For if anyone

thinks he [sic] is something, when he [sic] is nothing, that man deceives himself [sic]. But let each one test his [sic] own work, . . ." (Gal 6:3). Rudolf Bultmann maintains that anyone guilty of judging their neighbor (II Cor. 10:10-12; Rom. 14:4, 10, 12 f., 22) has ceased in love.<sup>5</sup> In this verse, however, Paul gives two basic reasons why the weak (or strong) have no right to judge. First, both the strong and the weak are under judgment; therefore, neither can judge, but only be judged.<sup>6</sup> This idea is echoed in v. 10b when Paul says: "For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God." The word for "judgment seat" in the Greek is bema, which sometimes refers to the official roman tribunal where the governor (and "only" the governor) could pass judgment on offenders or exonerate the innocent (see esp. Acts 18:12, 16-17; Matt. 27:19; John 19:13).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, if one was to follow this logic carefully, then one could conclude that since God is the only one able to exonerate a sinner, then God should be the only one judging the sinner. The second reason Paul gives is, no one has the right to judge another's "servant." The word servant (oiketen in Greek) denotes a domestic servant; and not slave, which is doulou in the Greek. Here, Paul is saying, the eater (and the ascetic) is answerable only to "their master," namely, the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Heb. 3:6). Ernst Kasemann sums it up like this: "one can judge only that for which one is responsible, not what belongs to others."<sup>8</sup> This aforementioned statement alone should be enough to give Evangelists and Ministers pause before placing judgment upon any other congregation outside the context in which they serve. In verse 4c, Paul announces his confidence that the Lord, having once received a believer, can cause that person to stand or fall (cf. Rom. 5:2 and 1 Cor. 10:12). More particularly, the "standing in" and/or "falling from" grace is exclusively between God and the faith of the believer.

Romans 14:5a. In this clause, Paul turns his attention, succinctly, from "foods" to "days." The clause reads; "One man [sic] esteems one day better than another, while another man [sic] esteems all days alike." The day which one person esteems better than another is ambiguous. It is also difficult to determine, from the text, which group (weak and strong) esteems one day better than another. But, judging from the flow of Paul's argument, it is more likely to be the weak in faith. And, when this text is placed in its broader literary context, the debate(s) was/were probably between Jews and Gentiles. Therefore, it can be assumed that this argument was over the Sabbath and its significance. More than once Paul was concerned about believers who made a fetish of observing days. He writes to the Galatians: "You observe days, and month, and seasons, and years: I am afraid I have labored over you in vain" (Gal. 4:10-11). He writes to the Colossians: "Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath" (Col. 2:16). The Jews had made a tyranny of the Sabbath, surrounding it with a jungle of regulations and prohibition.<sup>9</sup> Paul, however, neither justifies or condemns this belief. It should not be assumed, on the other hand, that Paul wishes to wipe out the Lord's day (see esp. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16-1-2; cf. also Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9); but he did fear an attitude which in affect consisted in observing one particular day. In this text, for Paul, all these are lawful as long as they are dedicated to the Lord. See v. 6 for further comments.

In clause 5b, Paul asserts that freedom of conscience and/or convictions should stand as the norm for individual decisions. Paul insists that "each" believer must be fully convinced in his or her "own" mind that they are doing right. Because, in the end, Paul emphatically states, each believer must

give an account of him/herself to God (see v. 12). Therefore, no one's decision should be affected by the contentions of others. Why? Because if one's actions are not as a result of *personal* faith, then their actions become sin (see esp. 14:23). Why sin? Because faith coerced by an external dynamic (e.g., *a crowd, or congregation, or fellow believer*) is not genuine trust in God, but in self and others. C.K. Barrett declares that: "this is the worst kind of idolatry . . ." <sup>10</sup> Furthermore, if one does not act out of personal faith, he or she might be guilty of not giving thanks to God? With this in mind, let us now turn our attention to v. 6.

