



The Reflector

Published and edited monthly in the interest of calling people back to the Bible
by Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

October 2008

The Right to Grow in the Faith

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

The right to grow in the faith is a fundamental right that God has given the Christian. I believe that the fourteenth chapter of Romans and the first few verses of the fifteenth chapter are designed to protect and enhance that right.

This section of Romans has received a lot of attention among brethren recently. Some think too much, others think not enough. In articles that I have read along with sermons and reports that I have heard, there has been no lack of variety in both the exegesis and application of this section by brethren whose knowledge and faithfulness I highly respect. Because of this, it is with no little trepidation that I present what I believe this section to be teaching.

The Total Context

First, it should be a given that this section must not be interpreted so as to conflict with other plain New Testament teaching on fellowship. The New Testament plainly sets limits on maintaining on-going fellowship. While Roman 14 clearly teaches such fellowship can and should be maintained in spite of *some* limited differences among those in “the faith,” it should not be used to cover virtually *all* differences as some are prone to do.

The New Testament clearly teaches that we must not maintain fellowship with certain brethren who differ from us in teaching and/or practice – even sometimes referring to them as “false brethren.” (See Gal. 2:4, 5). The church at Corinth was rebuked for continuing to fellowship a brother who unlawfully had his father’s wife (1 Cor. 5). This fornicator was lumped together with other immoral brethren (vv. 10, 13) with whom faithful brethren were not to maintain fellowship. The church at Thessalonica was told to “warn the unruly (or disorderly - Greek *ataktos*)” in Paul’s first letter to them (5:14). In the second letter (3:6), some months later, he tells them to withdraw from the disorderly (*ataktōs*). Vine says

that this word describes “certain church members who manifested an insubordinate spirit, whether by excitability or officiousness or idleness.” The church at Thyatira was rebuked sharply for tolerating one who taught the Lord’s servants to commit fornication (Rev. 2:20, NIV). The “elect lady” in 2 John was not to receive into her house nor bid godspeed to those who went beyond the doctrine of Christ in their teaching (2 John 9-11). Other examples could be cited, but these should suffice to show that all differences among brethren, no matter their nature, cannot be covered by Romans 14.

Before we examine the Romans text in detail, just a few words of caution about taking the “one size fits all” approach to fellowship. As much as we might like to simplify things by reducing all cases to a common denominator and dealing with them all alike, it just does not work that way. There are a number of factors that must be entered into the equation that require judgment on our part. The extent to which one may bear with a situation may depend on a number of things. What is the spiritual age of the person – a babe or mature? Is he demonstrating a rebellious spirit or not? What opportunity has the person had to know better? What influence is the person having on others? What is the strength of the evidence that the one involved is guilty of sin and error? The answer to these questions and perhaps more have to be factored in.

Not All Are Treated the Same

To illustrate what we have been saying, let’s take a look at 1 Thessalonians 5:14: “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.” (New King James Version). The treatment of three classes are considered: (1) The unruly, (2) The fainthearted, and (3) the weak. A different treatment is called for in each class, yet they all could possibly be overtly practicing the same thing. Let’s say that there are three women

in the congregation who are failing to attend assemblies as they should. There is no doubt that each is in violation of Hebrews 10:25.

It is clear that the first lady is just weak. She needs teaching and exhortation. She comes from a background where “going to church” was not that important. She was convicted concerning the first principles but needs a lot of teaching about other duties. She is also by nature the kind of person who lets things easily hinder her. She needs constant encouragement and support. Her problem is weakness, not unruliness.

The second lady is also unfaithful in her attendance. She is different from the first lady in that she is fully aware of her duty, but she has an abusive husband who hates the church. In order to attend, she has to almost fight her way out to the house. He hides her clothes and car keys. She knows that each time she attends what she will have to endure before and after the services. Having to endure such from her husband Sunday after Sunday, she has become weary and fainthearted. She does not need warning, she needs comfort and encouragement to endure her afflictions and be faithful in spite of her husband. A little help from the brethren with getting her to services regularly might be in order.

Likewise, our third lady knows full well what the Bible teaches about faithful attendance and has none of the problems of the second lady. Furthermore, she lets it be known by word and deed that she will attend when and if she wants to. She is unruly with a “insubordinate spirit” (See Vine on “unruly” or “disorderly”). She should be duly “warned” and if, after given time to repent, she does not correct the matter, then withdraw from (or disfellowship) her.

It should be obvious that overtly each lady is doing the same thing, but the circumstance surrounding each case determines how brethren should deal with her – whether they should support, comfort or warn her.

I think it significant that Paul urges the Thessalonians to warn the unruly in his first letter to them rather than withdraw from them. Months later he writes his second letter to them and in it tells them to withdraw from them. Now they had been both warned and given “space (time) to repent” (cf. Rev. 2:21).

