

An Analysis of Romans 14 and Fellowship

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INTRODUCTION:

1. Historically, Romans 14 has been used to justify fellowship among those who hold or practice contradictory beliefs regarding the faith in Christ Jesus. For the last ten years controversy has occurred when some were willing to defend brethren fellowshiping those who teach error regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage by applying the principles taught in Romans 14. Others see the doctrine of Christ regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage as not being included in the context of Romans 14, and therefore believe that Romans 14 does not allow an ongoing fellowship with those who teach or practice error regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage.
2. In this study we want to investigate Romans 14 and offer an analysis of Paul's teaching. We will want to determine the type of things we can disagree about and still have fellowship with God and with one another.
3. We will also investigate how Romans 14 has been used to justify the ongoing fellowship with those who teach and/or practice other matters of doctrinal and moral import other than marriage, divorce and remarriage issue. This is why the proper application of Romans 14 is necessary, for if we allow doctrinal error regarding one aspect of the faith to be tolerated in light of Romans 14, then the door is opened to allow others.

I. THE NECESSITY OF MAKING DISTINCTIONS

- A. There are those we are to "RECEIVE" - There are those we are not to "RECEIVE" (Rom. 14:1, 2 John 9-11).
 1. Romans 14:1 - "PROSLAMBANESTHE"
 - a) "To take to oneself or to receive...signifying a welcome" (Acts 28:2, Philm. 12) ...W.E. Vine
 - b) "To take as one's companion" (Acts 17:5, 18:26)...Thayer, p. 548.
 - c) "To receive - i.e. to grant one's access to one's heart; to take into friendship and intercourse (Rom. 14:1, 15:7)..Thayer, p. 548.
 2. John 10 - "UN-LAMBANETE"
 - a) Not to "take or receive" to oneself (2 Jn. 4, 3 Jn. 7 Jn. 1:12).
 3. In both contexts, "fellowship" is involved.
 - a) Romans 15:7 - "Wherefore receive ye one another, even as Christ also received you, to the glory of God"
 - b) 2 John 10-11 - "If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting: for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works."

- B. Therefore we must distinguish between the teaching and practice of those whom we are to receive in fellowship (Rom. 14:1) and those to whom we must not receive (2 Jn. 10).
1. Immediate context of Romans 14 will not allow for fellowship with those to practice sin or teach doctrinal error
 - a) Preceding passages - Romans 13:11-14
 - (1) "cast off works of darkness" - v.12
 - (2) "walk becomingly...not in reveling" v. 13
 - (3) "Make no provision for the flesh" - v. 14
 - (4) Sexual sin condemned, along with strife and jealousy.
 - b) Succeeding passages - Rom. 16:17-19
 - (1) "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which he learned: and turn away from them" v. 17
 - (2) "By...smooth and fair speech they beguile the hearts of the innocent" v. 18
 - (3) Therefore sin of doctrinal error is condemned - and we definitely are not to fellowship the teacher of doctrinal error.
 - c) Remote context - The biblical harmony of the whole with it's parts (cf. James 2:10).
 - (1) Moral sin condemned:
 - (a) Gal. 5:19-21 - works of the flesh
 - (b) Col. 3:5-11 - "put to death" our earthly members
 - (c) Eph. 5:3-14 - "reprove" unfruitful works of darkness.
 - (2) Doctrinal sin condemned:
 - (a) 2 Jn. 9-11 - not to go beyond doctrine of Christ.
 - (b) I Tim. 1:3 - not to teach another doctrine.
 - (c) Gal. 1:6-9 - not to teach another gospel.
 - (d) Titus 3:9-11 - reject heretics
 - (3) No fellowship with sin allowed
 - (a) Cor. 6:14 - it is an unequal yoking
 - (b) Eph. 5:11 - have no fellowship , rather reprove.
- C. Therefore, it is inappropriate for the text (Rom. 14:1-15:7) to be used to advocate fellowship with sinful doctrines and sinful practices since it would be a violation of the harmony of Scripture.
- D. Categories under consideration in Romans 14
1. Meats and days are being considered (v. 2; 5 -6; 14-15, 20)

