

# Christian Liberty, Part 12

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Now please turn with me in your own Bibles to Paul's letter to the Romans and chapter 14. And I make no apology for reading in your hearing the entire 14th chapter of Romans and the first seven verses of chapter 15.

Many of you may not know this, but in many so-called evangelical churches today, one would be hard-pressed to find even five verses of the Bible read. You've had a call to worship that was Scripture. You've had the reading of a whole psalm, a whole chapter from the New Testament Gospels, and now a chapter and a third from an epistle (more than less than a third, about a fourth). And to the extent that we continue to be a people soaking up our Bibles, we will be safe from the mere opinions of men and the changing winds of religious fads. And I trust that you who are part of the rising generation who are sitting here now in services soaked with the Bible, if the time ever comes when there begins to be an erosion from that, that you'll rear back on your hind legs and say, "No way, Jose. We want our Bibles. We want that blessed book which alone teaches us the way of God and shows us the way of life."

Hear, then, the reading of Romans 14 through 15 and verse 7.

"But him that is weak in faith receive [and now I'm going to give what is a much better translation--it makes sense to us], but not for the purpose of quarrels over disputed matters. Him that is weak in faith receive, but not for the purpose of quarrels over disputed matters. One man has faith to eat all things, but he that is weak eats herbs. Let not him that eats set at nought him that eats not. And let not him who does not eat judge him that eats, for God has received him. Who are you that judges the servant of another? to his own Lord he stands or falls. Yes, he shall be made to stand, for the Lord has power to make him stand. One man esteems one day above another, and another esteems every day alike. Let each man be fully assured in his own mind. He that regards the day regards it unto the Lord, and he that eats eats unto the Lord, for he gives God thanks. And he that does not eat, unto the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and none dies to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord, or whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you set at nought your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, to Me every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then, each one of us shall give account of himself to God.

"Let us not therefore judge one another any more, but judge this, rather, that no man put a stumbling block in his brother's way, or an occasion of falling. I know, and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean of itself, save to him who accounts anything to be unclean. To him it is unclean. For if because of meat your brother is grieved, you no longer walk in love. Do not destroy with your meat him for whom Christ died. Do not let your good be evil spoken of, for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he that in these things serves Christ is well pleasing to God and approved of men. So then, let us follow after the things which make for peace, and things whereby we may build up one another. Do not overthrow for meat's sake the work of God. All things indeed are clean, albeit it is evil for that man who eats with offense. It is good not to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor to do anything whereby your brother stumbles. The faith which you have, have to yourself before God. Happy is he who judges not himself in that which he approves. But he that doubts is condemned if he eat, because he does not eat of faith, and whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

"Now we that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each one of us please his neighbor for that which is good unto edifying. For Christ also pleased not himself, but as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached you fell on me. Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope. Now the God of patience and of comfort grant you to be of the same mind one with another according to Christ Jesus, that with one accord you may with one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore, receive one another, even as Christ also received you, to the glory of God."

Let us again pray and ask God for the help of His Spirit in understanding His word.

*Our Father, we would take the posture of the psalmist and pray that all carnal haughtiness and pride in our own mental and intellectual abilities would be nailed to the cross, that coming to spiritual realities we would acknowledge afresh our need of spiritual illumination. Help us, we pray, as I seek to open up portions of this chapter, as your people seek to understand it. O God, be our help, we pray, in Jesus' name.*

"Whom the Son sets free is free indeed." These words of our Lord Jesus in John 8:36 are among the most wonderful words that could ever reach human ears. "Whom the Son sets free is free indeed." And it is the nature and reality and fruits of this very freedom that are presently the focus of our study of the Word of God as we've been engaged in a series of messages entitled "A Fresh Look at the Doctrine of Christian Liberty".

Thus far, we've examined from the Scriptures the reality and nature of our bondage and slavery in Adam, the reality and nature of our liberty and freedom in Christ. We have looked at the goal of our liberty in Christ, Luke 1:74 and 75, and then we considered together the twofold danger or constant threats to our liberty in Christ: the threat of license or libertinism on the one hand and the threat of legalism on the

other. And addressing those threats, we opened up several pivotal texts in the Word of God.

Now this morning, we begin to explore the subject most often associated with the doctrine of Christian liberty, that is, our liberty in relationship to non-moral issues, those issues concerning which the Bible gives no clear prohibition, nor no clear command. And the moment we turn to that subject or that division of our subject, we should understand that there are two sections of Holy Scripture that are the divinely given watershed of biblical principles and understanding: Romans 14, that I've read in your hearing, into 15:7, and 1 Corinthians chapters 8, 9, and 10, and the first verse of chapter 11.