There is a time to take a preacher aside (privately) and explain to him the way of God more perfectly (Acts 18:26). Also, there is a time to (publicly) rebuke a preacher before all (cf. Gal. 2:11-14). There is a time of sharpness (Tit. 1:13) and

a time for gentleness (Gal. 6:1). Attitudes and circumstances makes the difference in the level of corrective measures that need to be taken.

So, before we can apply any teaching on fellowship and correcting sin and error from within, we must keep in mind that the principles of long-suffering, patience, boldness, firmness, etc. must be honored. We need to avoid the extreme of “dropping the axe” at the moment that guilt is determined without any patience and longsuffering and the other extreme of transforming *long*-suffering into *ever*-suffering.

In any controversy that has the potential of breaking fellowship no action should be taken until there has been ample time and opportunity to study and discuss the issues involved in the dispute. And in those cases that will at some point definitely require a break of fellowship, the offender needs to be worked with and given “space to repent” before severing fellowship.

With these observations in mind, let’s look at Romans 14-15:7.

Romans 14-15:7

As I read the text, I am impressed with three things: (1) The text is dealing with the relationship between the weak and strong in “the faith” (14:1; 15:1), (2) the things considered are personal and individual in application, and (3) the things practiced are not intrinsically wrong – “unclean of itself.” (v. 14). Now, let’s elaborate and make some application of these three things.

The text primarily tells the strong (in the faith) how to treat those who are “weak in the faith.” “Him that is weak in the faith receive ye.” The “ye” would be the strong. Paul concludes his remarks with “we then that are strong (in the faith, eob) ought to bear the infirmities of the weak (in the faith, eob) . . .” (15:1).

There has been a lot of discussion as to whether the things discussed in Romans 14 are matters of “*the* faith” or not. I see no reason not to regard them as matters of *the* faith for the several reasons: (1) The article (“the”) is in the King James Version and several good Greek texts. (2) In other passages where “the faith” is spoken of, we consider it to be the system of faith or the gospel (See Acts 6:7; Gal. 1:23; Phil. 1:27; Jude 3), why not here? (3) The situation seems to be parallel with 1 Corinthians 8, where the discussion concerns those weak or strong in knowledge of the faith.

I agree with brother Bryan Vinson in his commentary on Romans, “The parties here introduced are Christians, yet there

is that point wherein an inequality exists between them. On the one hand there are the weak, and on the other those who are strong. The point of weakness and strength revolves around the measure of their respective understanding and knowledge of the body of truth denominated, 'The Faith' (italics mine, eob). I am persuaded that it isn't a case of being weak in faith, or conviction or persuasion, as both Lard and Whiteside appear to have thought. Rather it is an instance where some are lacking in knowledge, while others are not. Those lacking knowledge are the weak in the faith; these not lacking in knowledge are the strong in the faith" (*Paul's Letters to the Saints at Rome* 259-260).

Among those in "the faith," there are various levels of development and knowledge. While all enter as babes, some enter with a better understanding than others of what things are required, permitted, and forbidden by the gospel (the faith) they now embrace. Some develop in this area faster than others. In some cases it may take years. The instructions of Romans 14 create an atmosphere where those who are still weak in the faith can grow and develop in spite of some mistaken *personal* views and practices that they may have concerning what God may or may not expect of them under the gospel. In both cases, the weak and the strong, do what they do "unto the Lord" (14:6). Paul's instructions allow time and create an atmosphere conducive to the weak's learning and growing out of his mistaken views – an atmosphere of "righteousness, peace and joy" (14:17) rather than constant disputation over his scruples.

In the course of his comments, Paul identifies the strong and the weak. The strong eats all things, the weak only herbs (14:2). He further states the truth of the matter, i.e., "there is nothing unclean of itself" (14:14). Being strong he understood this. But, the weak could not yet see this truth of which Paul was persuaded "by the Lord Jesus." What should the strong, like Paul, who understands that "the faith" allows him to eat "all things," do regarding weak brethren who have not grown to that point of knowledge? Not receive them? Receive them, but constantly dispute with them? Go ahead and eat all things regardless of how it might affect the weak? Or, should he not be patient as the weak practice what their consciences tell them until they can grow out of their weakness in the faith and conscientiously eat "all things"? Should he not be careful so as not to cause the weak to violate their consciences, become weaker, or even be destroyed spiritually (14:20-23)? Should he not, as a strong brother, "bear the infirmities of the

weak, and not to please [himself]" (15:1)?

So, it seems to me that the thrust of this section of Romans is to show a way that those who are strong in the faith can work patiently and peacefully together with those who are weak in the faith. The strong in the faith ("him that eateth") is not to despise ("set at naught" – ASV) the weak in the faith ("him that eateth not"). Nor is the weak ("him that eateth not") to be allowed to judge (separate, put asunder - Thayer) the strong in the faith ("him that eateth"). The kind of differences under consideration that the weak and strong have are such that they can work and worship together, giving the weak opportunity to grow out of his scruples based on a weak understanding of the faith, and deferring the ultimate resolution of the matter to the judgment of God (vv. 6-12).

