

Romans 14 Why were the weak in faith vegetarian?

We are living in a 'post-truth' world where something is true if it feels true for me. But when it comes to the Bible we are not in the realm of post-truth. The Bible is about a God of truth, and He gave Ten Commandments as a moral compass. Paul gives a short summary of the commandments in Romans 13:9. Our post-truth world is inevitably a world of controversy, and there is a huge battle for truth raging. As Christians we need to *earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints* (Jude 1:3).

Romans 14 is about controversy; but it is about a different kind of controversy. Even in a world where we recognise there is such a thing as Truth, there will always be what Paul calls *disputable matters* (Romans 14:1). Real life isn't black and white and the Bible isn't a list of do's and don'ts. The Bible is a book about real life, and unfortunately, like real life, contains some horrible things. But it is also a Book about God working out His redemptive purposes for the world through His chosen servant, Jesus Christ. Romans 14 is about real tensions involving real people (the weak and the strong), like you and me. But the nature of this controversy stands within the framework of biblical ethics. These *disputable matters* really are matters of personal conscience. They do hold the potential for relational tensions, but they do not in themselves present any threat to the Christian community: *As for the one whose faith is weak, welcome him, without passing judgment on disputable matters* (Romans 14:1).

Paul's attitude is very different in 1Corinthians 5. There was sexual immorality (incest) at the church in Corinth (1Corinthians 5:1). In this situation Paul says the person should be judged and appropriate action taken (1Corinthians 5:12-13). Likewise, sexual or other abuse of children is not a disputable matter. We have to make judgments (based on God's truth), for the good of the individual and the wider community, and this is why we have safeguarding processes in place. But for the disputable matters in Romans 14 the believing Gentiles are told not to judge the weak in faith. But what exactly were these disputable matters? They had to do with eating, special days and drinking wine.

Eating together in the early church was a big thing. Imagine a fellowship lunch with a table full of buffet food, and people going round with their plates. Now, I think, in the context of 1st century Judaism, the food on the table would have been kosher. Nevertheless, some (the strong – Christian believers,) ate anything, but others (the weak in faith – whom I think most likely were Jews who have not yet confessed Jesus as Lord, but who are interested,) eat only vegetarian food. In our culture there are various reasons for vegetarianism (compassion for animals, health reasons, to reduce CO₂) but why should the weak in faith eat only vegetables? (Romans 14:2).

Was it because they were weak in faith? I don't think so. Daniel refused to eat meat or drink wine from the king's table, and ate only vegetables, yet he is usually not considered to be weak in faith (Daniel 1:8-16). Was it because of the Biblical food laws? We have to conclude it was not, because there is nothing in the Bible saying Jews had to be vegetarian. The reasons the weak in faith, who were Jews, ate only vegetables is most likely due to concerns about contamination of the meat by idolatry. The Jewish synagogues had rulings (halacha – binding restrictions) on eating even kosher meat from animals which may have been sacrificed to pagan idols, something not unlikely if the meat had been sourced from the Gentile markets. It seems to me that the weak in faith decided to forego from meat completely so they could attend the Christian meetings to hear more about Jesus! But they were still loyal to the halacha of their synagogue. For Paul this didn't represent a risk to the Christian community and was to be understood as a matter of personal conscience. But he was concerned about the attitude of the Gentile Christians, who enjoyed more freedom, that they should not be arrogant (Romans 11:18; 12:3).

Nearly all churches have a set of rules. In Baptist churches these rules are called the constitution. Rules for membership can be set quite low (e.g. GBC) or much higher. The Exclusive Brethren set the bar very high, and have rules which forbid, for example, watching television, listening to the radio and visiting places of entertainment (and more). Although it is easy to make fun of rules like these, they come from a desire to be holy unto God and separate from this evil world.

Imagine someone from an Exclusive Brethren background came to worship at GBC, and imagine that this individual didn't really know the Lord. He loved to come to GBC to hear about Jesus, but was still attached to the rules of the Exclusive Brethren. To deliberately turn on the TV in his presence would be unloving, and a poor witness. Paul says, *Do not for the sake of food [watching TV] destroy the work of God* (Romans 14:20). This is not to say it is wrong to watch TV (although we should be careful what we watch), but we should not do anything to offend.

There seems to be no doubt that Paul's bar, in the light of the gospel, was lower than for most Jews. However, I don't think for Paul, as a Jew, this extended as far as eating non-Kosher (Acts 28:17), but he did not share the same concerns about contamination. Paul was keen to uphold the Torah (Romans 3:31), but he was not particularly concerned to uphold the halacha of the synagogues. Paul says he gets this from Jesus: *I know and am persuaded from the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it is unclean* (Romans 14:14). This sounds very much like Paul thinks the Levitical laws are now simply a matter of conscience (and this is the way many commentators read it.) However, the word for *unclean* isn't the word used for Levitical uncleanness, but is better translated as *common* (also in Mark 7:2). This is a reference to food deemed unclean/common by Jewish halacha because of possible contamination with idolatry. Jesus called these rules *the traditions of men*. As I understand it Jesus wasn't against the traditions of men in themselves; but he was very much against them when they were allowed to get in the way of the commandments of God, which they often did (Mark 7:8).

Paul instructs the Gentile Christians, *Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains* (Romans 14:3). The word for *despise* is used in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the sinner: *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on / despised everyone else, Jesus told this parable* (Luke 18:9). In this parable the Pharisee thought he was morally superior to everyone else, while the sinner pleaded for mercy. Jesus concludes the parable with a saying, *For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*" This is what Paul is saying to the Gentile Christians in Rome: don't look down or judge the weak in faith.

However, if we identify the weak as Jewish Christians who have not yet shaken off the bondage of the Law, we end up doing exactly what Paul says we shouldn't do, despising and judging them. Luther was a great man of God, but is also known for his anti-Semitic streak. He judged the weak in faith as being *in error, of the Jewish superstition, and Pelagian* (seeking salvation by works.) Other commentators refer to the weak as, *narrow-minded, over-sensitive Jews, cowardly Christian Jews, who still need the crutches of the law rather than solely relying on Christ*. But Paul reminds his readers we will all one day stand before God's judgment seat (Romans 14:10-12).

Unfortunately this arrogant spirit is still alive and well in the church today. Theologian Roy Clements, former pastor of Eden BC, but left in 1999 to pursue a homosexual relationship, classifies the weak as conservative Christians, and the strong as liberal and liberated Christians, like himself. This is the standard liberal position on Romans 14, and common in the Christian denominations today. But, in wrongly categorising the weak, he sees them as Pharisaic and a threat, and so inevitably does what Paul says he shouldn't do. He judges and despises the weak as *irrational [in] their prejudices; obstinate traditionalists who want things their way; and spiritually immature*. He concedes you should not treat the weak with contempt, and should "accept" them, but he clearly believes they need to be challenged.

Unlike Paul, Clements is working outside of the boundaries of Biblical ethics. His interpretation of Romans 14 is to twist and to do violence to the text, resulting in complete misapplication. Although to an extent he applies logic in following Luther, I think even Luther would be shocked! For Paul the weak in faith did not represent a threat to the Christian community; God was at work in their lives; the matters of eating shouldn't have made any difference to anyone; these were disputable matters, and ultimately matters of personal conscience. May the Lord give to His people a humble and loving spirit. Amen.