

Food Fights

Grey Matters – Part I

Romans 14:1-4

Introduction

One of the most enjoyable things I get to experience as a pastor is to welcome a brand new flock of sheep into the wider pastureland of this church. We call that welcome the GreenHouse class.

The GreenHouse is a course in which, for twelve to thirteen weeks, I get to teach what we believe, where we stand on a number of issues, and what to expect when considering joining this church. We named it GreenHouse because that word stands for a nurturing place where growth can occur for many different kinds of plants and flowers.

It is always thrilling to learn where people have come from. The current class is made up of a huge number of people, which causes our adult chapel to be packed to the walls. The members have come from all over the religious landscape of our country and other parts of the world.

There are people coming from backgrounds in Roman Catholicism and Mormonism. There are Southern Baptists and Independent Baptists, United Methodists and Episcopalians. There are Presbyterians and Assemblies of God in there too. Imagine that – I have to tell the Presbyterians to wake up and the Charismatics to settle down!

People are in that class from all walks of life.

Some come from a long line of believers, while others have only recently come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Some come from small churches where they knew everyone and some come from large churches.

Some grew up in the South and some have moved here from the North. This winter has the northerners totally disoriented. They are loving it, but they are very confused.

Some come from churches that had little concern for doctrine, while others come from churches that took a doctrinal stand.

Some come from churches where there was a high level of liturgy and predictability, while others come from churches with unstructured and spontaneous worship styles.

Some are used to pastors preaching through popular topics and issues of the day, while others are used to pastors preaching through a book of the Bible – even for several years. Many pastors do that, you know!

Some come from churches that do not allow musical instruments, while others come from churches that allow only certain instruments, and others still, from churches that use everything from banjos to spoons.

Some come from churches that sang only hymns, while some come to this church, having never sung a hymn before.

Some have heard the gospel often, while some are hearing it for the very first time.

Some want more music, while others want more preaching (amen?!).

There are people carrying King James Bibles, NIV's, NLT's, NEB's, and the truly spiritual, their New American Standards.

Some know hundreds of verses by heart, while others have only recently learned that the book of Genesis is at the beginning of the Bible and the book of Maps is at the end.

Some are mature in the Lord and others are brand new, infant believers.

In the current session of the GreenHouse class, there are people coming into our church who are natives of Washington State, Florida, California, New York, Australia, the island of Guam, and India.

How do we ever hope to get along?! How do we ever hope to keep it together?! There are so many backgrounds; so many histories; so many cultures! How do we make it together?

Without a doubt, one of the greatest witnesses to the world of the power of the gospel is the fact that we can . . . and we do!

The power of Jesus Christ binds together dissimilar people in a fellowship of genuine and profound unity.ⁱ

There is perhaps nothing more remarkable than, . . . *the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:3)*

It is no wonder that Jesus Christ said,

“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)

In other words, “All men will know that you belong to Me because you have love for one another.”

If this is true – and it is – then it is no wonder that the apostle Paul was deeply concerned with the fellowship of the brethren and the unity of the church.

As Paul has moved into the more practical part of his letter to the Romans, he has written, thus far:

- 2 verses on the necessity of the transformation (12:1-2);
- 6 verses on serving one another through spiritual gifts (12:3-8);
- 5 verses on how to act in church (12:9-13);
- 8 verses on how to respond to your enemies (12:14-21);
- 7 verses on how to respond to civil authority (13:1-7);
- 7 verses on how to live in light of Christ’s return (13:8-14).ⁱⁱ

Now, Paul will spend time telling the believer how to get along with one another, in spite of differences. It will run from chapter 14 verse 1 through the first part of chapter 15. It is not two verses, or six verses, or even eight verses, but thirty-six verses in all on how to get along with people who are different from you!

Food Fights

Paul begins this section, in Romans 14:1-4, by bringing up one of the most difficult subjects to agree upon. Look at Romans 14:1-3.

Now accept the one who is weak in [the] faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.

One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only.

The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him.

When you read this, you may be tempted to think, “C’mon, how divisive could this be for the believers in Rome? Surely they can figure this out and get along?! How difficult could this be?”

