

Chapter 62

Matters of Opinion

(Romans 14:1–5)

The Christians of Rome obviously came from different backgrounds. Some of them would be Jews. There were differences of opinion affecting the Christians in their fellowship together. Yet we Christians have to learn to stay together despite differences of opinion that might arise over smaller matters. In Rome there were clearly debates over food-laws, holy days and the drinking of wine. These things we can call ‘matters of opinion’. The principles Paul gives will help us in debates about foods, clothing and adornment, lipstick, wearing a gold wedding ring, preaching with bare feet, teenage girls wearing trousers, hair-length, permissible employments (Can a Christian be a politician? A soldier? A male ballet-dancer? A Christian pop-singer?). Then there are questions about entertainments, customs concerning greetings, how we use our money, the treatment of women and of children, womanly behaviour, the way in which we relate to the opposite sex. Church ceremonies come in the category of ‘matters of opinion’ also. Is it necessary for a woman to wear a white dress when she gets married? Is it necessary to use a gold ring? Should there be a ‘sign of the cross’ made in the air when someone is water-baptized? Must we use one cup or many cups in the Lord’s Supper? What style of music should one use in church? May we or must we have a choir to lead the worship? May the men and women sit together or must men sit

on one side of the church and ladies sit on the other side? Some of these questions will seem odd to some; other matters will seem strange for others. These are the kinds of question that Paul wants his friends at Rome to clearly understand.

He begins by addressing the strong. ¹*Receive the person who is weak in faith, and do so without intending to argue about opinions.* Our attitude to these ‘matters of opinion’ revolves around the boldness of our faith. Paul speaks of ‘the person who is weak in faith’. He is referring to a Christian who does not have sufficient faith in the goodness of creation. He does not refer to weakness in **saving** faith, or to ‘weakness’ in one’s trust in God **generally**. The opposite of such weakness is boldness. The ‘weak’ in faith are legalistic and over-scrupulous. It is unbelief, a refusal to believe that God’s creation is good and that nothing of this nature ‘is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving’ (1 Timothy 4:4). It is important to notice that it is the very **strict** Christian with a delicate conscience who is called the ‘weak’ Christian. The strong Christians have to focus on their need of love. Paul is speaking especially to them in Romans 14:1. Paul urges them to receive the weaker (i.e. fussy) brother or sister. He must treat him or her with welcoming friendliness. The strong are to receive the weak, but not with the idea of wrangling with him.

In the next verse Paul comes to the first of the three ‘matters of opinion’ that concern him. ²*One person has faith to eat all types of food, but another person who is weak eats only vegetables.* The strong Christian ‘believes’ in such a confident way that he is able to eat any kind of food without feeling in the least bit guilty.

³*The one who eats must not despise the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat must not judge the one who eats, for God has received him.* Here we discover the sins of both sides. (i) The strong Christian tends to despise the conscientiously weak Christian. ‘How narrow-minded you are!’ he says. ‘Imagine

being rigid about that! How old-fashioned can you get!' The 'emancipated' Christian is at this point showing lack of love in his scorn and his spirit of superiority. But (ii) the weak Christian tends to condemn the strong Christian. 'If you can do a thing like that,' he says, 'you are not a spiritual person. In fact, I do not think you are a Christian at all.' The strong Christian may be scornful, but the weak Christian is judgemental. Which are you?

In verse 4 Paul is speaking to the weak Christian who tends to be rather judgemental and condemning. He has said a word to the strong (14:1). Now he is speaking to the weak (developing the last words of verse 3). *4Who are you to judge the servant of another person? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him to stand.* The weak must not condemn the strong as if his or her boldness means that he or she is not a Christian at all. Paul's principle here is very liberating. We are responsible to help our fellow Christians, but we are not so responsible that we are to act as their judge. It actually brings a lot of release. We do not have to be an expert in judging the spiritual status of other people.

Verse 5 introduces the next controversial matter in Rome. *One person regards one day as above another. Another person regards all days.* Obviously there was controversy over whether certain days had to be kept as holy days. The church has often been troubled by such things. What have we to say to all of this? *Let each person be fully persuaded by his own mind.* In other words we are totally and utterly free. Days of this nature are totally a matter of our making up our own mind, and doing what we see is best as the Holy Spirit leads us.