



The Epistle to the Romans

Romans 14-16: The Generous Welcome

The last three chapters of Romans continue to spell out what it means for the faithful “to present (their) bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” (12:1) While chapters 12 and 13 deal primarily with the relationship between believers and outsiders (the government; the enemy), chapters 14 and 15 deal primarily with the relationship among Christians in the Roman churches.

We have suggested that Paul may have some specific knowledge of what is going on in the Roman churches – perhaps especially knowledge about the relationships between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. He also is presenting his gospel to a community he has never visited, so it is not surprising if he brings his experience with other churches – especially the Corinthians – and uses that experience to shape his exhortation to the Romans.

Romans 14:1-23 (maybe extend to 15:13): The Weak and the Strong in Faith

One theme that ties Romans 14 and Romans 15 together is the theme of “welcome” – welcome now not for the stranger but welcome for the fellow Christian. “Welcome those who are weak in faith...for God has welcomed them (14:1,3).” “Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (15:7).”

The first admonition is to those who are “strong” in faith to welcome those who are “weak” in faith. When Paul refers to strength and weakness in this way he means something quite different from our common impressions about what makes faith weak and strong.

We are inclined to say that someone who is strong in faith is governed by a set of religious principles that dictate behavior in a whole range of circumstances. The strong in faith keep Sabbath (or Sunday) faithfully. They may abstain from alcohol. They avoid rough language. The list goes on and on. Those who are weak in faith, we think, do not set for themselves such high standards of behavior – they hang a little looser to the demands of religious texts and communities.

For Paul those who are strong in faith are those whose confidence in God’s grace is such that they do not think they have to be overly scrupulous about their daily behavior. If they are justified by faith (like Abraham) they are not justified by their diet or by their Sabbath keeping,

so diet and strict Sabbath keeping are a matter of indifference – at least where salvation is concerned.

The weak in faith, says Paul, are those who think they need to bolster their fundamental faithfulness by a few useful add-ons. They may be saved by faith, but they also watch their diets and their Sabbaths as a kind of insurance policy, lest faith prove not quite enough in the end.

There are clearly two key distinctions between weak and strong that Paul holds up – perhaps because he knows that the distinctions are causing some friction among Roman Christians. The first is the distinction between meat eaters and vegetarians. Some Christians think that eating meat violates their conscience, others do not. (For somewhat different reasons we have this discussion in many Christian families today.) The second is the distinction between those who observe one day as more special than the others – and apparently acknowledge that specialness by fasting. (14:6)

It may be that these distinctions mark the difference between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians in Rome. Jewish Christians may be vegetarian – at least when there are shared Jewish/Gentile meals – in order to assure that they are eating according to kosher rules. And Jewish Christians may be more inclined to be strictly sabbatarian – perhaps including fasting as part of their Sabbath observance.

But we know that issues over meat eating are also rampant among the Gentiles of the Corinthian churches (where the weak in faith won't eat meat that has been used in temple sacrifice). And Judaism is not the only religion or philosophy that recognizes special days or encourages fasting.

In any case the exact nature of the dispute is not as helpful to us as is Paul's twofold response to that dispute. Paul begins his discussion of the remedy to the situation by pointing out that in actual practice the strong and weak are not as divided as they might seem. They are united in the fact that they both those who eat meat and those who eat vegetables, both those who fast and those who pray, bless the Lord in prayer. As he so often does Paul corrects their ideology by pointing to their practice.

Then he moves on with one of those apparent asides that sums up so much of his gospel. "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord and if we die we die to the Lord." The identity of the faithful is finally found not even in their faith, and certainly not in the distinction between those who are strong in faith and those who are weak. The identity of the faithful is found in the Lord – in life and in death. And therefore certainly in the sometimes disputatious churches of Rome.

Paul then provides the practical implications of his claims. Here is how the strong in faith are supposed to welcome the weak.

The strong in faith do not judge the weak. The quotation from Isaiah 49:18 and 45:23 claims that God alone is judge over all, and therefore reminds the Romans that they have no place claiming superiority, claiming the right to judge, one over the other. The text recalls for us Matt. 7:1 "Do not judge so that you may not be judged." Though there is no clear indication that Paul

knows the tradition of Jesus' teaching here, Jesus is saying what Paul says: God is the final judge; leave judgment to God. For Paul that is part of true welcoming.

The strong in faith do not cause the weak to stumble. Here we are reminded of Paul's instructions to the Corinthians in 1 Cor 8:7-13. If a "strong" Christian feels free to eat meat, that's fine. It is not fine for a strong Christian to entice a weak one into eating meat, because that violates the faith of the weaker one. "Because those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith." (14:23) Paul ends this section with another summary that can provide a guide from that day until this about the true nature of sin (which is not defined as the "weak" think as breaking one of a series of rules). "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin."

Romans 15:1-13: Building Up the Neighbor, Building Up the Church

Paul continues to stress the theme of welcome, especially the obligation of the "strong" to welcome the "weak." Now he turns to Christ as the great example of one who did not defend his own perquisites at the expense of others but who took on himself the weakness of others. As usual Paul reflects on the meaning of Christ's selfgiving by finding a word in the Old Testament that provides a lens through which to view the Gospel: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen upon me." (Rom. 15:3; Ps. 69:9)

Remember that from Romans 12:1 on Paul has been talking about right worship. Now he reminds the Romans that right worship is always worship together. Their "logical/spiritual" worship is to live in harmony with one another. "In accordance with Jesus Christ" means in accordance with who you are as members of Christ's body. All this so that with "one voice" "together" they may glorify God.

