

Three Apostolic Principles

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The existence of small divergences of thought and judgment amongst Christians is a frequent source of much weakness and discouragement. No acute observation is needed to perceive these differences of judgment, and their mischievous effects today; nor have we to read far in the New Testament Epistles before we find full and frequent allusions to the existence of these very troubles in the early church, together with divine instructions, which, if followed out, effectually counteract them.

We make no apology for referring our readers to these instructions. The need is all too urgent on every hand. The matter may seem small upon the surface, but it is very easy to "fail of the grace of God," and consequently there is found through some small divergence a "root of bitterness" which, springing up, troubles us all" and thereby many be defiled" (Heb. 12: 15). A great conflagration may proceed from a little fire, as the apostle James reminds us.

The epistle which stands first in order has a whole chapter devoted to meeting disturbances, and the underlying tendencies which produced them, springing out of such matters, and in it we find the Apostle Paul laying down three very definite principles which directly bear upon such questions. In each case the dogmatic statement of the principle is followed by an exhortation which shows the practical bearing of the principle thus laid down. We refer to Romans 14.

The subject of this chapter is the importance of receiving one who is "weak in the faith" (verse 1). Such an one will have defective thoughts of many things and he is not to be received in order to start arguing with him over points of difference. Such argumentations would indeed be "doubtful disputations," or the "determining of questions of reasoning," and those who are strong have to remember that the weak brother is weak not in his reasoning faculties but *in his faith*. What he needs therefore is some larger apprehension in faith of the whole truth of God. If this be patiently ministered to him many of these questions of reasoning will settle themselves.

The chapter gives us some indication of the nature of those questions which agitated the primitive church. There were: (1) *Questions as to meats* (verse 2). One man was assured that he might eat all things. Others had scruples; some going so far that they would only eat herbs. (2) *Questions as to days* (verse 5). One man specially regarded certain days. Another esteemed every day alike. Both these sets of questions would be most acute where Jews and Gentiles freely intermingled in the same assembly. There were also (3) *Questions as to "things offered to idols"* as brought before us in 1 Corinthians 8, and 1 Corinthians 10: 19-33.

This matter would continually be raised. Some with knowledge might go as far as sitting at meat in the idol's temple (1 Cor. 8: 10). Others, bidden by an unbeliever to a meal might be disposed to go (1 Cor. 10: 27), or even in buying their meat in the markets (1 Cor. 10: 25), this question might be raised, for much of the meat offered for sale was the flesh of animals killed in connection with heathen sacrifices.

In each of these cases no definite instructions are given from the Lord. He evidently intends that each disciple shall act according to his own faith, and thus profit by the individual exercise that is needful.

First and foremost in Romans 14. stands the great principle of

Liberty,

which is stated in verses 3 and 4 in connection with the questions as to the eating of meats. When divergences of judgment arise our first natural impulse is to start interfering with one another. He who eats will despise him who eats not, for his scruples appear to him narrow minded in the extreme. He who eats not will judge and condemn the eater, unable to see his freedom in any other light than unwarrantable licence.

"Who art thou that judgest another man's servant?" asks the Apostle. A pertinent question indeed! The thing that is really unwarrantable is neither the apparent narrowness of vision of the one nor the apparent breadth of licence of the other, but the assumption of judicial functions that belong alone to the great Master of all of us. To that Master we stand or fall, and indeed we may count upon His support as the latter part of the verse encouragingly states.

Do we all realize this? Fully assured though we may be that we have the Lord's mind on some particular point it is not ours to legislate for others. The Lord insists upon His rights in dealing direct with His own servants, and we are to keep our hands off them. The business of each one of us in these matters is to have to do with our Master, and to consult His Word, and thus to reach assurance in our own minds as to what is His will as to our own course.

This principle of Christian liberty is summed up in the words, "*To his own master he standeth or falleth*" (verse 4). The exhortation based upon this is "*Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind*" (verse 5).

This brings us to the second principle laid down which is that of

Responsibility

of a direct and stringent sort to the Lord Himself. It is evidently of more importance that a saint should act with loyalty in regard to the will of the Lord as they know it — even supposing their knowledge of it to be defective — than that they should have a more perfect knowledge of that will. We say this with verses 6 and 14 before us.

The former verse shows that he who regards the day or eats as the case may be does so *unto the Lord*; and he who does not regard the day or does not eat refrains equally *unto the Lord*. The mind of the Lord is one, and cannot therefore lie in two opposite directions; but in acting or not acting both alike were governed by loyalty to the Lord as far as they understood His wishes, and *this* was pleasing to Him, and counted for more than correctness of understanding.