We come then this morning to our first examination of Romans 14:1 to 15:7, one of those two watershed passages. And as we do, I want us first of all to consider briefly the contents of the previous part of the letter, especially as those contents relate to basic teaching concerning the Christian life. So if you are taking notes, Roman numeral 1 is the previous content of the Roman letter, especially as it touches upon the Christian life. Those who divided up our Bible into chapters and verses, this was a human endeavor back a few hundred years ago. But I want us to think of the Roman letter as Paul's 16-page letter. It's been divided into 16 chapters. And in this 16-page letter, we are, this morning, going to open up the letter to page 14 and on into a bit of page 15.

Now surely you would acknowledge with me that the Apostle Paul had enough keenness of mind and enough sense of spiritual responsibility to avoid two things at this point in his letter. Number one, we, I trust, are confident that when we come to page 14, we would find absolutely nothing that would contradict or negate what he had written in pages 1 to 13. And secondly, that we give him enough credit of mental acuity that he did not forget what he wrote on pages 1 to 13. So you all agree with me that if Paul is a reasonably intelligent person, let alone a man when he writes this under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that he would neither forget nor contradict anything that he had written in the first 13 pages. Therefore, whatever is found in this portion of the Word of God, page 14 and a bit of page 15 of Paul's letter, must be understood in a way that is consistent with everything that has gone before. We all agreed with that.

Now a failure to come to grips with that very self-evident principle has caused people to derive stuff out of Romans 14 through 15:7 that ought never had entered their heads. But it has entered their heads and into their religious persuasion because they forget this is a letter with organic unity. And you do not just rip a section out of its larger context. So, as I said, I want to spend a few moments just sketching in what Paul has set before us in those first 13 chapters, particularly as it relates to the doctrine of the Christian life, that is, how we are to live as children of God.

The great theme of Romans, I trust immediately you say, Romans 1, 16 and 17: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that

believes, for therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith to faith, as it is written, "The just shall live by faith." That's Paul's great theme. It is the theme of a righteousness provided by God, revealed in the gospel, and to be received by faith. I hope every believer has an understanding of the simple fact that is Paul's great theme. Then as he addresses that theme, he starts in verse 18 of chapter 1 all the way through to chapter 3 and verse 20 to demonstrate the universal need for such a righteousness.

If you sit here this morning and you say, "Why get excited about such a theme, a righteousness from God, revealed in the gospel, received by faith? What's that have to do with me? If you have no sense that it has a lot to do with you, I urge you, when you leave this place today, spend some time this afternoon reading Romans 1:18 to 3:20 with the prayer, "Oh God, show me where I fit in here." And if God answers that prayer and you read it thoughtfully, you will see how you do fit.

You are part of a world that is under the condemnation of God because it has no righteousness of its own that is acceptable to God. And then beginning in verse 21 of chapter 3 through to the end of that chapter, he shows the provision of this righteousness in the person and work of Jesus, which is to be received by faith. But now, a righteousness from God has been revealed. And then he demonstrates that that righteousness is procured in the death of Jesus Christ and is available to all men by faith.

And then in chapter 4, he shows the witness of the Old Testament to this righteousness which is received by faith. And he illustrates in the life of Abraham, and in the life of David, this has always been God's way of conferring righteousness upon sinners. No sinner has ever found acceptance before God in any other way than God's provision of righteousness received by faith.

And in chapter 5, verses 1 to 11, he sets forth some of the amazing fruits of this righteousness received by faith: "having therefore been justified by faith, we have peace with God, we have access, we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, the love of..." Oh it's marvelous! I don't want to start quoting or I'm going to get preachy, but he shows us some of those marvelous privileges that belong to every single sinner who, conscious that he has no righteousness of his own, has cast himself upon Jesus Christ as revealed in the gospel, and by faith has laid hold of the righteousness of God in Jesus.

And then at the end of chapter 5, verses 12 to 21, he demonstrates the framework within which this righteousness comes to us. As surely as our sinfulness comes to us in terms of the representative headship of Adam, so it is in Jesus Christ and His representative headship that this righteousness comes to us.

Then, in chapter 6, he moves from the question of how this righteousness by faith is received and its initial blessings to the whole question of what relationship does it have to a changed life. If salvation is all of God and all of grace and all in Christ, and where sin abounds, grace does much more abound, he asks the question in chapter

6 and verse 1, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" And his answer is, "God forbid." And then he begins to demonstrate why every single person who's received this righteousness of God, procured by Christ, announced in the gospel, and received by faith, always, without exception, produces a holy life.

