

# Romans 14: A Study of the Context

by Harry Osborne

In every generation, there is an attempt to justify a "broader fellowship" to include those preaching and practicing some sin or doctrinal error. The attempt to justify such invariably includes Romans 14. The advocate of a "broader fellowship" notes the instructions to "receive" the one with whom we have a difference in preaching and practice. The next step is saying the differences discussed would include a *doctrinal* matter or practice of some *sin*. Thus, we are told we must "receive" those who are preaching some errors or practicing some sins. The crux of the issue is this: **Does Romans 14 include doctrinal error and sinful practice in the differences under discussion?**

The issue is not whether brethren differing on an issue are to be longsuffering. The Bible clearly teaches that "longsuffering" and "bearing with one another in love" are essential (Eph. 4:1-3). God says that we are to "warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all" (1 Thess. 5:14). Paul's exhortation on restoring in a spirit of gentleness one who is overtaken in a trespass is a principle we must teach and practice (Gal. 6:1). In the case of a brother sinning against us personally, Jesus shows that we must exhaust every effort to solve the matter before counting him as "the Gentile and publican" (Matt. 18:15-17). Even the factious man is to receive the first and second admonition before we refuse him (Tit. 3:10). We can never be justified in severing the bonds of fellowship at the drop of a hat.

However, a study of Romans 14 shows it deals with matters of *indifference* or *opinion*. The differences in practice discussed are areas in which either of the different practices involve no sin, both are right in and of themselves.

Paul's instruction to "receive" the brother with whom we have a difference is immediately seen as a contrast to 2 John 9-11. John commands another way of dealing with the differing brother, "do not receive him not" (2 Jn. 10). Do the writers contradict or are they speaking of distinct types of differences?

In 2 John, the difference under consideration is plainly declared to involve the *doctrine of Christ*. John speaks of one who transgresses that doctrine, thus, committing sin. As a result, this one is no longer in fellowship with God (2 Jn. 9). Not only is the practice of such sin condemned, but so also is the teaching that would justify it. Therefore, faithful Christians are urged to make no provision for and give no encouragement to the preaching of doctrinal error (2 Jn. 10). The provision for or encouragement of sin and error is condemned as involvement in "evil deeds" (2 Jn. 11). Clearly, John says no harbor is to be given to the one practicing sin or preaching error.

Romans 14 sets forth an entirely separate kind of difference. The issue is brought into focus with the first verse:

*New American Standard* - Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.

**Revised Standard Version** - As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions.

**Phillips** - Welcome a man whose faith is weak, but not with the idea of arguing over his scruples.

These versions correctly present the nature of the differences dealt with in the chapter - matters of *indifference* or *opinion*. Matters of indifference are those areas in which God has neither required nor prohibited a practice. Thus, two differing practices may be right in and of themselves given the fact that God has *allowed* both practices. The two brethren who are involved in the differing practices

may both be acting in the way that is right, given their diverse backgrounds, circumstances, and consciences. These variables would form the basis for the two to differ in their *opinion* or *judgment* of the practice in question and to differ in that practice, yet both be acceptable before God. In such cases, Romans 14 instructs brethren not to "judge," "dispute," or "argue" with one another over such matter. However, the teaching clearly restricts the application of this instruction to matters of indifference, as God views them, where the variant practices would both be right in and of themselves.

In areas of difference regarding that required or forbidden by God, the differing practices would not both be right in and of themselves. In such cases, "judging" a sinful practice is right and necessary (1 Cor. 5:3-5). "Disputing" would be essential in for harmony to be achieved upon truth (Acts 15:1-29).

Romans 14:2 defines the stronger brother as the one who had "faith" to eat meat. This faith would come from an understanding of the principles declared by God. Paul says God created meat to be received by man with thanksgiving and "is sanctified through the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:3-5). How is meat sanctified through the word of God? God's instruction, His word, *allowed* man to eat meat initially (Gen. 1:29 cf. Gen. 9:3). God's instruction later showed Peter that the restrictions regarding clean and unclean meat in the law of Moses were no longer binding (Acts 10:11-16). Even when that meat had been offered to an idol, God *allowed* partaking of meat in a situation that gave no deference to the idol and provided no stumbling-block for another (1 Cor. 10:25-32). There can be no doubt that the practice of the stronger brother in eating meat was *allowed* by God - it was *right* in and of itself!