Just think for a moment, what it meant for a Jew, steeped in his religious, Jewish tradition – with its ceremonial and dietary laws – to enter the church of grace and freedom.

I can remember spending three years in Detroit, Michigan, in order to earn my first master’s degree. In only three years of being surrounded by the factories and automotive plants, I felt the pride of American made automobiles and came to the conclusion that there was something wrong with Volvo’s and BMW’s and Mercedes and other foreign cars. I would not own a foreign car. Okay, I could not afford one, but even if I could, I would still rather have a Ford or a Chevy pick-up truck. That just seems right! Better!

There would be people in the New Testament church who had been influenced by the Essenes – a strict sect of Jews. The Essenes had special meals together which they prepared for with ritualistic bathing, followed by the wearing of special clothing. These meals had to be prepared by priests or they would not eat them. That just seemed right! Better!

Think of the Gentiles who were being saved and were becoming part of the church. They were coming out of pagan idolatry and were now, sick of

the lives they had lived and wanting to break free of any connection to the false gods of their past.

There would be Christians influenced by Pythagoras, who taught that the soul of man was a fallen deity confined to the body. He, much like Hindus, believed in reincarnation; that is, you might dwell in a man, an animal, or a plant in an endless chain of being. The only way to break the chain was through absolute purity and discipline – silence, study, self-examination, and abstaining from anything enjoyable. The less you enjoyed life, the quicker you could leave planet earth.

Pythagoras would never be caught eating a Krispy Kreme doughnut!

What does that have to do with Romans 14? Nothing, unless you think Dunkin' Donuts is better. If so, we will never get along – you need to find another church!

It might seem silly to you, but in the first century, this issue of food was far more significant than doughnuts . . . or American made cars.

Today, we might find a closer analogy to the divisive issue of differing opinions if we talked about fashion, or make-up, or sports, or movies, or playing cards or playing golf on Sunday afternoon. Perhaps we would come closer if we discussed political opinions regarding the environment, drilling in Alaska, or gun control. Perhaps the temptation to divide is over the education of children, or the use of money and wealth, or the choice of college or a career. I could go on and on.

I intend to discuss this for several weeks, as we dive into the issue of things that are not explicitly forbidden or even addressed in scripture. Paul refers to them, in Romans 14:1, as “opinions”. We can call these issues “doubtful things”. We refer to this arena of living as a “grey area”.

One of the most difficult discoveries in the Christian life – particularly for the new Christian – is the discovery that the it is not always black and white – it is often colored in grey.

The discovery that there are so many areas in life where the answer is not found in a verse of scripture – where the answer is not cut and dried, black or white . . . but grey.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is a portion of a road near my home that slopes down rather steeply between two ridges and creates a valley. At the bottom of the valley and to the left is a large pond. Often, in the early morning, fog covers the bottom portion of that road. It is like driving into a cloud; a grey mist.

In truth, Christianity is often like driving through a grey fog. It is difficult to see the road in front of you, much less stay within the lines. You have to slow down and stay alert.

Evidently, helping Christians not only find their way through the fog, but learn to travel with others along the way was important to the apostle Paul. This is shown in the fact that he will literally slow down and spend more time on this one subject than almost any other.

Evidently, to the apostle Paul, grey matters – it matters!

Just ask a church if it mattered whether or not they used a guitar in the service, or passed an offering plate, or canceled Wednesday night prayer meeting for another program, or supported a divorced missionary, or replaced the organ with a synthesizer. Ask them if it mattered.

Leslie Flynn writes in his book about the variety of disagreements that deeply divide Christians – grey matters that create hurt and division:

A Christian from the South may be repelled by a swimming party for both men and women, but then offend her Northern friend by wearing a pant-suit to church. At an international meeting for missionaries, a woman from the Orient cannot wear sandals indoors with a clear conscience, while others think her silly for coming barefoot. A Christian from Eastern Europe thinks it terribly worldly and wasteful for a Christian acquaintance to have a wedding ring, yet a woman he knows from further south would consider it a scandalous thing to be in public without her wedding rings on. A man from Denmark is pained in his spirit to watch British Bible school students playing soccer on Sunday afternoon, while the students, in turn, are grieved when he lights his pipe on his porch.^{iv}

These are issues that certainly do not determine your future in heaven or hell, but can determine fellowship on earth.