And in chapter 6, verses 1 to 14, he told us the result of faith in Christ unto justification is a union with Christ in which we died with Him, we were raised with Him, to this great, wonderful result, that sin no longer exercises Lordship over us, for we are not under the law, but under grace. So verse 14 is the key text in that section and then in verses 15 to the end of the chapter he says the result of a saving response to the gospel is the change of masters from sin to righteousness. The first half of the chapter, when we lay hold of Christ and are united to Christ, the virtue of His death and resurrection is reproduced in us. We die to sin's lordship. We rise to newness of life. Sin no longer has dominion over us.

Verses 15 to the end of the chapter, the key verse being verse 17, "But God be thanked that you who were the slaves of sin, you have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine unto which you were delivered, and having been made free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness." He says that in union with Christ, in the embrace of faith, we not only have died to sin's dominion, we've had a change of masters from sin to righteousness.

And then he goes on to demonstrate in chapter 7 verses 1 to 6, the result of our union with Christ is released from the enslavement to the law. We are now free to render bond service with joy and freedom of spirit to the God who has released us.

And then when we come into chapter 8, he says the gift of the Spirit is given to all who embrace Christ in the gospel. It produces a new sphere of moral conduct from flesh to spirit: "You are no longer in the flesh, but in the Spirit. If so, be that the Spirit of God dwells in you. If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His. As many as are led by the Spirit, they are the sons of God." He demonstrates that this gracious provision of salvation in Christ, a righteousness from God by faith, does not simply leave us pardoned, forgiven, accepted sinners. It always makes us transformed sinners.

Until then, when he comes to chapter 12 and the end of the dense, concentrated doctrinal section, what is his appeal? "I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, present your bodies a living sacrifice, wholly acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service. Be not fashioned according to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God." The gracious provisions of such a salvation in Christ demands a response of total consecration which issues--follow me now--which issues in a life of non-conformity to the world and a passionate desire to be totally conformed to the will of God in everything.

Paul wrote chapter 12:1 and 2 before he wrote chapter 14, and he did not write anything in chapter 14 to negate, to in any way water down the tremendous appeal

that if our souls stand back amazed at such a glorious salvation as is ours in Christ, It's only reasonable that we say, "Oh God, I'm yours, lock, stock, barrel, from the top of my head to the tip of my toes. I'm all yours, all the time, in every relationship. I don't want to be fashioned by that world that's on its way to hell, in which I once was blind and dead and a rebel against you. I want in every single area of life to know your will and to do it in the power and in the grace of your spirit."

Then he goes on in chapters 12 and 13 to get very specific about what that kind of a life will look like. And among the things he says, we're not going to look at all of them, among the things he says, look at 12.9: "Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor that which is evil. Cleave to that which is good." When he says in chapter 14, "To the pure, to the clean, all things are pure." Wait a minute. Don't you wrench that loose. There are some things that are inherently, intrinsically evil. He says, "Abhor them." There are some things that are intrinsically, essentially good. Paul didn't forget what he wrote. "Abhor the evil. Cling to the good." Chapter 13, verses 8 to 10. The obligation of love that is upon us in all of our relationships.

And then most interestingly, the last thing his pen wrote or his mouth dictated in chapter 13. Look at verse 14: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Make not provision for the flesh to fulfill the lust thereof." That's the last word before he takes up the subject of Christian liberty with regard to non-moral issues. And to me it's tragic that many people read chapter 14 through 15:7 in such a way as to give them allowance to fulfill the lust of the flesh under the guise of Christian liberty.

So that's a brief flyover. Paul picks up his pen or dictates chapters 14 through 15:7 fully conscious of what he wrote in the first 13 pages of his letter. He is not forgetting what he wrote, and he is not negating or canceling what he wrote.

Now we come (Roman numeral II) to the precise concerns in this section of the letter. As Paul writes, pages 14 and 15, what are his precise concerns? And I'm going to answer that under three headings. Number one: the identity of the issues addressed Number two: the origin of the issues addressed and the problems created by the issues addressed. So the identity, origin, and problems.

The identity of the issues addressed. What is Paul dealing with in these chapters that we say address in a focused way the matter of Christian liberty as it touches on non-moral issues? Well, let's look at the text. Verse one; "Him that is weak in faith receive, yet not for the purpose of quarrels over disputed matters." And what are the disputed matters? Read on: "One man has faith to eat all things, but he that is weak eats herbs. Let not him that eats set at nought him that eats not, and let not him that eats not judge him that eats." Oh, you got the message. What are the precise issues? The eating or the not eating of certain foods.

