

20th November 2016

Romans 14 vs. 1-14, 15.1-7

Acceptance and Toleration

The last evening on the Holy Land Pilgrimage fell on the Jewish Sabbath. The Sabbath or Shabbat, starts at sunset on Friday evening. We were staying in a Jewish hotel so we discovered as we went for our evening meal that the elevators were on a Shabbat setting. In other words, they stopped at every floor, opened the doors for a short moment, and then went on to the next floor. It was so that no one could create fire on the Sabbath by pressing a button. When we arrived for our meal it was all a cold buffet. Even the coffee was in flasks prepared before sundown. It wasn't quite the send-off meal we had in mind.

Food is the topic in our last look at Romans today. Paul is writing to a church in Rome that appears to be divided and in danger of splitting. Some Christians believe that they should not eat meat and that certain days are more special than others. Other Christians don't believe this. In other words, these Christians have differences of opinions which they seem to hold with a passion.

I remember hearing some one say how many years ago he and his wife had a difficult decision to make. He couldn't remember which of them got their way but looking back after many years he still thinks he was right and she was wrong!

I have a friend who is a Baptist minister and he loves to joke about the rigidity of Baptists to make fun at denominationalism. He says 'what's the difference between a Baptist and a terrorist?' You can negotiate with a terrorist!

He tells the story of a preacher pounding away at a pulpit and yelling out to the congregation: 'is everyone here a Baptist?'

An old woman several pews back says 'no! I'm a Methodist'

'Why are you a Methodist?' asks the preacher.

'Well my mother was a Methodist, my father was a Methodist so they raised me as a Methodist'.

'That's the dumbest thing I have heard' said the preacher. 'If your mother was an idiot and your father was an idiot would you be an idiot?'

'No', said the old woman sharp as a sword. 'If my mother was an idiot and my father was an idiot I suppose I'd be a Baptist'.

Now don't get me wrong I have nothing against Baptists – lovely people, I know a lot of them. My wife was one. But often we can believe we are right and all the others are wrong - can't we?

Paul is addressing a situation that is depressingly familiar to many churches and indeed to those outside in the world. In these verses, he turns from one party to the other. He calls each party to accept each other because God has accepted them. The theme of

welcome runs throughout this chapter and echoes themes in the rest of the letter.

We cannot be sure who the strong in faith Christians are. Paul seems to use the words in almost the opposite way of our usual understanding. Usually we think of strong Christians as those who have every clear rule that they loyally obey and weak Christians as those who seem less concerned for having regulations for every aspect of behaviour. Paul suggests that those who are strong in faith find both freedom and obedience in faith and do not need so long a set of rules to strengthen their Christianity. Those who are weak in faith think faith, in itself, is insufficient to give them guidelines to obedience. They are helped by a particular set of rules.

It seems that in this particular case the rules include not eating meat and observing particular holy days, perhaps for prayer and fasting. Paul is probably speaking about Jewish Christians who were vegetarian thereby avoiding any meat that wasn't kosher meat, and who observed certain holy days that the Gentile Christians didn't.

Paul's first word is that all the Roman Christians are to welcome and accept one another (but not just so that they can have a family feud). They are to welcome one another because God is the great welcomer, the one whose arms are always open. In the whole of this letter Paul has talked about what God has done for humanity in Jesus Christ. God has justified us, made us righteous, and made us friends not enemies, for

those who have faith. And God has done all that even whilst we were still sinners. That is still hard to believe and accept that God loves us even though we are sinners. All our lives we spend trying to earn approval, compete, achieve and so we consequently compare ourselves with others and judge others. 'They are not as holy as I am'. 'They are not as deserving of God's love as I am'. 'They are not as mature as I am'. The gospel is hard to believe and accept.

Paul now gives another way of talking about what God has done: God has welcomed Gentile and Jew into God's family, God's household. We all are servants of the Lord, and to despise the servant is to despise the Lord.

Acceptance is a popular word today and rightly so. Theologically, God's acceptance of us is a good contemporary term for justification – which we have looked at in previous weeks – being in a right relationship with God. But we should be cautious about modern talk of unconditional acceptance, as when the concept of an open church in which membership is offered to everybody with no questions asked and no conditions laid down. For though God's love is indeed unconditional – God loved us while we were still sinners, his acceptance of us is not, since it depends on repentance and our faith in Jesus Christ. The stark reality is you are either a friend or an enemy of God. The vast swathe of our society, really don't care but you wouldn't class them as 'friends of God' as Paul makes that distinction.

In this passage acceptance of the weak or the strong is because God has accepted them: in other words, they have faith in Jesus Christ: they are fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

The second principle of acceptance is therefore not to quarrel over disputable matters. Paul is saying we shouldn't turn the church into a debating chamber, whose chief characteristic is argument, still less into a lawcourt where weak persons are put in the dock, interrogated and assaulted. The welcome we give must include respect for their opinions.