What do we do in these areas? Who is right? And who is wrong?

Paul, answer the question for us all. Can we eat meat or not?!

Notice Romans 14:2.

One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only.

Evidently, some of the Roman Jews had become vegetarians. This was not because they thought killing animals and eating them was morally wrong. In fact, the Old Testament never required abstinence from meat. The problem was most likely, their inability to trust whether or not the meat was kosher; that is, killed and prepared in the presence and direction of a rabbi. Since they could not be sure the meat was kosher and therefore, acceptable, they refused all meat and ate only vegetables.

So there is division in the church between the meat-eaters and the vegetable only eaters. There are meat-eaters who do not care if it is kosher and meat-eaters who want kosher meat, but do not care if it has been offered to idols. There are vegetarians who will not eat meat offered to idols and vegetable eaters who will not eat meat, not because it has been offered to idols, but because they cannot be sure it is kosher.

The church is deeply divided. There is the salad side and the steak side.

This is a food fight! It is taking place, not in the cafeteria, but in the church.

We need a referee! Paul, can you help us out?

Paul's answer will come – buried near the end of his letter. His answer will initially stun most of them, and irritate all of them on both sides of the argument. Neither side will feel vindicated by Paul. Both sides will be challenged.

I like to call the first few verses by the following title.

Four Ways to Stop a Food Fight From Ever Starting

1. Start with acceptance!

Notice Romans 14:1 again.

Now accept the one who is weak in [the] faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.^y

Accept! This word is from “proslambano,” which is a strong word that means, “to take to one's self; to receive into fellowship or companionship.”^y

It is always used in the middle voice. This communicates a personal welcome – a warm reception of another person.

The word is used by Paul as he exhorted Philemon to receive Onesimus, Philemon's runaway

servant, back to himself as a brother – to welcome him home as if he were receiving Paul himself. (Philemon 1:10-17)

It is also used in Romans 15:7 of Christ receiving the believer to Himself.

The starting point is that you are brothers and sisters in Christ. You belong to one another.

We read,

Now accept the one who is weak in [the] faith . . .

The definite article in the original text indicates this person is not weak in their trust or faithfulness to God, but in their understanding of the full truth of the faith – the fullness of the gospel message.^{vi}

By the way, you need to know that these Jews, and perhaps Gentiles who had come out of idolatry and wanted nothing to do with their former lives, were not insincere believers. They were not trying to be petty, but were deeply conscientious. They were so concerned with offending God that they had chosen to eat vegetables only and stay away from meat altogether.

The word translated “vegetable” comes from a verb meaning “to dig”. In other words, they were only eating those things that grew out of the ground.^{vii}

These believers were young in their faith, but passionate in their lifestyle. Their problem was simply in not yet realizing that their acceptance into the family of God had nothing to do with what was in the oven and what was on their plate.

For the believers who knew, Paul says, “Be patient. Resist the temptation to withdraw the welcome mat. Accept them into the fellowship.”

So, if I can paraphrase the first part of Paul's answer, it would read, “Welcome into your fellowship the one who is weak in his understanding of the gospel of grace. Don't bring him in just so you can straighten out all his opinions, but welcome him to yourself, just as he is.”

I find it fascinating that there is something Paul does not say. We would expect Paul to do them a favor by just sending them a menu and saying something a waiter once said to me, “If you don't see it on the menu, you can't have it!”

Why would Paul not just say, “If it's not on the menu, don't eat it!”?

Because handing the church a menu would never produce maturity – in young believers or old.

Handing them rules was not as important as helping them develop relationships with principled minds, unified hearts, and gracious spirits.

Everyone has a place at the table for their favorite food. Start with acceptance!

2. The second way to stop a food fight is to simply refuse to argue!

This is another way of saying, for those of you who know the difference, do not major on the minors. Recognize the difference between orthodoxy and opinion and do not divide over opinion! That means you just might have to keep your opinion to yourself.