Now listen carefully. As a matter of religious conscience before God, the issue is the eating or non-eating of certain foods as a matter of religious convictions, of religious conscience before God. That's why Paul can go on to say, if someone eats that concerning which his conscience gives him no peace that he ought to eat it, he

stands condemned. He has chosen what in his mind is sin, and therefore to him it is sin. Though it is not sin in itself in isolation, when he eats it, with his religious conviction being "I ought not to eat it", he is sinning. So it is a matter of the eating or non-eating of certain foods as a matter of religious conviction, not an issue of preference, of health issues, but conscience before God. Keep that clearly in mind. It's there in the text.

We've just looked at the first couple of verses. You find it again in 6b: "He that regards the day, regards the day to the Lord. He that eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks. And he that eats not, to the Lord he eats not, and giveth God thanks." Verse 15 again: "If because of your meat your brother is grieved, you no longer walk in love." Verse 20: "Overthrow not for meat's sake the work of God." The first issue that is in Paul's crosshairs is the eating or not eating of certain foods as a matter of religious conscience before God.

Secondly (we're trying to identify the issues addressed), the keeping of certain religious holidays or special days as a matter of religious conviction. Verses 5 and 6: "One man esteems one day above another. Another esteems every day alike [flat line]. Let each man be fully assured in his own mind. He that regards the day [now notice] regards it unto the Lord." You see the issue? It is a matter of keeping these special religious holidays out of conscience toward God. Believing that God requires me to do so, God is pleased when I do so, or being persuaded God does not require me, God is pleased if these holidays come and go and I act like I didn't even know they were on the calendar. The identity of the issues addressed, number one, the eating or not eating of certain foods as a matter of religious conviction.

Thirdly (possibly a separate category), the use or non-use of wine as a matter of religious convictions. Because, we read further on in the chapter, verse 21: "It is good not to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor do anything whereby thy brother stumbles." So into the picture comes the issue of wine, and it's alluded to in verse 17: "The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking." So the issue here is whether someone out of religious conviction totally abstains from wine, by inference any alcoholic beverages, or whether one indulges as a matter of conviction that he can do so with a good conscience before God. Now, have I persuaded you that that's what Paul's talking about? Alright? You're persuaded, alright?

You say, "Pastor, we're not kindergarten." Friends, please, I'm not insulting your intelligence. But if you're not clear on this, you're going to be off on everything else that follows. That's why I say, "Lord, if ever I take the role of a teacher, help me to take that role this morning, make it as plain as I can, even be a fool if I have to." All right? So if you feel I've come down a little bit, I'm not doing it to insult you. I love you too much to have anyone go out and say, "Well, I'm not quite sure."

The issue identified, clearly, foods, special days, and wine. Now, what's the importance of all this? We see then that the issues addressed are not things that Paul would have called evil. Chapter 12 and verse 9 "Abhor that which is evil." Some

things are evil and they can never be made other than evil. And calling them Christian liberty doesn't change evil into that which is good.

For example, the end of chapter 13, he says, "Let us walk becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, partying about and getting smashed [not in sexual orgies and bedding around" would be a contemporary rendering of the next two words in the Greek], not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and jealousy." These things can never be made acceptable to God. And there are a host of other things that can never be made acceptable to God. Some things are essentially worldly. "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed..." There are some things that to give our eyes to them and our ears to them and our feet to them and our money to them is to violate Romans 6:13. "Neither present your members instruments of unrighteousness unto sin." Paul wrote that earlier in the letter. So when he takes up these issues as non-moral issues, he hasn't forgotten what he's already written. And you and I must not forget.

Let me get specific. Rome had its theaters and had its plays with plot lines dripping with pagan sensuality and immorality. You think Paul is putting into the category of Christian liberty going to such plays, drinking in with one's eyes, acted out homosexual, fornicating relationships, and doing that to the glory of God as a matter of Christian liberty? No way. They were to abhor what was evil, evil plays, voluntarily impinging upon their eyeballs. Any contemporary application? You don't go to the theater in New York to see it. You bring the theater to you by way of blockbuster, with plots shot through with immorality and uncleanness and ribaldry. Abhor what is evil. Don't call it Christian liberty.