The latter verse shows the importance of thus acting in accordance with one's light, not in regard to the will of the Lord objectively as verse 6, but in regard to its subjective effect upon one's own conscience. If, believing a certain thing to be unclean or wrong, I yet indulge in it, my conscience is defiled. It is unclean to me, whatever it may be in the Lord's estimation.

These things Scripture brings before us, not to put a premium upon ignorance, nor to discourage our diligent inquiry as to what the will of the Lord is as to such matters, but the very reverse. We are to inquire, and being fully persuaded as to what the Lord would have us do, we must act in reference to Him. Thus He will be thanked and honoured whether we eat or regard the day, or whether we do not. We are the Lord's, and to Him we live (verse 8). He, by death and resurrection, has established His Lordship over both dead and living (verse 9), and before His judgment-seat we all shall stand (verse 10). In that solemn hour "*every one of us shall give account of himself to God*" (verse 12). In these words we get a dogmatic statement of our second principle. Each shall give account of *himself*, and not

another. Our responsibility is direct and personal, solitary, and alone.

Upon this is based the exhortation, "*Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling-block or any occasion to fall in his brother's way*" (verse 13).

The liberty which is ours in Christ is, then, to be held in connection with the responsibility which is ours toward Christ. Each believer is so directly accountable to the Lord that he must not be interfered with by other believers, nor must he interfere with them.

Is, then, the attitude of each saint and servant of Christ towards his fellow saints and servants to be one of lofty detachment or superiority? By no means. The Apostle now introduces a third principle to complete the balance of truth — that of

Fraternity.

The chapter opens with "Him that is weak in the faith." We soon discover that he is "another man's servant": he is "the Lord's." In verse 10, we discover that he is our "brother," and this is alluded to again in verse 13. Verse 15 dwells upon the fact in more detail. There he is said to be "*thy brother, . . . him . . . for whom Christ died.*" This is a very clear dogmatic statement of the third principle.

Here we have not only the fact that this brotherhood exists, but we discover that it rests upon the death of Christ as its basis. Looking upon our brother in this light we cannot be indifferent to his welfare. He is an object of the love of Christ which carried Him even to death. If Christ loved him even to death, what shall our attitude towards him be? Shall we grieve him, or cause him to stumble? Shall we flaunt our liberty — that liberty which is ours, as an unchallenged right, according to the early part of the chapter — before him in such a way as to destroy his good conscience? No, indeed! We shall walk towards him "charitably" or "according to love."

We shall recognize, moreover, that these questions of eating, or regarding days, of meats sacrificed to idols, and feasts, and shambles, and the like, are, after all, of minor importance. The kingdom of God does not consist of such things, but of "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" (verse 17), and hence these are the things to be diligently pursued as of prime importance. It is therefore well to maintain a spirit of yieldingness in regard to the minor matters, rather than imperil righteousness, or peace, or the spiritual joy of saints, by standing on one's rights. *Liberty* may be mine but it is well to waive it for the sake of *fraternity* so long as *responsibility* towards the Lord is not impaired thereby. This is emphasised not only in verse 21 of our chapter but also in 1 Corinthians 8: 9-13, and 1 Corinthians 10: 23-31.

In Corinthians the Apostle sums it up by saying "all things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient." In the light of this we must ask ourselves not only "Have I liberty to do this thing?" but also "Is it expedient that I should claim and use my liberty in this case?"

Connected, therefore, with this third principle we have the exhortation, "*Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another*" (verse 19). Our attitude is therefore not to be the negative one of merely avoiding friction and discord and damage to weak souls by the yielding up of one's liberties on certain occasions, but the positive one of earnestly pursuing all that makes for peace and edification. In this a certain amount of self-denial is certainly called for, and there will be times, especially for the strong believer, when he will have to hold his faith in private before God and keep in check its manifestation in acts before men as verse 22 infers. The latter part of that verse would indicate that such a check upon the strong believer is wholesome, since in the exuberance of faith it is easy to rather overshoot the mark in embracing one's liberties, and consequently in calmer moments be uneasy and condemned in conscience over things one has

permitted oneself to do.

Romans 14 may be a chapter that some of us are very inclined to skip. Yet it is full of most important instruction which, if assimilated and practised by us, would be of great benefit to the church at large. We beg our readers to very definitely lay it to heart.