

## Bible Study Appendix

### **Living with Disagreements**

Romans 14:1–15:13

by The Reverend Frances Taylor Gench

The apostle Paul’s closing exhortation to the church at Rome includes a fascinating discussion about living with disagreements, addressed to Christians whose argumentative discourse is threatening the unity and stability of the church. What are they arguing about? It seems that there are, within the house churches of Rome, different understandings of what proper response to the gospel of Jesus Christ looks like. The main point Paul tries to convey to these congregations is that “there are some things that appear to divide Christians very deeply in terms of their practice but are, in fact (in the language of later theology), ‘things indifferent’ that should not be allowed to divide them”<sup>1</sup>— matters that are clearly very important to the disputing parties, but that from Paul’s perspective are not essential for faith or salvation. Paul maintains there is room within the Christian community for different ways of responding to the gospel. The problem he perceives is when one group tries to impose its understanding of Christian faith and lifestyle on all others.

Note: Paul is *not* suggesting that “anything goes.” There are limits to Christian behavior, as we know from a lot of his discussion elsewhere (eg. 1 Corinthians 5). But what Paul is saying in Romans 14–15 is that within the structures of grace is a measure of freedom, which means a need for tolerance exists within the Christian community as we live together with differences and disagreements over what proper response to the gospel looks like.<sup>2</sup>

The situation of the church at Rome has been a matter of debate. Some scholars think Paul is addressing a hypothetical situation rather than a real one, that is, Romans 14:1–15:13 represents a general reflection growing out of his pastoral experience in Galatia and Corinth—general pastoral advice about typical issues facing the life of early Christian communities. However, most scholars are now persuaded that this text is very situation-specific. Paul has never visited Rome before, but he knows a number of Christians there (see Rom. 16), and has heard a lot about their house churches that concerns him. Thus, he devotes a great deal of space at the end of the letter to discussion of a major social and theological problem threatening the stability and the unity of the church at Rome—one that he believes subverts the gospel.

Two antagonistic groups are identified by label in this text: “the weak” on the one hand, and “the strong” on the other. “The weak” might not have identified themselves as such. This is probably the terminology of “the strong” and reflects their stereotypical grasp of the situation—a viewpoint that would hardly have been welcomed by the weak.<sup>3</sup> Paul adopts this language of “weak” and “strong” and clearly identifies with “the strong” in 15:1. But to be fair, the “weak” might have described things differently. (It would be interesting to know what labels they, themselves, were using!)

What do we know about “the weak” and “the strong”? They seem to have very different opinions about food and drink and the observance of special days. A major bone of contention appears in 14:2: “Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.” Another is mentioned in 14:5: “Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike.” Their disagreements center on dietary scruples and the observance of certain holy days, which suggests that traditional Jewish sensitivities are in view. Thus, one thing at stake in the dispute over food and special days is the continuing importance of these observances, given their traditional importance as integral parts of Jewish heritage.<sup>4</sup>

But a few caveats are needed. For one thing, the Mosaic Law does not prohibit the eating of meat or drinking of wine, though Jews in non-Jewish contexts did often restrict their diets to avoid violating dietary scruples. Also, most scholars would caution us against assuming that “the weak” were all Jewish Christians and “the strong” were all Gentile Christians. Paul, for example, was a Jewish Christian, but counts himself among the “strong” that no longer observe dietary laws, and the same was probably true of Prisca, Aquila, and other Jewish Christians. And among the weak were no doubt Gentiles who practiced vegetarianism, perhaps to distance themselves from their former way of life, from former idolatrous practices. We know from Paul’s letter to the Galatians that dietary prescriptions and observance of particular days had appeal for some Gentile Christians. Thus, we should not think in terms of a clear-cut ethnic split. No doubt, both “strong” Jewish Christians and “strong” Gentile Christians were in one camp, and “weak” Jewish Christians and “weak” Gentile Christians in the other. Interestingly, Paul nowhere uses the word “Jew” or “Gentile” in 14:1–15:6; it is only in the final paragraph (15:7–13) that specific reference to Jews and Gentiles appears, as Paul describes Christ’s service to both. Still, one cannot help but suspect a strong element of Jewish/Gentile tension behind the divisions—a tension that underlies much of this entire letter.