What about Roman Christians who used to delight to go to the Colosseum? They loved to see the gladiators come out and fight to the death and to see the blood spurting, and it fed something base and evil in their hearts. You think Paul is putting going to the Colosseum and watching a bloodbath of gladiators as a matter of Christian liberty, where men deface the image of God in one another and murder one another, an act which God hates, and finding entertainment in it? I ask you, do you think so?

You see the modern application? "Dirty Harry", "Terminator 1", "Terminator 2", "Terminator 3", right down to all of the present shoot them up, blow them to pieces, blood and gore movies. You watch those under the name of Christian liberty. Shame on you! They are evil! You're to abhor it! You're to abstain from it, not to put a tag over it, Christian liberty. That's why I say you've got to clearly identify what Paul is dealing with.

A certain beverage, going in the mouth in moderation or not. "Oh, this is such and such a special holiday, Christian holiday [with overtones as we'll see from the Old Testament]. We're going to celebrate this as unto the Lord. I don't really feel I can eat that meat [and we'll see for what reasons]." My friend, don't you take meat and wine, and keeping certain days, and use them as a platform to justify drinking in evil,

voluntarily, as a matter of entertainment and avocation. It's wickedness, and it's time some of you faced it. Call me what you want to call me, but until you can show me that Romans 14 touches those issues and puts them in the category of liberty, I will not retract what I've said this morning.

Furthermore, we see that the issues addressed are not matters which compromise the purity of the gospel. You heard about this in the previous hour. These issues did not compromise the purity of the gospel. Some of you perhaps may have thought, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, didn't Paul when writing to the Galatians say, 'You're keeping days and months. I fear my soul labor upon you in vain.'" He writes to the Colossians and talks to them about their asceticism and their touch not, taste not. Ah, but there was a difference. Here at Rome, nobody was intruding these issues into the purity and the integrity of the gospel. No one was saying, "If I don't eat that meat, I will be adding to the work of Christ. If I keep that particular religious day, I will be adding to the work of Christ. If I do not take that wine, I will be adding something to the righteousness of God in Christ." No. Here at Rome, unlike the situation at Galatia and Colossae, these issues were not threatening the purity and the integrity of the gospel. That's why Paul dealt with them in the most tender, gracious, loving, pastoral way. You see the difference?

Here was the matter of people's consciences, all who were trusting only in that gospel which Paul expounds earlier in the letter, trusting only in Christ crucified and risen from the dead as the ground of their acceptance with God. But they had some baggage, as we'll see from their past religious associations, so that their consciences were differently conditioned about, "Shall I or shall I not eat this meat or that particular form of meat? Shall I or shall I not keep that holiday? Shall I or shall I not drink wine?" But in this case, no threat was being brought forward to the integrity and the purity of the gospel. Therefore Paul deals with it gently, pastorally, and lovingly.

Now then, in the light of this, we are not warranted to put into this category of Christian liberty any other matters but those that can be truly called scripturally non-moral matters. And here I've got to give you a little historical lesson. You've heard me use the term things indifferent--the Greek term "abiaphora". Well, I did a little research, a little study. I try to do some before I preach. Don't preach off the cuff. And I came across a book that we have in our bookstore, an excellent book, J. Douma's book, *Responsible Conduct*, published by Presbyterian and Reformed. And he has a whole chapter dealing with this question: Are there abiaphora? Are there things indifferent? And he traces out how this term was first of all used by the Stoics, the Greek philosophers, and how it then got revived during the Reformation. And he comes to the conclusion,

"No, I don't think we should use it, because in a very real sense, at the end of the day, no action that we take is a thing indifferent. It may be a thing indifferent in itself, but it is not indifferent when we do or do not indulge in it. At the end of the day, Every action has reference to the Lord. [Again, look at the text: "One man has faith to eat all things." In other words, it is a matter of his persuasion that] I have a liberty in Christ

to eat all forms of meat and all forms of vegetables, and in so long as I eat in due proportion and I don't become a glutton, I can, in faith, eat and fulfill 1 Corinthians 10:31: 'Whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God.' My eating is not a thing indifferent when I do it to the glory of God or to some other end. So in a sense there are really no things indifferent."

Again, in chapter 14, verses 6 to 8: "He that regards the day, regards it to the Lord. He that eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks. He that does not eat, unto the Lord he eats not, and gives God thanks. None of us lives to himself, none of us dies to himself." See what Paul is doing? He's saying, even in these matters that are not in the category of the evil that we are to abhor, or the good to which we are to plead, even in these things concerning which there is no clear, explicit command or prohibition, at the end of the day, everything has significance in our relationship to God. That's Paul's point.

We don't live to ourselves. So when I'm making a decision, "Shall I or shall I not have wine with my meal?" I don't cordon off that area and say, "Well, Lord Jesus, You have nothing to do with this. I block you out. That's a thing indifferent." Oh, no, no. If I cannot, with a conscience persuaded, that my moderate use of the wine is a means by which I can glorify God, I ought not to touch it. "For whatsoever is not of faith is sin." And so I'm not going to call them things indifferent, because I can't use the term anymore with a good conscience. That's what happens when you read and study, and you get light on your own conscience. So that's subhead number one, the identity of the issues addressed.

Now then, the origin of these issues. How in the world did these issues get into the Roman Church? So when Paul's dictating his letter, and he comes and sees that his amanuensis has written page 13, and he says, "Oh boy, we're on page 14, I've got to address this issue", why did he have to address the issue with the church at Rome? Well, devout students of the Word of God differ in their answer to that question. Douglas Moole, in his massive commentary on Romans (I mean in massive, it's a thousand pages. It's no little ditty commentary), when he addresses that question, he lists six different answers given to that question. Why did Paul have to address this question at Rome? What was there in the church at Rome that necessitated his addressing this? And then he says it is of his persuasion that his number six is the right answer. And then marshals a list of responsible, godly, proven exegetes and theologians who take the same position. And so I hide under their skirt and stand with them. And here is basically the answer:

Rome was a cosmopolitan city. You had all kinds of people from various nations of the world gathering there, and we know that a number of Jews were there, because under one ruler, the Jews were told to flee the city, and he didn't want them there. So here is a cosmopolitan city. We're not even sure how the gospel came. It could be that some of the people who are present in Jerusalem at Pentecost, who came from Rome, went back and were the instruments to see the church established. But the church was comprised, obviously, of Jews and Gentiles. You read the Book of

Romans and you see Paul is interacting with the Jews, with the Gentiles, all the time, through the entire book. So the church, made up of a cosmopolitan complexion, Jews and Gentiles, and some of those Jews, while not like the Judaizers, trusting in their circumcision, trusting in eating kosher food, trusting in keeping some of their Jewish feast days would add to their salvation--no--these things were just so much a part of their cultural slash religious background that they just felt un-Jewish not continuing them.

You see the difference now between continuing them, because "If I don't, I'll be lost, I won't be saved" and saying, "Well, I just feel more comfortable continuing in these things." Just like many Jewish converts today say they don't have to reject their Jewishness to become Christians. They call themselves fulfilled Jews, messianic Jews, and they will continue to keep a number of the things that are part and parcel of their "Jewishness". Now, I have a question when they start keeping Passover. But I'm just telling you what they do. I'm not saying I approve; I'm not telling you I disapprove of some, but this is what they do.

So you had these Jews, they had an abhorrence for idols, and it could be that the whole issue of meat was such that realizing, as we read in 1 Corinthians in the parallel passages, that much of the meat that you could buy in a bargain meat shop had been offered unto idols, that they were so concerned that they would in any way be tainted with pagan idolatry, they said, "Look, the best thing to do is just be a vegetarian. Forget it. I don't want to have to bow over my meat and wonder, oh, does this is... No, no, no, no. Lord, I can get by on my veggies. I can have my veggie burgers." Maybe they had found a way to make veggie burgers back then, and they tasted a little bit like hamburgers. Who knows? But there were some of those. And when those special days came, now that they saw their fulfillment in Christ, they could keep those days, not looking forward to, but looking back and rejoicing that Christ indeed had come and He was the fulfillment of all the types and the shadows. They weren't going back to the synagogue, unlike the Hebrew Christians who were tempted to reject Christ and reject His church and go back to the synagogue, back to the temple. No, here were people who were not in any way relinquishing their faith in Christ and in the gospel. But they had these scruples of conscience, and they could not, with a good conscience before God, eat the meats. They could not, with a good conscience, give up those particular days.

On the other hand, you had people coming out of a totally pagan background. They may have had absolutely no relationship to special dietary laws and to special feast days. And so they looked at these others and said, "This is ridiculous. Why have a conscience about not having a good steak? I mean, God gives us the steak. And we thank God for it." And they were the strong ones whose consciences were thinking right. No meats are inherently unclean, none whatsoever. All things are clean, as Paul says later on in the chapter. And so these people, with a good conscience, could partake of all kinds of meats. They could just ignore special fast days and feast days, and they had no scruples about having wine in moderation. So, that's the origin of these issues. And God purposed to have a church made up of Jew and Gentile. And

Paul is passionately concerned for their unity, and therefore, he takes this much time to address the issue in these chapters.

