

The Problem of Christian Liberty

Romans 14:1 - 15:13

Background

It would be wonderful if brothers agreed at all times, but in most cases this is not true. In Romans 14:1 - 15:13 we find an example of discord between "strong" brothers and those who were "weak."

These weak brothers were not *morally* weak, but weak "in the faith." They had the true faith, but they were not yet able to fully grasp or understand it. They thought it necessary to completely abstain from certain types of food. They also observed special days, possibly Jewish feast days, or possibly a certain day of the week, such as Saturday (the Sabbath) or Sunday.

(Yes, these weak Christians needed to grow; they needed to become strong. But growing takes time; and those who were strong needed to be patient!)

The way Paul treats this situation is useful for modern-day problems with "Christian liberties."

We are not to judge (criticize or condemn) each other (14:1-5)

In this specific situation, both groups were in the wrong. The strong were looking down on the weaker and the weak were condemning the stronger. Paul commands the strong to stop judging (criticizing, condemning) and to accept the weak brothers. He also tells the weak that the stronger brothers are responsible to the *Lord*, not to them.

On the other hand, he doesn't condemn the weak brother's abstinence from certain foods. Neither does he condemn the observing of special days, but tells each to do as he is convinced.

We will be judged by the Lord (14:6-13a)

In both of these issues, *both* parties were doing their actions "for the Lord." Paul reminds us that we belong to the Lord, both in life and in death. So either way, we do what we do for the Lord. Since he is Lord of both the dead and the living, we will all be judged by him. Therefore, we are not to judge each other in such matters.

Build up and don't destroy (14: 13b-21)

It is true that there is nothing inherently wrong with different kinds of foods; but if someone does believe that eating certain things is wrong, then to that person it *is* wrong. Such a person may be greatly distressed or

possibly even destroyed, if the stronger brother refuses to act out of love, and puts such an obstacle in the weak brother's way. In addition, the stronger brother's "good" (probably referring to his freedom) could end up being spoken of as "evil."

God's kingdom is not made up of these disputable matters, but of "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Our job is to focus on *these* types of things (righteousness, peace and joy) and to build others up, instead of destroying them. Although all food is "clean," it is *wrong* to eat it, when eating results in offense. It is *good* to not do *anything* that might cause a brother to stumble into sin.

All should please others (14:22-15:4)

The strong brothers are in a blessed position. When they participate in such activities, they do not have to worry about problems with their conscience. In contrast, the weak are condemned, if they do something they have doubts about. (Not being done as an expression of faith, it is sin.) Because of this, the strong must not parade about, showing their "faith" and pleasing themselves. Instead, they should bear the weaknesses of the weaker brothers.

Instead of focusing on one's own interests, each person should focus on pleasing others in a way that results in *their* good and which builds *them* up. Our example is Christ himself, who, instead of pleasing himself, allowed the reproaches that had been directed toward the Father to fall on himself.

Accept each other (15:5-13)

When such issues arise, we need a spirit of unity (from God) within ourselves, regulated by Christ, so that we may glorify God with unity of mind and voice. We are to accept each other, with our differences, just as Christ also accepted us, both Jews and Gentiles.

"Christian Liberties" today--a warning

The above guidelines should be used when such a problem arises. Yet there are two things we need to consider, when applying them.

First, Paul's instructions in this situation are different from the way he tells us to respond to false teachers, who try to enslave believers with rules and regulations. For weak brothers, we are told to restrain the expression of our freedom; we should not tempt them to sin. In contrast, we are not to give-in for a single moment to false teachers, but are to totally oppose their attempts to push their false views upon everyone else. (See Galatians 2:4-5, for an example.)

On the other hand, there are others who apply the name "Christian liberty" to anything they want to do. Many of these people go about claiming to be "strong" (implying that they have the right to do whatever they want) and telling the others that people who are offended are merely "weak." In too many cases, this "Christian liberty" is nothing more than "*sin*," misspelled.