- a) These are "authorized liberties" - practices and doctrines that are neither commanded nor condemned, but allowed. The practice or non-practice by saints is a matter of indifference to God.
 - (1) I Cor. 8:8-9 "not worse nor better...liberty of yours"
 - (2) I Cor. 10:23 - "lawful" , "expedients"

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- b) The practice of these things were "clean" "good", and "pure" in themselves (Romans 14:14,16, 20).
- c) Neither brother had to change his practice - matters of indifference (not commanded or condemned - allowed) before God.
- 2. "Meats" and "Days" are not just randomly selected examples of liberties.
 - a) The theme of Romans is "Justification by Faith" (chapters 1-11), with special relationships of Jews to Christ (chapters 9-11) in view of the salvation of the Gentiles. Thus, "meats" and "days" are items that exemplify the theme - justification by faith as it relates to the Jew/Gentile problem. Both "meats" and "days" were problems created by the integration of the two groups in Christ (Eph. 2:11-22). What had previously been bound to Jews (meats and days) was now loosed in Christ. What had be a sinful practice among Gentiles (eating met which had been sacrificed to an idol) no longer mattered in Christ. This was the truth of the gospel, but "there is not in all men that knowledge" (I Cor. 8:7).
 - b) Romans 14 addressed the liberty in Christ of both Jew and Gentile, which some wanted to limit. The weak brother wanted to bind where God no longer bound and Paul instructed him to stop doing so. The strong brother was told not to flaunt his knowledge. Neither brother sinned in the matters before them unless they wanted to bind where God has not bound (cf. Gal. 4:8-11; Gal. 5:6, Gal. 2:3-5; Acts 16:3) But there is no inherent sin in the practice or non-practice of meats and days.

II. BRETHREN UNDER CONSIDERATION - The strong and the weak

- A. The strong brother (Romans 15:1)
 - 1. He is the "taught" and "assured" brother (14:2, 14, 23; I Cor. 8:1-7; I Tim. 4:1-5). He knew what had been revealed about meats and days.
 - 2. He knew their proper relation to God (I Cor. 8:8; Col. 2:16).
 - 3. He knew that an idol was nothing (I Cor. 8:4).
 - 4. He was convinced in his own mind (Romans 14:5, 22)
 - 5. He was able to practice eating and observing and doing so to the Lord giving thanks (Rom. 14:6).
 - 6. He was innocent before God when he ate meats and considered every day alike. No sin is attached to his actions.
 - 7. He is warned not to be puffed up in his knowledge (I Cor. 8:1ff.).
 - 8. He was tempted to "set at nought" the weak brother (Romans 14:3, 10).

9. He was warned not to cause his brother to stumble (Romans 14:21; I Cor. 8:9-13; 10:32).
- B. The weak brother (Romans 14:1, 15:1)
1. He is the "untaught" brother (I Cor. 8:1-7).
 - a) He did not understand what has been revealed.
 - b) He did not know their proper relation to God.

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- c) He feared that observance would commend idols.
 2. His refusal to eat meats was "to the Lord" (Romans 14:6).
 3. He was convinced in his own mind (Romans 14:5)
 4. "Weak in faith" does not mean lack of zeal, for he was ready to contend for his position.
 5. He was "weak in the faith" in that "faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17) and he did not have the proper knowledge to have the personal faith he should have had.
 6. He was innocent before God when he did not eat meat or he observed a certain day.
 7. He was commanded to stop judging the strong brother (Romans 14:3, 10, 13)
 8. He is warned to not violate his own conscience (Romans 14:23; I Cor. 8:10).
- C. Relation to each other:
1. Both were brethren, received by God (Romans 14:3, 15:7).
 2. Both were innocent of any wrongdoing in the practice or non-practice of "meats" and "days".
 3. Strong to receive the weak without "doubtful disputations" (KJV) (Romans 14:1).
 - a) Translations:
 - (1) "Arguing over scruples" (Phillips)
 - (2) "decision of scruples" (ASV)
 - (3) "passing judgment on his opinions" (NAS)
 - (4) "not to criticize their views" (Williams)
 - b) "Doubtful" - "DIAKRISIS": "a distinguishing, discerning, judging" (Thayer, p. 139).
 - c) "Disputations" - DIALOGISMOS": the thinking of a man deliberating with himself; hence 1. a thought, inward reasoning" (Thayer, p. 139).
 - d) Thus, receiving a weak brother into fellowship regarding to these beliefs and practices is not conditioned upon a agreement or forced decisions concerning all his internal doubts. Obviously this "agreeing to disagree" does not involve sinful doctrines and practices. There should be no contesting of another's thoughts in the matters of Romans 14, yet in doctrinal matters of the faith we must "contend earnestly " (Jude 3).
 4. The strong was not to set at nought the weak nor act so as to cast a stumblingblock before him (Romans 14:3, 13, 21).