Now, by way of application, while we are not likely to have people come among us with Jewish scruples, food, special days, Yet, we do come from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds which have conditioned our consciences on such matters as special days in the religious calendar. We have some among you who feel, because you know the origins of the church calendar days, Christmas, Easter, all of those things that they were imported from pagan things, that you just feel before God, "I want nothing to do with the whole shebang!" You regard every day alike, except the Lord's Day. And you do so with a good conscience before God.

Others of you, your background is such that you've been conditioned that Christmas and Easter and Good Friday and some of these things, they have such positive connotations for you. And now that you're a Christian and you see the richness of the truth in Christ, you couldn't think of letting December 25 pass without celebrating Christmas. You'd feel you were doing something wrong to your family, to your own soul. So there are those differing conditioning factors of our background, of our associations.

Likewise, with regard to certain foods, the use of wine moderately. Some of you people come out of a background where you grew up in homes where wine was a staple commodity on the table. You never saw your mom or dad drunk, never saw them slur a word. And you were taught at a given age the moderate, responsible use of wine; it's unthinkable to you that God would be displeased with your moderate use of wine.

Others of you, like myself, I came out of a background where devil, sin, hell, and booze were synonyms. Yes, that's right. My father was an executive for Schick Electric Shaver, and every year they'd give him this big box of real fancy expensive booze. You know what he would do in front of all of us? He'd take the tops off and pour them down the toilet, except for a little bit at the bottom of one kind of hard liquor that he would keep in case somebody needed that for medicinal purposes. As far as I know, it sat there for years and never went down at all. That's the kind of background I came out of. So my conscience was conditioned that no Christian, certainly no serious Christian, would ever touch a drop of alcoholic beverage. Some of you come out of a similar background. So we have those differing backgrounds. That's where we're from. Therefore, Romans 14 through 15:7 does have something to say to us.

So we've looked briefly at the identity of the issues, the origin of the issues. Now thirdly and finally, the problems created by these issues. What are the problems created by these issues?

Well, number one, they have the potential to prevent or to disrupt the unity of a local congregation. Look at the bookend imperatives in this section. The section is bounded by 14:1 and 15:7. And verses 8 through 13 of chapter 7 are sort of an

appendix demonstrating the larger truth that God intended to incorporate Gentiles into His church. But what are the bookend imperatives?

Look at verse 1: "But him that is weak in the faith [here's the imperative] receive." The implication is the majority of the people in the Roman church had a strong conscience (and we're going to identify that next week). Who is the weak? Who is the strong? With respect to these issues of foods and days and wine, their consciences were properly instructed that God nowhere commanded or forbade the eating of certain meats. God nowhere commanded or forbade the keeping of religious holidays so long as they are not kept with a view to adding to the work of Christ. God nowhere forbids or commands the moderate, responsible use of wine. If He did, Jesus blew it. We read about it this morning. So much so that they said, "Hey, you kept the good stuff till last. Usually you give the good stuff first." And then when people are beginning to be glad and loosened up a bit--that's what the passage says, folks. There's no way to understand it otherwise. I've seen people stand on their head and try to do better. It's easier to stand on your feet when you're talking rather than stand on your head.

Now here's the situation. These things have the potential for disruption, so Paul has to say, "You strong ones, you must receive that weak brother. You must not hold him off at a distance." And then verse 7 of chapter 15: "Wherefore, receive one another, even as Christ also received you." These are the bookend imperatives, and in between, look at verse 19: "Let us follow after the things which make for peace, and the things whereby we may build up one another." Paul recognized that this issue of meats and days and wine had the potential either to prevent or disrupt the kind of unity in the Church at Rome that was essential to the Church being itself. Here was Paul's vision in 15 verses 5 and 6: "The God of patience and comfort grant you to be [now notice] of the same mind one with another according to Christ Jesus." While he recognizes they will be of different minds with respect to meats and days and wine, they can be of the same mind by the standard of Christ and no division over meats and days and wine. Isn't that beautiful? He says, "Let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind." But now he says, "May the God of patience and comfort grant you to be of the same mind."