Paul has two requirements for the way in which the 'stronger' and 'weaker' Christians are to get on with each other. First, they are not to judge each other. Second the strong are not to cause the weak to stumble. The verses before us, deal with the issue of judging. The overall claim is clear enough. No Christian has the right to condemn another Christian for practising Christianity in ways that are different from one's own. Paul makes his case for mutual acceptance in three ways.

First he makes his case by making them think about their own practice. Whether they eat meat or not they sincerely believe they are doing what they do to honour the Lord. Each viewpoint grows out of a firm grasp of Christian truth, the desire to honour God with your lives. Whether they eat meat or not both parties give thanks to God.

The two movements here, whether we can receive something from God with thanksgiving as His gift to us, then we can offer it back in service to him, belong together and are vital aspects of our Christian discipleship. Both are practical and valuable tests: 'Can I thank God for this? Can I do this unto the Lord?'

Secondly, Paul makes his case by reminding them that their lives aren't their own. They come from God, and they return to God. So, he issues that great affirmation: *if we live we live for the Lord and if we die we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die we belong to the Lord.* This simple passage written to settle a little church feud about the menu at church suppers contains a great comforting and challenging affirmation. I have used it at funerals and with the dying to point out that all our living and our dying, from the most everyday to the most astonishing, we are in God's care and mercy. There is the assurance that we belong to God – in life and in death – and that we belong to each other.

Finally, Paul makes his case that God is the judge of all and that judgement belongs to God alone. He echoes Jesus words in the Sermon on the Mount 'do not judge and you will not be judged' I'm sure that a lot of the things we argue about have no eternal concern in the judgement of God. God's ways are not our ways. When Christians judge one another, we pretend that righteousness and strength are ours. We commit the worst idolatry of all: we take over God's job. We make ourselves into God. In 14.10 Paul reminds us that we will all stand before God's

judgement seat and give an account of ourselves. Leave it to God.

Therefore, four great theological truths underpin this advice. First God has accepted us in Christ. Secondly Christ died and rose to be the lord, both theirs and ours. Thirdly, they are sisters and brothers so that we are members of the same family. Fourthly, all of us will stand before God's judgement seat. All these truths should sanctify our relationships in the church.

Paul goes on in 14.13-18 to say we need to act in love towards each other. Even though Paul identifies with the strong, that Christians are not obliged to refrain from eating certain foods or observing certain holy days, he will not distress his brother or sister but will respect their beliefs. Love limits its own liberty out of respect for others and the principle of liberty. For to wound a weaker brother's conscience is not only to distress him but to destroy him and that is incompatible with love. In chapter 15 he argues that we should not please ourselves but our neighbour as an outworking of the love of Christ.

For Paul conscience is sacrosanct, so that to go against it is a sin. At the same time, there is an implicit requirement to educate our conscience. It is not infallible. One could argue that Paul has written this entire letter to inform the consciences of his hearers and to reaffirm Christian truths and thereby sharpen up their conscience. He has stressed the principle that everything must be done from faith and that everyone

should be convinced of their own mind. We need therefore to educate our consciences by the Word of God so that we become strong in faith, growing in settled convictions. Secondly there is the principle of love. Everything must be done according to love so that we honour and not despise our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Does this mean that Christians aren't allowed to disagree about things? Aren't there important issues that we need to stand on. Does this mean that no judgement, or debate can be made? That everything is relative, anything goes? Paul says almost sarcastically that the kingdom of God is more important than food. But how do you decide which matters are essential and which are non-essential or your faith.

Although it is not always easy to distinguish between the essentials and the non-essentials a safe guide is that truths on which scripture speaks with a clear voice are essentials, whereas whenever equally biblical Christians, equally anxious to understand and obey scripture, reach different conclusions, these must be regarded as non-essentials.

Think about the things that Christians disagree on: the mode of baptism, infant or believers, immersion or sprinkling. Last week we had Remembrance Sunday: many Christians are pacifists and cannot justify war in any circumstance. Christians have different views on signs and wonders, the precise nature of heaven and hell, the second coming of Christ and the end of the age. Which President to elect. We of course in this

John Stott: Romans: the Bible Speaks Today, IVP
1998

church must decide by the summertime whether we are prepared to recognise and host same sex marriage. Now all those issues, and there are more, faithful Christian trying to honour God and be biblical, will hold different views and reach different conclusions because scripture is not clear. And if you can be bothered to engage in the same sex marriage discussion you will hear biblical justification for and against it. I would argue they are all non-essentials to our faith but important to our consciences and important with respect to how we welcome and accept one another in Christ's church. Can we hear the advice and principles that Paul offer to us through his teaching to the Romans about how to conduct ourselves?

A church ought to hold the fundamentals of faith and at the same time allow for differences of opinion and of interpretation in secondary matters, especially rites and ceremonies. On fundamentals: then faith is primary and we may not appeal to love as an excuse to deny essential faith. In non-fundamentals, however, love is primary, and we may not appeal to zeal for faith as an excuse for failures in love. Faith instructs our consciences. Love respects the consciences of others. Faith gives liberty; love limits its exercise. No one has put it better than the great Reformed scholar Richard Baxter: In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things charity. Amen.

Bibliography: