

ACCEPTING Romans 14:1-12

Are the same things important to you now that were important to you 50 years ago? Probably not! As we grow and mature, our sense of what is important should also mature. All of us would probably not agree on what are the most important things if we were to list the top five things of importance to us as individuals. Many of the reasons for the differences of opinions are related to our experiences or background. Just because we have different ideas of what is important does not necessarily make us right or wrong. There are some things that are absolutes and there are many other things that are simply matters of preference.

There is a great tendency in some “so-called” religious matters to conclude that if you don't agree with me, then you are not committed to the same degree that I am or that you are not as spiritually mature. On the other hand, if someone is more zealous than we are in certain areas, we tend to think that they overdo things and concentrate on trivial matters or that they are fanatics.

The early church had its disagreements among its members with regard to such matters. Paul addressed how this should be handled in his letter to the Romans in Chapter 14. To the credit of those in the early church, their issues over eating meat or observing holidays did have some spiritual concerns tied to the basic issues even though these concerns may have been misapplied or misplaced. Just to be clear, Paul's concerns with what he had addressed in Chapter 14 were **not** with regard to differences or controversies related to false teachings about the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the resurrection or salvation by works versus salvation by faith. To be sure there are some “spiritual” or moral issues that are sources of disagreements in churches today. We have to take a firm stand with regard to issues that are absolutely wrong and are contrary to sound Scriptural teaching. The questions with which we need to deal in this setting are related to what we might call personal conscience issues.

In order to put such issues in perspective there are several questions we might ask. If respecting another person is the question, then we might ask if God respects them. Sometimes people will question whether or not a person is saved if they engaged in certain practices that they think are wrong and might ask whether or not Christ died for them. Another consideration is to realize that since God is our Father, then other Christians (who may not see some of the nonessentials the same way we do) are still part of God's family. Finally, we need to realize that others are not accountable to us but they are ultimately accountable to God.

In the first part of Chapter 14 Paul addressed our attitudes and actions toward the personal conscience issues of other Christians. In the second part of this Chapter Paul addressed the issue of the impact of our convictions and actions on others.

Stop Judging – 14:1-4

¹ Now accept the one who is weak in faith, *but* not for *the purpose of* passing judgment on his opinions. ² One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables *only*. ³ The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. ⁴ Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. Romans 14:1-4 (NASB95)

A good starting point is to be able to make a distinction between the essential and nonessential things in life. In the last two verses of Chapter 13, Paul mentioned certain behaviors that are to be avoided. These included such things as carousing, drunkenness, sexual

promiscuity, sensuality, strife and jealousy. These things would fit in the category of things we should not ever be doing. These issues are not matters of preference or an option we have.

For those areas that are questions of preferences, we must take a different approach in dealing with these in the church. It is not necessary for us to agree on everything in order for us to be in that same church fellowship. If that were a requirement then there would be many small congregations. If we agree on the major and significant issues then we have a basis for commonality. We should not let our disagreements over non-significant issues cancel out the good that results from our agreement in other areas.

An example of the opinion differences that Paul encountered was related to eating practices. There were two possible areas of concern for those that would not eat meat. The first could be related to Jewish traditions and rules regarding the proper preparation of food. Animals that were killed for food were to be well bled and drained of blood before they would be fit to eat (or kosher). This practice was likely a result of the belief that the life force of animals was in its blood. Consequently, there were pagan practices of people drinking blood so that they might have access to the power/life force of the animal. This idea has some religious significance and, consequently, this practice was forbidden by the Jews. The early church leaders also agreed that it was important to abstain from blood. The argument of those not eating meat was that they did not know if the meat had been properly drained and they were not going to take any chances. These may have missed the point of that ancient rule which was that we should not try to obtain spiritual or soul power from animals but that we are to look to God for power.

The other possibility that would have influenced these people to not eat meat was that much of the meat sold in the marketplace was left over from sacrifices made to idols or from divination practices. They argued that they did not want to be partakers in those practices in any way, shape, or form. Those who did eat such meat argued that idols are not anything of significance and have no power. Therefore, what does it matter?

Paul's advice was that they stop judging one another. If God accepts the other person, then why do you still judge and not accept them?

We may be responsible for each other to help one another in love, however, we are ultimately responsible to God. You don't have to please me, but you do need to be pleasing to God. Our priority should be in this order: please God, please others, please yourself.

Honor God – 14:5-8

⁵One person regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. ⁷For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; ⁸for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. Romans 14:5-8 (NASB95)

Another area of contention that arose in the church between those Christians of Israelite background and those of pagan backgrounds was with regard to observing various holidays. The Jews had various religious festival observances such as Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. They also had festivals of the new moon, Day of Atonement, and the festival of lights. It is not mentioned in this text, but we know from historical accounts that many who came out of pagan traditions also had various religious-related holidays. Some of these were associated with changing of the seasons such as the spring equinox and the winter solstice. We know from our own traditions that we have invented many special observances to honor individuals, or groups of individuals. Having special days for celebrations or remembrances was and still is a big deal.

The controversies over observing religious holidays have grown over the past several decades as we see the battle lines drawn between those who see us as a Christian nation and those who would have us to be totally secular. These battles are not so much in the church as they are in the bigger context of the culture. Consequently, we see our schools and places of commerce being the battle ground. People will sue to prevent a school system from observing Thanksgiving since the original context of that celebration among the pilgrims was related to being thankful to God for his providence in getting them through tough times. We see church people threatening to boycott businesses who try to appease the secularists by adopting a “happy holidays” theme rather than openly declaring “merry Christmas.”

Even in the church today we have some who are uncomfortable with blending Christian related observances such as the birth of Jesus with the pagan winter solstice and the Druid veneration of evergreen trees, holly and mistletoe. The same thing can be said of those who find it difficult to endorse the blend of celebrating the resurrection of Christ with the pagan traditions of the goddess of fertility being born each spring from a brightly colored egg even to the point of referring to the celebration by the name of the fertility goddess Ashtoreth or Easter. A third area with which some find difficulty is the observance of honoring deceased saints being blended with the pagan tradition of trying to appease ghosts and goblins and to ward off evil spirit that roam about on the “night of the dead” that we know as Halloween.

Many times as I read such accounts of controversy in the early church, I have a tendency to think “we don’t have such problems today.” The problems are still around. We certainly don’t argue about and have issues about eating meat sacrificed to idols. On the other hand many have issues with regard to consumption of alcoholic beverages. I react negatively (internally) to seeing a priest or preacher of the gospel with a bottle of beer. I am not comfortable with that. I guess that in such matters I would be classified among the group that Paul called “weak” in the faith in the first verse of this chapter. When we stop and analyze these various situations that are not moral issues but are related to traditions and perhaps health related issues, then we need to examine why we believe and behave the way we do.

When we observe various holidays or abstain from certain foods or not participate in celebrations of pagan origins, then the question of why should be addressed. Paul raised this question with regard to whether our motivation to do what we do is related to our relationship with God. We could make the general argument like this: Since Christ died for us, then we should live for Him. Do I observe Christmas in such a way that it honors God or in a way that glorifies pagan traditions? Do I abstain from drinking alcoholic beverages to honor God or to come across as supporting puritan or even Baptist traditions?

It gets more complicated that these basic questions when we mix in “group affiliations.” For example, when we agree to have “membership” in a local church body and be associated with that group, there are certain expectations of behaviors that we tacitly or even openly agree to do. If we read a “church covenant” from a typical Baptist church, there are statements that affirm the practice of “abstaining from the sale and consumption of beverage alcohol.” By becoming a member of such a group and then ignoring the “covenant” we certainly raise questions of integrity. In Ecclesiastes 5:5 we see “It is better not to take an oath than to take an oath and not keep it.” Therefore, we could make the argument that it not a sin to drink beer but it is a sin to pretend to be something that you are not. The issue is then not “consumption of alcohol” but the lack of honesty or integrity.

Aside from the issue of integrity that we might be faced with as Baptists, how are we to regard Christians in other church groups who don’t have any such restrictions?

Remove Obstacles – 14:9-12

⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. ¹⁰But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹For it is written, “AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.” ¹²So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. Romans 14:9-12 (NASB95)

We sometimes joke about the Wiscopalians in reference to those in the Episcopal church because they don't treat the consumption of alcoholic beverages as we do. Perhaps it could be argued that this is showing contempt for them. The same thing could be said regarding practices in other denominations that we don't agree with. Contempt is an outcome of being judgmental. The bottom line is that no one has made us judge regarding other Christians.

Walvoord and Zuck (Bible Knowledge Commentary) have the following observations on these verses: As Lord, Jesus will one day review and evaluate the ministry of Christians (His servants) at His judgment seat. Paul affirmed the certainty of this event in quoting Isaiah 49:18 and 45:23, pertaining to everyone standing before Christ and confessing Him as Lord. At that event each believer will give an account (“a word”) of himself to God. The issue of the believer's eternal destiny will not be at stake; that was settled by his faith in Christ (see Romans 8:1). Each believer's life of service will be under review in which some loss will be experienced (1 Cor. 3:12-15), but he will be rewarded for what endures (1 Cor. 4:4-5). This judgment of believers climactically demonstrates God's lordship.