I read recently of an occasion in which Charles Spurgeon, the famous British pastor of the 1800s, was traveling to meetings in a first class railway carriage. Another preacher saw him board and go to the first class section. This preacher was back in the third class carriage. He finally decided to give Spurgeon a piece of his mind. He made his way up to Spurgeon and demanded, “Mr. Spurgeon, what are you doing up here? I am riding back there in the third class carriage taking care of the Lord’s money.”

Spurgeon replied, “And I am up here in the first class carriage taking care of the Lord’s servant.”

I have decided from now on, to fly first class. And if someone complains, I get to quote Spurgeon!

Accept – do not argue.

So why do we argue? Because we like to!

Yesterday, I called my wife into my study and said, “I need help with my sermon title.”

It is not an uncommon thing for me to get my sermon titles from her. In fact, my best titles are usually her idea.

I explained the text and discussed the issue of arguing over food. She then said, “How about something like, ‘Food Fights’?”

I said, “That’s it! That sums it up perfectly! I love it – ‘Food Fights’! From now on, you can fly first class too!”

Just as I said this, my twelve year old daughter, who was halfway down the stairs, heard me and said, “Food fights? I love food fights!”

I said, “You do?” while at that moment, questioning the value of her education.

“Sure,” she said, “food fights are fun.”

What a classic admission – and revelation, “Food fights are fun!”

We would expect Paul to say, “The salad people need to start their own church,” or “The steak people need to go to another church.”

No. He simply says, in Romans 14:2,

One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only.

Back in verse 1, Paul said to accept him, not argue with him.

However, it is not enough to not argue – Paul is about to go to the matter of the heart. The third way to stop a food fight will involve much more than not arguing.

3. The third way to stop a food fight is to seriously adjust your attitude!

Notice again, Romans 14:3a.

The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, . . .

The word “contempt” means “to view as worthless; to disdain or disrespect someone because of their personal preferences or viewpoint”.

You might not be arguing with them in public, but you despise them in private.

Paul goes on to say in Romans 14:3b, as he addresses the other side of the argument,

. . . and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, . . .

It works both ways. Both sides are judgmental, censorious, critical, and, if the truth is told, downright hateful.

Those who do eat, look down their nose at those who do not. And those who do not eat, separate from those who do.

The word “judge,” or “krino,” carries the idea of isolation or separation.

I was talking to another pastor recently. We have a mutual friend who has been in the ministry for a number of years. I asked whether he knew how our friend and his ministry are doing. He responded, “Oh yes, he has really become a disappointment.”

I thought, “Oh no, he’s left his wife; he’s gotten involved in sin.”

I said, “Really? Why?”

He replied, “Oh, he started singing choruses in his church.”

It had become a matter of separation, “krino,” censorious judgment in the arena of grey matters. He was literally doing what Paul said not to do.

Both sides need an adjustment of their attitude. And, by the way, both sides have valid points and concerns. What is lost in the heat of the argument, is balance.

Someone says, “Christianity has nothing to do with what you wear, so wear anything you like.”

Someone else says, “But wait, doesn’t what you wear communicate a message? Can’t what you wear and how you wear it cause someone else to think something regarding you that they shouldn’t be thinking?”

Both sides can be right. In fact, in the mind of Paul, both sides might be necessary in order to arrive at the best conclusion.

One minister found this out the hard way. He was personally convinced that it was a sin to eat chocolate, among other more obvious vices. He decided to have a visual demonstration that would add emphasis to his Sunday sermon and teach his congregation a lesson they would never forget.

As he began his sermon, he placed four worms into four separate jars. The first worm was put into a container of alcohol; the second worm was put into a container of cigarette smoke; the third worm was put into a container of chocolate syrup; the fourth worm was put into a container of rich, clean soil. Then, the preacher preached against the sins of all the above.

At the conclusion of the sermon, the minister showed his congregation the following results:

- The first worm in the alcohol – dead;
- The second worm in the cigarette smoke – dead;
- The third worm in the chocolate syrup – dead, (as an aside, I think that worm had a smile on its face);
- The fourth worm in the good clean soil – alive!

The minister then asked his congregation, “What have you learned from this demonstration?”