Political realities may have exacerbated these divisions. The first Christians in Rome were Jews, but in the year 49 CE, the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome (including Jewish Christians). When the edict of Claudius was lifted in the year 54 and Rome’s Jewish population returned, Jewish Christians would have returned to a church that had become largely Gentile in the intervening years—a church with a very different composition and ethos. Returning Jewish Christians may have had difficulty adapting to the new situation and difficulty finding genuine acceptance.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is worth noting that “welcome one another” is the key admonition in Romans 14–15. One gets the impression this is not happening, that they are meeting separately, not worshiping together, and nursing antagonism and suspicions about one another. While this is historical speculation, many scholars find it very likely that the return of Jewish Christians to Rome and general tensions between predominantly Jewish house churches on the one hand and predominantly Gentile house churches on the other illumine the conflicts addressed in Romans 14–15.

In terms of its literary context, Romans 14:1–15:13 appears at the end of a long section of ethical exhortation that stretches from Chapters 12–15, in which Paul develops the ethical implications of the whole argument he has been making throughout the letter for the

Roman Christians and their life in Christ. This text is the climax of Paul's ethical exhortation in Chapters 12–15 and, in many respects, it is also the conclusion to the whole letter. Both its position in the letter and the space devoted to it indicate the matter at hand is one of real importance to the church at Rome, and one whose resolution was integral to Paul's understanding of the gospel and its corporate outworking.<sup>6</sup> Among the words immediately preceding this text are these: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another" (13:8) and "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (13:14). Now, in Chapter 14, Paul begins to talk very specifically about what "putting on the Lord Jesus Christ" and "love" mean in practice.

### Reading of the text

Have someone read Romans 14:1–15:13 for the group, and then discuss your reactions to it.

### Questions for discussion and reflection

- What strikes you most as you hear this text? What questions does it raise for you?
- The text contains a great deal of repeated language. What are some of the concepts that are underlined by way of repetition? What words strike you as particularly important as you think about the language Paul is using in this text?

Repeated words and concepts that might be noted

—"Lord": It may be worth noting that this word appears ten times in the first eleven verses. The lordship of Jesus is a central emphasis throughout the text and the reason for unity across barriers of tradition and custom.

—"Welcome": Note the central role of this admonition and its explicit connection to the welcome that God in Christ extends to us.

—Compare translations of 15:1—the NRSV, for example, reads, "We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak." However, the Greek word *bastazein* urges Christians not simply to "put up with" or "tolerate" each other, but rather (more positively) to "bear with" or "support" each other. Moreover, Paul has not suggested that "weakness" is a "failing." A more literal translation would read, "bear with the weaknesses of the powerless" or "the weaknesses of those without strength." The Revised English Bible conveys 15:1 as "Those of us who are strong must accept as our own burden the tender scruples of the weak."

—"Judging, despising, condemning": Diversity in lifestyle itself is not what Paul is most concerned about in this text. He is concerned, rather, about the attitudes of Christians to this diversity.

- What do the “weak” and “strong” have in common? Make a list.

Note that both give allegiance to Jesus as Lord; both seek to honor and give thanks to God; both share in the life of the kingdom; both have duties toward each other; both are in danger of allowing their convictions about proper Christian obedience in everyday matters to disrupt the community of the faithful. Paul does not imply that the “weak” have any less a grasp of the basic content of the faith, namely, Jesus’ resurrection and lordship.