Romans 14:6. This verse points back to vv. 1, 3 and 5. In that, it gives the strong further reason why he or she should welcome the ascetic --i.e., the vegetarian and, possibly, the Sabbatarian. As a comparison with these verses, the one who regards a specific day as being special or sacred is a weak person. Now Paul states that the person who makes this distinction between days, a distinction which strong persons would not make, must not be looked down upon for doing so; for he or she does so with the purpose of honoring the Lord. Likewise, the one who eats, paying no attention to the distinction between the clean and unclean, cannot be accused of being indifferent to the will of God. On the contrary, (s)he too honors the Lord by doing what (s)he does. Therefore, when either the ascetic or the strong live to please the Lord, each should accept the other's practices. I assume though there is no evidence in the text, that when a person does something in the name of the Lord which is not contrary to the Gospel, that person is justified by the Lord because of their human frailty. Also, the phrase "to give thanks to God" suggests, according to C.K. Barrett, that "both the ascetic and the strong observe the (originally Jewish) custom of saying a blessing (that is, a thanksgiving to God) over their meals." <sup>11</sup> In other words, when the weak and the strong sit down to eat, they both say their grace to God. As a result, the Lord accepts both the weak and the strong.

Romans 14:7. Paul, in this verse, asserts that it is impossible for one to live or die in isolation. For Paul, there is not feasible way for one whether weak or strong, to live completely detached from one's brothers and sisters in Christ. Was it not John Donne who said "No man [sic] is an island to himself [sic]." And, since no one lives in isolation, but in relation to others, one's actions have an adverse effect on other servants of the Lord; both positive and negative (see Rom. 14:13, 15; 1 Cor. 8:9, 13; cf. 10:24). Although Paul has been speaking on the impossibility of an isolated life there is one situation in which a person is possibly isolated, and that it is when he or she stands before the judgment seat of God (see v. 10b). Even here, an exception could be noted. According to William Barclay: "we do not stand alone at the judgment seat of God, for we stand with Jesus Christ." <sup>12</sup>

Romans 14:8-9. Now that Paul has discussed the impossibility for believers to live isolated one from another, he takes it a step further, in this verse, by discussing the impossibility for the believer to "live" or "die" in isolation from the Lord (Kyrios). Paul says, "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." In more technical jargon, the totality of existence is under his lordship, all in life and all in death, this world and the next world, present and future, time and eternity, everything is under the Lord's rulership. This was accomplished by the Lord's vicarious - substitutionary - act on the cross (see Rom. 4:25 and Col. 2:12-14). Jesus Christ, once despised, disgraced, and seemingly defeated, is now enthroned as "cosmic" King;

thus, he is able to judge the living and the dead (see 2 Tim. 4:1 and cf. Rom. 14:14). Again, "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?"

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Paul has just addressed what could become an explosive situation. Paul operates with both a Biblical and situational ethic and employs them in a contingent matter; because only the situation can decide what counts as heresy or immature faith. The Apostle warns the strong believer who is emancipated from the law and/or scruples not to indulge in sarcastic name-calling, for example, labeling the weaker brothers and sisters as narrow-minded, unenlightened Pharisees. Likewise, he warns the abstainer not to denounce the stronger brothers and sisters by labeling them as unspiritual, high-minded intellectuals. In either case, Paul turns on a red light and orders his readers to stop pinning labels on their brothers and sisters, because they both belong to the Lord.

On the one hand, he admonishes the weak that salvation is purely a matter of "faith" in redeeming grace. Therefore, they must resist steadfastly any attempt to introduce human merit, gained by law keeping, as a condition of sanctification. On the other hand, he admonishes the strong to forgo some of their liberties, thereby preventing their weaker brothers and sisters from losing out spiritually.

To be sure, both the strong and the weak must make concessions to immaturity and prejudice, and edify one another with love (see 1 Cor. 8:1c). Thus, motivated by love, they will both avoid doing anything that might hurt their brothers and sisters. Rather than scandalizing one another, they should sacrifice self -- as Christ sacrificed himself -- that they might promote harmony and produce edification. Finally, in this text, the church's primary function is neither rigid orthodoxy nor absolute liberty, but unity and love.

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