5. The weak was not to judge the strong as sinful but to be careful not to violate his own conscience (Romans 14:3, 23).
6. They were to act toward each other so as to "make for peace" and "edify one another" (Romans 14:19), not division.

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III. VARIOUS APPLICATIONS OF ROMANS 14

A. UNITY IN DIVERSITY

1. How denominationalists look at the passage: Earl F. Palmer, a Presbyterian says that all differences "other than the central question of the Lordship of Christ" are governed by this passage (Salvation By Surprise, Waco: Word Books, 1975, p. 168). Therefore, as long as one says he receives Jesus as Lord, he must be received even though his actions violate the will of the Lord he professes to believe.
2. Carl Ketcherside, in the January, 1961 issue of MISSION MESSENGER, equates the differences mentioned in Romans 14 with every modern difference our brethren have had over the worship, work and organization of the church.
3. Ed Harrell in April 1989 issue of Christianity Magazine, p. 6 says "*The issue in Romans 14 is precisely the establishment of the right of brethren to differ in matters of 'faith' ". He dismisses the idea that Romans 14 deals only with matters of indifference with this logic: "Common sense tells me that without the need of revelation".*
4. Ed Harrell writes, "*it is obvious that Christians sometimes disagree about scriptural instruction, even in matters of considerable moral and doctrinal import. In spite of these disagreements, we work and worship together, leaving many matters of individual judgment in the hands of God. That behavior, uniformly practiced throughout the history of Christianity is, I believe, the issue addressed in Romans 14.*" (Christianity Magazine, May, 1989, p. 6, "The Bounds of Christian Unity")
5. When brethren begin to seek a basis for a "broader fellowship" on Romans 14, they edge closer to denominationalism thought where we must agree upon the Lordship of Christ but can accept people into fellowship that differ on other doctrinal issues - worship, work and organization of the church, marriage divorce and remarriage, etc.

B. INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC AND MISSIONARY SOCIETIES

1. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton co-authored a commentary on Romans, but prior to it's completion, McGarvey died (1911). Pendleton, who accepted the use of instrumental music in worship to God and the Missionary Society, attempted to justify both on the grounds of Romans 14 by saying, "*In modern*

times controversy over meat sacrificed to idols is unknown, but the principle still applies as to instrumental music, missionary societies, etc." (Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans, Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co.; 1916 pp. 525-526).

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C. HOMOSEXUALITY

1. Norman Pittenger in his book Time For Consent, contends that the Bible does not clearly condemn "*monogamous, loving homosexual unions*". He argues from Romans 14 that those who reject homosexual people from fellowship in the church "*have utterly failed to understand the Christian gospel.*" (quoted from John R.W. Stott, Christianity Today [22 Nov. 85], pp. 26-27).

D. DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

1. Since brethren are divided in their understanding concerning marriage, divorce and remarriage, Ed Harrell in advocating "*Consistent Fellowship*" has concluded that "*doctrinal unanimity*" on this subject "*does not and probably cannot exist*" (Christianity Magazine, Nov. 1988, p. 8).
2. From this beginning point, he suggests that Romans 14 be applied to those teaching on the subject if they are **sincere** in their beliefs and **not factious** (ibid, p. 9).
3. Ed Harrell writes, "*It is perfectly proper that some congregations have not, and would not, invite Homer Hailey to preach because of his position that he holds on this subject. Others, rightly I believe, have decided to use him in spite of the difference*" (ibid, p. 9).

CONCLUSION:

We cannot tolerate differences by merely asserting that they fit into Romans 14. Romans 14 regulates fellowship in the matters of indifference where differing practices are right in themselves. May we not allow the door to be opened to doctrinal error, sinful practices and apostasy through abusing the context of Romans 14.