

## Three Divinely Established Principles

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The existence of divergences of thought and judgment amongst Christians is a frequent source of much discouragement and weakness. No acute observation is needed to perceive their mischievous effects today. In the Epistles of the New Testament we find frequent allusions to the existence of such troubles in the early church; together with inspired 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 has reminded us.

In Romans 14 the Apostle Paul has laid down three very definite principles, which directly bear upon such matters. And further, the statement of the principle is in each case followed by an exhortation which shows its practical bearing.

The subject of the chapter is the importance of receiving one who is "weak in the faith" (verse 1). Such will have defective thoughts as to many things, and they are not to be received in order to start arguing with them over points of difference. Such argumentations would indeed be "doubtful disputations," or the "determining of questions of reasoning." Those who are strong have to remember that the "weak" brother is weak not in his reasoning faculties but in his apprehension of "the faith." What he needs therefore is some larger understanding of the whole truth of God. If this be patiently ministered to him, many of these questions 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 matters of dispute 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,"** for this, we gather, is what is signified by the word, "unclean," in verse 14. The same point is brought before us in 1 Corinthians 8, and 1 Corinthians 10: 19-33, for this was a matter that continually would have been raised. Some with knowledge might go as far as sitting at meat in an idol's temple (1 Cor. 8: 10). Others, bidden by an unbeliever to a feast, might be disposed to go (1 Cor. 10: 27); or even in buying their meat in the market (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 were 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 will be created thereby.

First and foremost then 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 such 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 us all. 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 it is, "**Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind**" (verse 5). To reach such full persuasion will entail, for each sincere and true-hearted servant, much prayerful searching of the Scriptures.

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 he knows it — even supposing his knowledge of it is defective — than that he should have a more perfect knowledge of that will. We write 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 mind, 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 are stated, not to put a premium upon ignorance, nor to discourage our diligent enquiry as to what the will of the Lord is as to such matters, but the very reverse. We are to enquire, 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. He, by death and resurrection, has established His Lordship over both dead and living. Before His judgment-seat we all shall stand. These things are stated in verses 8-10.

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

of 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 an 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 introduced 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 this fact in more detail. There he is said to be, "**thy brother . . . him . . . for whom Christ died.**" This is a very clear and dogmatic statement of the third principle.

Here we have not only the fact that this brotherhood exists, but 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 thus, 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 good in the sight of God that we should 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 emphasized 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 summed 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 that make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another**" (verse 19). Our attitude is therefore not to be merely the negative one of avoiding friction and discord, and damage to weaker brethren by the yielding up of one's liberties on certain occasions, but also the positive one of earnestly pursuing all that makes for peace and edification. In so acting, a certain amount of self-denial will certainly be 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.

Let this verse be carefully considered, especially the latter part of it, and we shall see that such a

check upon the strong believer is a wholesome thing for himself, since in the exuberance of his faith it is easy to overshoot the mark to some degree as he embraces his liberties. If any of us have done this, we shall probably agree that as a consequence in our calmer moments we have been uneasy, and perhaps condemned in our consciences, over things that we have permitted ourselves to do.

Romans 14 may be a chapter that many of us are inclined to skip over in our reading. The writer has to confess that in his lengthy period of Christian life and experience, he has no recollection of ever hearing an address given upon it. 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, and nip in the bud many divisive forces.

So may we earnestly entreat our readers to lay it to heart in very definite fashion.