

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 14:1-15:13 - Background

Study Notes:

As we come to Romans 14, it seems as if Paul has reengaged a previous discussion from chapter 13. He talked about the requirement to love our fellow Christians and then temporarily switched to discerning the times we live in. Now he has returned to the subject of loving others.

- **The Overall Theme Of Romans 14**

Paul is going to illustrate how to “walk in love” by talking about pressing issues in the first century-Christian Church. He will divide his instructions between two groups he calls “the weak” and “the strong”.

Paul is discussing these groups in the light of Christian conscience, and not morality. The issues were debates on foods and modes of worship. “One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.” “One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike.”

The apostle is NOT dealing with “black and white” legalities. These are “matters of conscience”. He’s going to give us a “roadmap” for how to handle these things.

The “Weak” and the “Strong”:

In the context in which Paul was writing, who were the weak and the strong? Christian commentators have offered four proposals.

1. The weak were recent converts from pagan cultures. These converts are similar to those Paul had encountered in Corinth and

wrote about in 1 Corinthians 8.

Their struggle involved eating meats which had been offered to pagan deities prior to being sold by local butchers. These “weak” Christians were concerned about compromising their moral standards by eating idol-meats.

2. A second suggestion is that the “weak” were ascetics – meaning Christians who lived with strict restrictions on lifestyle matters. Such groups existed in both Judaism and Christianity, with the Essenes being the best known in Judaism.

3. Scholars such as C. K. Barrett insist that the “weak” were Christian legalists: They represented those Christians who failed to grasp what he calls: “... The fundamental principle ... that men are justified and reconciled to God not by vegetarianism, sabbatarianism, or teetotalism, but by faith alone”. - C. K. Barrett

4. The fourth proposal is that the “weak” were for the most part Jewish Christians. Their “weakness” was tied to a continuing commitment to Jewish dietary regulations, even though they had converted to Christianity.

This fourth proposal makes the most sense: Jewish-Christians trying to continue obeying the Old Testament food laws while participating in a mixture of Sabbath and Sunday worship.

A clear example of this tension can be found in Acts 21, where the Jerusalem Council's sent Paul directives for the newly saved Gentiles. While the roles are somewhat reversed, they proposed:

“As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.” – Acts 21:25

Paul's directions in Romans 14 have similarities to the Council's

concerns that those with weaker consciences would be treated with contempt by others.

What Paul seems to be advocating in this chapter are guidelines to ensure that principles are not compromised, while concessions are possible on matters of conscience.

Paul appears to be striving for a respect between Messianic-Christians, who took a more conservative approach to matters of conscience, and their Gentile counterparts, who had less reasons to be concerned. See: Romans 15:5-6

It would be too simplistic to suggest the formula was “Jewish-Christian: weak” versus “Gentile-Christian: strong”. There must have been overlap between these groups, especially as some would have been previous Gentile proselytes within Judaism.

Many of these people may have been like Paul – sharing a strong sense of personal freedom that stemmed from a high regard for the role of grace in their new lives. See: Romans 14:14, 20

- **Dietary Laws and Sabbaths:**

Dietary Laws:

The Jews had always maintained a different approach to dietary rules. An example is how Daniel and his three friends dealt with the Babylonian dietary requirements for the king's servants.

Two centuries before Christ, the Maccabean Crisis resulted in the observance of dietary laws becoming a test of Jewishness – or as one person suggests, “a badge of loyalty to covenant and nation”.

Jewish dietary rules presented one of the clearest differences between Jews and Gentiles. The Gentiles readily offered slaughtered animals to pagan gods. The meat was used in pagan worship as well as sold in the marketplace.

Sabbaths:

The Jews practiced a rigid schedule of Sabbaths and festivals based on the lunar calendar. The Gentiles, however, came from a myriad of competing religious practices. Their worship observances could be highly regulated or strictly personal.

At Rome, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians had to deal with competing backgrounds. Diet and worship laws came into direct play as they attempted to live out their faith.

Paul realizes the dangers of these competing views. He also understands these are non-essential matters: Diet and worship do not have a direct bearing on one's salvation. They are matters of individual conscience and freedom. See: Romans 14:17-18

Paul's Outline In Romans 14:1–15:13:

1. The overarching principle of mutual acceptance between what he calls the "weak" and the "strong".
2. Three possible outcomes: 1. The strong will despise or condemn the weak. 2. The "strong" will offend or destroy the "weak". 3. The "strong" will follow Christ's unselfish example.
3. The celebration of the unity of both Jewish and Gentile Christians in their common Worship of God.