(It would be an interesting exercise to see how often Paul mentions the glory of God in this epistle, often as the kind of liturgical climax to a set of instructions or claims. Karl Barth started a kind of revolution in the theological world in his commentary on Romans which insisted that the heart of this epistle, the heart of Christian faith, is the glory of God.)

Paul returns to the great theme of "welcome" which has framed chapters 14- 15. "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." (15:7) There is the "glory of God" again, and the Greek here is appropriately ambiguous.

On the one hand Christ has welcomed the Roman Christians – for the glory of God. On the other hand, the Roman Christians are to welcome one another – for the glory of God. Be who you are, Paul keeps saying. Be Christ; welcome one another as he welcomed you.

Now explicitly the "one another" suggests that Jewish Christians welcome Gentiles and vice versa. Christ's ministry was to the circumcised but for the sake of the Gentiles so that (as in chapters 9-11) Jews and Gentiles alike are part of God's plan. Again Paul uses scripture to make his point, quoting a kind of mélange of Old Testament verses all of which use the key word "Gentiles" to remind the Romans that they have been welcomed, according to God's plan, into the very covenant people of God.

And then the benediction that brings together so many themes of Romans. We'll provide our own translation and put in italics the words that recapitulate so many of Paul's great claims.

"Now may the God of *hope* fill you with all *joy* and *peace* in *faithfulness*, so that you may grow in *hope* in the power of *the Holy Spirit*."

Romans 15:14-33: Travel Plans

Romans 15:14-21 brings us back to the beginning of the epistle and to one of Paul's reasons for writing. He needs to insist that he has authority to speak to the Roman churches and that they have an obligation to listen, because he has been appointed an apostle to Gentiles (and to Gentile territory). He has not wanted to go too far in asserting his authority because others founded the Roman churches but, as if we the Romans had not guessed. He did not want to be too reticent either.

Romans 15:22-33 speaks concretely of Paul's travel plans and his hope for the Roman churches in relationship to those plans. (See the introduction to this study).

In brief, he is about to carry the offering he has been collecting from Gentile churches to present it in Jerusalem. This is a climax of his own ministry – itself a sign of the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the community of faith, and he seems a bit nervous that his gracious gift may not be gratefully received (15:32). Then he hopes to go to Spain so that the Gospel can be preached to the ends of the earth. And he further hopes that the Romans will help speed him on his way, providing the blessing of their prayers and, probably, their financial resources, too.

Romans 16:1-27: Final Greetings

The very last verses of Romans, 16:25-27 appear and disappear in different places in different manuscripts, leading some scholars to think they are an add-on to the original text. And 16:17-20 seem an odd interruption in the flow of the farewell greetings and are strikingly different in tone from most of the epistle to the Romans. Perhaps they, too, represent a kind of scribal add on.

What we have that is clearly Paul's is interesting in itself for several reasons.

First there is the length of the greetings. We can suspect that since Paul is trying to commend himself to the Roman Christians he is not so subtly listing all those who can vouch for him.

Second there is the commendation of Phoebe who is a diakonos of the church in Cenchrae (the first time the term "church" is used explicitly in this epistle.) The Greek word is the masculine form of the term for "deacon" or "minister" or "leader." While the issue of women's ordination is not yet up for discussion (largely because no one has yet been ordained to Christian ministry), it is at least clear here that Paul uses for Phoebe a term that is used elsewhere for male leaders of the church, and he does this without hesitation or distinction.

Third the list of people greeted includes names that seem to be both Jewish and Gentile, fitting nicely with our guesses about the mixed congregations, or the mixture between two kinds of congregations, in Rome. The Jews probably include Paul's "kinfolk" Andronicus and Julia who were believers before he was and who are (male and female alike) to be counted among the "apostles" if not among the Apostles.

Fourth the reference to Prisca and Aquila suggests several features of the Roman community. We know that Paul knew them in other contexts and that they were helpers to him – Paul was not the only peripatetic Christian. According to Acts 18:1-3 Prisca and Aquila were among the Jewish Christians Claudius has banished from Rome. Now they have obviously returned, perhaps providing evidence that the "welcoming" Paul insists on includes them. And finally the fact that a church meets in their house reinforces our sense that the Roman Christians met in a variety of house churches, some perhaps mostly Gentile and some mostly Jewish.

In 16:21-23 Paul's fellow workers sign off on the letter and we discover that Tertius "wrote" the letter, which almost certainly means that Paul dictated it to him. Even the most dedicated apostle imaginable did not travel, minister, or write alone. Not a bad conclusion for a letter that urges Christians to acknowledge other Christians "as Christ has welcomed you."

There may be a climactic rhetorical function for these verses that go even beyond the window they give us to the Roman community. Paul has spent fifteen chapters laying out in great detail his glorious gospel. For the listening community in the house churches of Rome, chapter 16 may be a visual aid. Aristocrats and slaves sit in the same room as brothers and sisters; Jews and Gentiles of many nations are learning to love one another; men and women serve and pray together in a very gender-segregated culture. It may just be that Paul is implicitly saying, "If the first fifteen chapters still haven't convinced you, and you need proof that the gospel works, just look around you. There's not another place in all of Roman society where you would see this. The lion is lying down with the lamb. I am surely not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God!"

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