- Where do you observe points of similarity and dissimilarity—connection and disconnection—between this text and the conflicts in which Presbyterians are currently engaged?
- Paul presents psychological insights that are remarkably contemporary. Consider the following two quotations by noted New Testament scholars James D. G. Dunn and Luke Timothy Johnson and share your responses to them:

The threat to Christian community in Rome was the clash of two fundamentals, each held by the one group in opposition to the other—the fundamental of constitutive tradition and practice, and the fundamental of liberty of faith in Christ. The symptoms of this clash were clear. The first symptom was an unwillingness to accept, to welcome the other . . . . The second symptom was the attitudes of the one to the other: “Let the one who eats not despise the one who does not eat, and let not the one who does not eat pass judgment on the one who eats” (14:3). The language is very striking and reveals a penetrating insight on Paul’s part into the psychology of group conflict. As repeated experience within Christian history reminds us, those who stand on the fundamental of Christian liberty will be tempted to “despise,” to hold in contempt the more traditional—to despise them for what “the strong” regard as the narrowness of their scruples. At the same time, those who stand on the fundamental of constitutive tradition will tend to “judge” or condemn the more liberal—or judge them because they regard “the strong” as having abandoned or fatally compromised the *bene esse* if not the *esse* itself of Christian tradition and identity. (James D. G. Dunn)<sup>7</sup>

The attitudes Paul identifies are amazingly contemporary—or perhaps are simply perennial for intentional communities. Who has not lived in a community in which “conservatives” who swear by the law stand in judgment on the “liberals” and the liberals who glory in their freedom hold the conservatives in disdain? (Luke Timothy Johnson)<sup>8</sup>

- Why is the matter of living with disagreements such an important matter for Paul? Why is the conflict among the Roman congregations in danger of subverting the gospel, in his view?

The unity of humankind for whom Christ died and for which God raised him is one thing at stake, in Paul’s view.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the goal of God’s act of grace in Jesus Christ is unity among God’s creatures, and was the divine plan from the very beginning as four quotations drawn from the whole of the Old Testament (Pentateuch, Prophets, Psalms) remind us (Rom. 15:7–13)! That unity is thus to become reality in the present in the community of those who acknowledge God’s gracious lordship in Christ.<sup>10</sup> Maintaining Christian unity, then, “is not just a matter of preventing squabbles and bad feeling in the church. It is part of essential

Christian witness to one Lord.”<sup>11</sup> Paul wants his readers to re-frame their understanding of life together in connection with this big picture: “He draws together in one place the pattern of edification in the community, the pattern of the messiah Jesus, and the pattern of God’s work in the world for Jew and Gentile, so that they appear as one single pattern of self-giving and self-emptying for the benefit of others.”<sup>12</sup>

- This text, addressed to Christians living in the capital city of the Roman Empire, has political implications. If Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not. Paul is interested in maintaining communities united in loyalty to Jesus as Lord, right under Caesar’s nose. Consider the following observation by New Testament scholar N. T. Wright and share your reactions to it:

A church that all too obviously embodies the social, ethnic, cultural, and political divisions of its surrounding world is no real challenge to the Caesars of this world. It is only when representatives of many nations worship the world’s true Lord in unity that Caesar might get the hint that there is after all “another king.” ... To settle for comfortable disunity because that way we can “be ourselves” and keep things the way we have always known them is to court disloyalty to the one Lord and failure in the church’s mission to challenge the gospel of Caesar with the gospel of Jesus Christ. (N. T. Wright)<sup>13</sup>

- Paul is very concerned about attitudes Christians harbor toward each other. How would you summarize the attitudes he encourages and seeks to inculcate?
- As you read this text through the lens of the “peace, unity, and purity of the church,” what insights emerge?
- What new insights have emerged from your engagement with Romans 14–15 and discussion of it? What questions linger?

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. X (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), p. 749.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Achtemeier, *Romans*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), p. 217.

<sup>3</sup> Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), pp. 341, 343.

<sup>4</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 682.

<sup>5</sup> Dunn, pp. 683–84.

<sup>6</sup> Dunn, pp. 680–81.

<sup>7</sup> Dunn, p. 686.

<sup>8</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), p. 199.

<sup>9</sup> Achtemeier, p. 221.

<sup>10</sup> Achtemeier, p. 225.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, p. 739.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, p. 203.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, p. 750.