The basis for receiving a brother with a differing practice is also clearly stated (vs. 3-4). The meat-eater recognized that it was not essential to eat meat. It was the herb-eater who believed the meat-eater was engaged in an unlawful practice. This false idea is plainly refuted when the apostle instructs, "*Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats...*" Why? "...for God **has received** him" (v. 3). Notice three facts about this last phrase. (1) The word "for" is from the Greek word *gar* which is a conjunction used to express cause. (2) The word "received" in the original language carries the idea of a past, completed action. (3) The antecedent to the "him" of this phrase is "him who eats" in the previous phrase. When we add these facts up, what must we conclude? *God had already (at a past time) received "him" that ate meat in his practice, therefore the other brother had no right to judge or condemn him now.* This shows that lawful action is a necessary prerequisite for lawful fellowship.

In the next verse, Paul shows the same thing through the use of a sequential argument. **First**, an accepted premise, "To his own master he stands or falls." In other words, it is God that has the ultimate right to judge regarding the brother's acceptance or rejection in this matter of eating meat. **Second**, an emphatic declaration, "Indeed, he will be made to stand." That is, at the final judgment (where all of God's judgments will ultimately be revealed), he will stand before God. This statement is the emphatic declaration that the man will be approved (future tense) in the final judgment with respect to his practice of eating meat just as God had "received" (past tense) him in that action. **Third**, a causal phrase, "For God is able to make him stand." Again, *gar* is used indicating a reason for the validity of the preceding point. The Lord's power should remind all men of His ability to make the acceptance of the meat-eater in his practice complete in the final judgment. No one had the authority to reverse God's judgment so as to cause the meat-eater to be lost.

The practice of esteeming days is clearly identified as being of the same nature as the eating of meat - they were both right in and of themselves. Each one was right as long as he carried out his practice "fully convinced in his own mind" or without doubt (v. 5). Can such be said of *a practice that is not right* in and of itself? If one was "fully convinced in his own mind" that he could *commit adultery*,

would God encourage him to do so? If one was "fully convinced in his own mind" that he could *steal*, would an inspired writer countenance his practice? Certainly not! We must limit this advice to the realm considered - *cases where variant practices were both right or lawful in and of themselves*. In such cases, those differing in practice both acted "to the Lord" (v. 6). This statement could not be made if one or both of the practices were unlawful.

From this point, Paul urges those differing in practice not to judge one another and to remember that they face a final judgment of God (vs. 7-12). He also urges that they refrain from acting in such a way as to cause another to stumble (vs. 13-23). One can see how this could happen with the eating of meat from either of three possibilities. *First*, the Jew who had been converted to Christ might have a problem eating the meat he had seen as unclean all of his life. Intellectually, he would know God now allowed such, but it takes time for the old feelings to be fully conquered so that no doubt remains. If a stronger brother exhorted him to eat while those doubts remained, sin would result (v. 23). Second, a Jewish convert holding to restrictions for cleanliness from the old law or rabbinical traditions may think any meat prepared by Gentiles hands would be unclean. Though he might accept that those teachings were not a part of the Gospel, his conscience might need some time to fully assimilate that fact. *Third*, the Gentile who had been converted to Christ might have a problem eating meat since the practice was so closely tied to the worship of an idol all of his life. Intellectually, he would know there is nothing to the idol, but old patterns of thought are not fully changed overnight. If a stronger brother encouraged him to eat meat while doubts remained, sin would result (v. 23).

Again we come back to emphasize the basis of this entire chapter. Brethren differed in thought and practice *regarding matters that were right in and of themselves*. True, the weaker brother did not understand that the practice of the stronger brother was right. However, the fact remains that both practices were right and Paul repeatedly emphasized the lawful nature of both practices. Upon that basis, both brethren were to receive each other, because God had already received them.