Individual vs. Congregational Practices

Now let us consider the personal nature of the things over which the strong and the weak differed. They were things that involved personal or individual practice rather than congregational. The practice of these things directly affected only the one practicing them and his God. One might esteem a day above another in his private practice and another would not. Neither one's practice necessarily infringes on the other. However, if one who esteemed a day above another insisted that the church also esteem that day – that would be another matter. It would force the issue to the point of division because "the strong" who understand that there are no such holy days bound by "the faith" must join in the practice, against their conscientious convictions or else separate themselves.

One converted out of denominationalism, still weak in the faith, might accompany his singing in private worship with instrumental music. As long as he does not force the practice upon the church, the strong can afford to be patient and fellowship him, giving him time and opportunity to grow out of his weak knowledge of the faith. However, if he insists on bringing his instrument into congregational worship then the strong would have to deal with him for causing division by introducing an unauthorized practice into the worship of the church (Rom. 16:17).

One who is weak in the faith might believe that, because of the good social work it does, he can contribute to a "faith-based" charitable work or a church supported charitable institution. He sends the institution his personal check each month. I don't believe this would be reason for the strong to set him at naught. However, if he should press his practice upon the church to get it to start sending a contribution then

the fat would be in the fire. Those who understand the implications of such support could not go along with part of their weekly contribution to the church going to such works. Again, I emphasize the things in Romans 14 are things of individual practice and not congregational.

Though a thing is a matter of faith, but individual in application, it does not have to necessarily involve others. Nothing in the text precludes either side from expressing and teaching his position with the proper attitude in order to study the matter. There is a difference in expressing and pressing a position. Paul clearly expressed his position (14:14). But, at the same time he made room for those “weak in the faith” to practice what they believed until they could come to the knowledge that he had of the faith. He further cautioned those who were like him, strong in the faith, to exercise their liberty, permitted by “the faith,” in such a way as to protect the consciences of the weak and so as not to destroy them spiritually before they could grow out of their mistaken scruples. (14:20).

Because of this principle brethren, through the years, have been able to work together in spite of some individual differences in practice. Such issues as the covering, military service, and the like have not generally disturbed congregations as such when all parties have had the right attitude. They may exchange views in order to learn and increase their knowledge of “the faith,” but not pressing their views to the point of disruption of the peace and fellowship of the brethren.

Morally right vs. Inherently Sinful Things

As stated earlier, our text is not dealing with anything “unclean of itself” or as we often say, “wrong within itself.” It does not cover “the works of the flesh.” In the last verse of chapter 13, Paul clearly states, “But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, *and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof*” (italics mine, eob). Galatians 5:19-21 catalogs the “works of the flesh.” The things listed, and “such like” are inherently or morally wrong. None of these things is covered in Romans 14. It is dealing with certain morally right things about which there were questions as to whether they are religiously demanded, permitted, or forbidden by “the faith.”

Both “fornication” and “adultery” are listed as works (or lusts) of the flesh. Those guilty of these sins in any form (even though they may be weak in the faith) are not included in those who are to be received in Romans 14. They are inherently sinful and those practicing them cannot be received

even though they are privately practiced (1 Cor. 5:11). Those guilty of these sins, in or out of a “marriage,” cannot be retained in fellowship after being given “space (time) to repent” (cf. Rev. 2:21). Thus, adulterous marriages, as per Matthew 19:9 and parallel passages, cannot be included in those to be received in Romans 14.

Furthermore, other instructions are explicit about what to do with one who continues to practice fornication by being married to one that he has no right to. We are to “put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (1 Cor. 5:13). Also, Christ severely rebuked the church at Thyatira for “suffering” or allowing one to “to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication” (Rev. 2:20). Thus, neither those guilty of fornication, nor those who teach doctrines that would permit fornication are covered by Romans 14.

Romans 14 is not dealing with things fundamental to the faith or anything that threatens to undermine or make shipwreck of a person’s faith (cf. 1 Tim. 1:19). Such questions as the nature of Christ while on earth, whether the alien is subject to the law of God, and trustworthiness of the creation account are so fundamental to the faith that they cannot possibly be thrown into Romans 14. Mistaken views and teachings on these subjects are such that they will undermine, and possibly destroy, the faith of some. Such cannot be paralleled with the mistaken views of those weak in the faith in Romans 14.

Conclusion

The weak in the faith, in Romans 14, are mistaken in their views and incorrect and overly scrupulous in their personal practices and need to grow in the faith. The strong in the faith are correct in their views and practice, but the things are of such nature that they can give deference to the weak without embracing their mistaken views or violating their own conscience or duty to God. The weak in the faith have the right to grow under the gospel in an atmosphere of peace conducive to edification (v. 19). Applying the conclusion to Romans 14 given in the first few verses of the next chapter will protect that right. “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me . . . That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.” (15:1-3, 6-7)

edbragwell@edsrmonsandthings.com