

Chapter 14

Verses 1–23 It's more important to love one another than to be right

As you may have gathered, the different groups of Jesus-followers in Rome were not getting on with one another. It was complicated. At the heart of the disagreements were different attitudes towards the Instruction and this broadly represented a division between Jews and non-Jews. Having said that, there were quite a few non-Jews on the Jewish side and a handful of Jews on the non-Jewish side. The non-Jews on the Jewish side were mostly people who had been linked to one or other of the Roman synagogues before they began following Jesus. The Jews in the non-Jewish camp were Jews who thought like me, or at least that's how the thought of themselves. In truth, some of the issues were personal but they got dressed up as though they were differences that mattered to God. At root the real problem was that some of the leaders involved didn't accept, love and respect one another.

Anyway, the leaders on the non-Jewish side decided they would refer to their group as the 'strong in faith' while referring to the others as 'the weak in faith'. Essentially, the strong felt that they need not worry about the provisions of the Instruction while the 'weak' felt that they should be taken seriously. These were really unhelpful designations but, somehow, they had stuck and so I made use of them. However, when you read what I say you might want to put ironic air-quotes around the words strong and weak in this part of the letter! It will help you get the tone of what I was trying to say.

I had set out my theological positions on the issues I wanted to address and then given a general outline of ethical teaching. In this section I have the situation in Rome firmly in my sights. I genuinely wanted to help them resolve their differences. However, I confess that I did have an ulterior motive. As I've already said, I was very keen that the community in Rome would agree to be the base for my mission to the west, to Spain. A united church would be a much more effective partner than one focussed on its internal squabbles. Most of my remarks are addressed to the 'strong' most of whom, as I've said, were not Jewish.

1. Some of the 'strong' thought they should have nothing to do with the 'weak'. My first proposal is that they should, in fact, make them welcome. Sometimes they would invite them to meetings, but their purpose was to try to prove them wrong in an argument, not to accept them as equals. Clearly, I thought that they should put a stop to this.

2. The 'strong' thought they could eat anything. It didn't matter to them if it was something that part of the scriptures forbade or if there was a good chance it was the leftovers of a pagan sacrifice and temple party from the day before. You need to remember that in the ancient world, the life of animals were nearly always taken through a ritual. This meant that almost all animals that were butchered died as part of a sacrificial ritual. Since lots of Jews grew up with the idea that the pagan gods were demonic, you can see why they wanted to be sure they were avoiding meat that might be associated with them. Add to this the fact that the meat would not have been dealt with in accordance with the scriptures' rules about these things and you can see why lots of the Jewish Christians – and the non-Jews who had once been linked to the synagogues – might have been functional vegetarians. They were not necessarily opposed to eating meat in principle, only to its practice in their context. So, for the most part, they ate fruit and vegetables. In its context, such a position seems perfectly understandable.

3. Nevertheless, those who called themselves 'strong' had no qualms about these things at all. Indeed, some of them saw this as a kind of badge of the strength of their faith. As a result, they despised the others. At the same time, I'm afraid to say, those in the other camp tended to judge those who did eat meat. They considered them as little better than pagans and thought that they didn't really understand the scriptures. My point was that God had welcomed both the groups and so, whatever the rights and wrongs of the matter, these differences should not become a basis for division.

4. My argument here was that 'It is not for us to pass judgement on one another. We are all accountable to the same King and he will look after all of us.'

5. The 'weak', influenced by the Instruction, liked to keep certain days as festivals while the 'strong' felt that every day was given equally by God, and they all have the same value. Each is welcome to their own opinion. It's not something worth getting het up about. The point is that everyone should think the issue through and their practice should match the conclusion to which they come.

6. The key thing is that if a person chose to mark the feast, they should do it to honour God. If they ate meat and were grateful for it, they honoured God who provided it. Meanwhile those who would not eat the meat should also honour God in their practice and give God thanks.

7. This is where I offer the basic principle and I think that this has stood the test of time. The thing that matters is that none of us, 'weak' or 'strong', Jew or non-Jew, lives or dies for our own sake.

8. Rather we live and die for the Lord. We all belong to him.

9. Christ died and then lived again and so both the living and the dead belong to him.

10. In the light of this, there was no reason for the Jesus-followers in Rome to despise one another as the 'strong' did the 'weak' or to judge one another as the 'weak' did the 'strong'. They all have the same judge and that's God.

11. Here I quote a text to make the point. God is the judge of all, and all things are made to offer God praise.

12. So, each of those who heard the letter, and this applies to all subsequent readers too, is answerable to God for the way they treat others.

13. The conclusion to all this is that the Jesus-followers in Rome should stop judging one another. Instead, they should try to be supportive to one another and stop trying to trip each other up.

14. Theologically, I'm on the side of those who call themselves 'strong'. Nothing is clean or unclean in itself; that's something that we humans project onto it. But this projection can be a reality that needs to be taken properly into account.

15. So, if one of the 'weak' groups believes something to be unclean and someone in the 'strong' group eats it anyway, that is not an act of love. The act of eating the thing that another thinks is

unclean ends up hurting someone who belongs to King Jesus. It contravenes the rule that we should love one another. And this rule is much more significant than any of the theological points over which people are arguing.

16. The result is that something you regard as good, eating the meat for example, gets spoken of as something evil.

17. What matters for those who live under the rule of God is not these questions of what you eat or drink, but living life in the way God intended from the beginning, peace with God and with one another, and joy in God's Holy Spirit. These are the things that hold us all together.

18. Whoever understands this and serves King Jesus in this way is accepted by God and approved by his followers.

19. Therefore, I insisted, do the things that build peace and that build up everyone.

20. Questions of what food to eat cannot be allowed to bring down what God is building. As I've said, theologically, everything's clean, to that extent the 'strong' are correct but as soon as their insistence on eating meat causes another Jesus-follower to struggle, they're in the wrong. You can be as much in the right as you like but if you do it without love, you're very much in the wrong.

21. So, if something causes a problem to another follower of Jesus, something like eating meat or, to take another example, drinking wine, or anything else come to that, then it's best not to do it.

22. Your faith, that is your opinions in this area, are best kept between yourself and God. So don't give yourself any reason to judge yourself in this area. And be sure of your own mind.

23. If you do have doubts, then, best not to eat because whatever we do ought to spring from faith. If it doesn't, it can lead to sin.

I could easily see how people who had heard teaching derived from the letter I wrote to the Galatians might, if they forgot about the context of the message, think that people who kept Jewish festivals had missed the point of the gospel. But the point in Galatia was not about people who freely chose to keep festivals but about an attempt by outsiders to impose them and to say that you couldn't be part of the people of God without them. In most circumstances, where there is division, the way forward lies in reminding those involved that they are to love God and to love one another. Sometimes there's a point of principle at stake and just occasionally this is a hill that you might choose to die on. Most of the time our clever arguments are the way we try to keep power and influence for ourselves and for our group. The law of love sees right through that kind of posturing and shows a better way forward. The point of all this is that lots of the time it doesn't matter how clever you are or how theologically correct you, if you don't love others, it all counts for nothing. I seem to remember making this point at some length in a letter I wrote to Corinth.¹ The picture of the community of Jesus-followers as a body was there in the background of that argument as well.

¹ See 1 Corinthians 13.