And what is that mind? The recognition that there will be diversity of persuasion on these things, and that those who are persuaded in one direction do not judge those persuaded in another, and those on this side do not look down their nose at those here. They are persuaded. Christ has bought them. Christ has won them. Christ has brought them under His gracious rule. They are seeking to please Christ. This one bows over its vegetable meal and thanks God for his vegetables, not like a Pharisee: "Oh, God, I thank you I ain't eating meat like my brother Henry." That would be Pharisaical. He just says, "Lord, thank you for my veggies. Thank you, Lord, I'm content to eat my veggies." Next to him at the church supper, here's Henry bowed over his twelve-ounce sirloin steak, and he's drooling. He can't wait to dive into that well-marbled piece of cholesterol-making flesh. And he said, "Lord, thank you." You

see? But if they have one mind according to Christ, there's no fracture in their unity. They recognize and respect each other's conscience before Almighty God.

Paul would not conceive of four or five churches at Rome. One church is to keep the Jewish Holy Days Evangelical Reformed Church of Rome. Then you look down in the Yellow Pages and you see the No Drink Wine Evangelical and Reformed Church of Rome. And then you find another one, the Kosher Food Vegetarian Evangelical Reformed Church of Rome. It would be scandalous, scandalous. And so Paul takes the time to lay out the principles that will help the people of God to be of one mind in Christ Jesus.

Look at the second strand of his vision, verse 6: "that with one accord you may with one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." His vision is that they will be of one mind according to Christ, that with one mouth they may glorify Christ. And this will only be true as, in verse 7, they receive one another as Christ has received them to the glory of God. He recognizes problem number one: these things have the potential to prevent or disrupt the unity of a local congregation.

Secondly, they have the potential to cripple and devastate the spiritual health of some within the congregation. You read through all the negative words Paul uses in these chapters. He uses such words as these: "Do not despise. Do not judge. Quarrels over disputed matters, stumbling block, grieve, destroy, overturn the work of God." That's strong language, folks. And that's destructive language. And Paul says if this thing is not sorted out as it ought to be, it has the potential to cripple and devastate the spiritual health of some within the congregation.

And it has that potential here. We have had cycles of disruption in this area. God lays the task of the training of your children upon you as parents. Therefore, homeschooling is the only honorable way to train your children. Others say God has laid the task of training upon the parents. It is a rare parent who is competent to give the training that will most glorify God. Therefore, a Christian school is your... We've had to sort out, my friends, in this congregation, incipient divisiveness over the method of parental responsibility administered in the training of children. This will never be, while some of us have breath, a homeschooling church, a Christian school church. Never! Let each be fully persuaded in his own mind. That's the issue.

And be supportive, and embracing one another from the heart, not holding off the homeschoolers and saying, "Yeah, they're a little bit kooky." And the homeschoolers holding off the others, saying "They're a little bit unspiritual." And that's in some of your hearts if you're honest. If you're honest, it's in some of your hearts. That's why we need these chapters. Because where that is allowed to fester, it will shrivel up your own soul. It will cause damage to the souls of others.

Likewise, there are some of you that have such a cavalier attitude to the indulging of your liberties that you have no sensitivity whatsoever of what Paul says: "We that are strong ought to bear with the infirmities of the weak and not to please ourselves." You are so determined to let everybody know that you know what your liberties are. What

we're going to see next week, a vital, vital principle, God helping us, that there's a difference, a world of difference between understanding and appreciating my liberties in Christ and my visible external exercise of those liberties before others. A world of difference.

Some of you don't understand that. And because you don't, you're not exercising your liberties in a way that builds up but has the potential to grieve, to destroy, to overthrow the work of God. Surely none of us can be indifferent then or willfully careless with respect to these matters. Our unity under Christ is at stake. The issue of our worshipping with one heart and one mouth is at stake. The glory of God is at stake. It should baffle people to come among us and begin to get to know us and see all the differing matters of conscience we have on matters concerning which God has not spoken.

And dear people, if God is going to use us to break into this community and reach real, live, contemporary sinners, we're going to have people come in who have no sense whatsoever of a church dress code. I mean, we're going to have guys come in here in shorts and t-shirts with garish stuff printed on them. What are you going to do? Meet them at the door and say, "Oh, you can't come in here like that?" Bless God if the place were full of them. I hope after a while they'd get a little sense of propriety. But I'm not going to go up to them and say, "You can't come here with your shorts!" People don't have a clue about a lot of things that are part of your evangelical and Reformed cultural heritage. But they aren't issues expressly addressed in the word of God. We've got to recognize that the conscience has to be educated. And in some areas, it may not come up educated the way ours is. Are you comfortable with that? Or are you only comfortable if everybody's...

God grant that by his grace, we might grasp these principles, internalize them. Then, in the days to come, it will be a wonderful thing to see God, by the Spirit, work them out to His praise among us.

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