A little old woman in the back, quickly raised her hand and said, “As long as you drink, smoke and eat plenty of chocolate, you’ll never have worms.”

These steps are three ways to stop a food fight:

- Start with acceptance!
- Simply refuse to argue!

- Seriously adjust your attitude!

There is one last step in stopping a food fight.

4. Stop and remember your authority!

Notice Romans 14:4.

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Paul is literally saying, “Stop and think! What right do any of us have to judge the personal opinions of other believers?”

Paul is not talking about doctrine; he is not talking about explicit sinful behavior which we are commanded to judge and discipline in the body. Paul is talking about grey matters; questionable areas; matters of conscience and personal conviction.

Who are we to play the judge of another in these areas – especially if they are the servant of the living Lord?! How can we judge another in the fog?

We are not omniscient, so we do not know all the facts. We are unable to see into people’s hearts; we cannot read their motives.

We are finite, so we cannot see the big picture. We have poor spiritual eyesight; we live with blind spots. Most of all, we are inconsistent and imperfect!^{viii}

Fortunately, we do not answer to one another in grey matters of conscience – we answer to God. So, in order to stop a food fight from ever starting, we must be willing to not to have the last word – and to remember that God, our final authority, will have the final word!

This is the reason that Paul will take us eventually (later in Romans 14), to the Bema seat; the judgment seat of Christ where the believer will give an account of every one of his choices – both major and minor; both secret and public; both actions and motives. God will have the last word.

Conclusion

The key word of the entire thirty-six verses, from Romans chapter 14 through the first of chapter 15, is “acceptance”. You should circle this word in verse 1 and draw a line to the last part of verse 3, where it appears again. Then, circle it in verse 18, and skip to chapter 15, verse 7, where it appears twice.

Accepting others in the Lord will go a long way to stopping food fights from ever happening in the church.

His name was Bill. He had long, wild hair, wore jeans and a T-shirt, and was barefoot the day he visited our church. We were located near his university. Although he was a brilliant student, he had adopted the wardrobe of his college. He became a Christian while attending college, and decided to try out our church. He had never been to church in his entire life.

The service was well underway and completely packed. As Bill made his way down the aisle, he could not find a seat. When he reached the front row, all eyes were on this young man – wondering what he was doing and perhaps, what he was doing here. Bill got all the way to the front, but there were no seats. So, he just sat down right on the carpet. It was the way many of the kids sat in his college fellowship during packed meetings, but it certainly was not the way we sat in church!

By now, the people were uptight and the tension in the air was thick. About this time, the pastor saw one of his deacons making his way down the aisle. This deacon was in his seventies, had silver-gray

hair, and wore a suit and necktie, cleaned and pressed. He was a godly leader in the church – the epitome of dignity and quiet godliness. As he got closer to the young student, everyone was saying to themselves, “Well, you can’t blame him for what he’s about to do. How can you expect a man of his age and dignity and background to understand some college kid sprawled out in the aisle by the front row?”

When the older man finally reached the younger man, the church was utterly silent. All eyes were focused on him. You could hardly hear anyone breathing – even the pastor stopped what he was saying. Everyone simply watched as this elderly man, with some difficulty, lowered himself down and sat next to Bill, patting him on the back and whispering, “Welcome here.”

The deacon would sit next to Bill for the rest of the service. When the minister finally broke the silence and spoke again, he said, “What I’m about to preach, you will never remember . . . but what you have just seen, you will never forget!”^{ix}

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/5/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ John MacArthur, Romans: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1994), p. 273.

ⁱⁱ James Montgomery Boice, Romans: Volume 4 (Baker Books, 1995), p. 1723.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fritz Ridenour, How to Be a Christian Without Being Religious (Regal Books, 1967), p. 122.

^{iv} R. Kent Hughes, Romans: Volume 2 (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 259.

^v Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 379.

^{vi} MacArthur, p. 275.

^{vii} Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament (Baker Books, 1974), p. 208.

^{viii} Charles R. Swindoll, The Grace Awakening Study Guide (Insight for Living, 1991), p. 72.

^{ix} Tony Beckett, “Syllabus on Romans 14,” 2002.