DON’T QUARREL

The church is to be a place where we welcome one another because Jesus has welcomed us (Romans 14:1; 15:7). The church is not a debating society. It is not a place where we quarrel over our opinions (Romans 14:1). The unity of the church isn’t dependent upon uniformity of opinion. Our unity depends upon our willingness to avoid placing stumbling blocks in our brother’s or sister’s way and by pursuing the things that make for peace and build one another up (Romans 14:13, 19).

Making peace and building one another up involves refusing to judge on disputable matters. We know that we don’t stand before the judgment seat of each other. We stand before the judgment seat of Christ (Romans 14:10, 11). We will give an account of ourselves to God, not to each other (Romans 14:12). Every servant stands or falls before his or her own master. Our Master is able to make us stand (Romans 14:4). Our Master can guide us safely through the judgment. It would be a terrible mistake to judge and condemn those whom God has welcomed.

The quarrels the Roman Christians engaged in centered on the appropriate feasting and fasting days, as well as the types of foods people chose to eat. Paul reminded them that “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).
Write out Romans 14 from the translation of your choice. If you are pressed for time, write out Romans 14:19–23. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
VEGETARIANISM AND WEAK FAITH

In the Roman house churches, those with weak faith chose to eat only vegetables (Romans 14:2). Those with strong faith ate a more omnivorous diet. What was the association between weak faith and a vegetarian diet, and what was the connection between meat-eating and strong faith? The world of the book of Romans is a very different world than exists today. To find the answers to these questions, we need to understand the historical differences between the world of Rome and the world of today.

How was the world of Rome different than the world of today? The vast majority of early Christians were poor (1 Corinthians 1:26, 27; James 2:5–7). In Rome, as in most societies, meat eating was a luxury that the poor were not often able to afford. In fact, about the only time the poor could afford to eat meat was when it went on sale. When did meat go on sale in Rome? The price of meat dramatically decreased during pagan festivals. At the festivals, many animals would be sacrificed at the pagan temples. They would provide more meat than the priests and their families could consume. The pagan priests would sell the excess meat at the market. Excess supply drives prices down and opens markets to new consumers.

This became a problem for impoverished Christians. They could only afford to eat meat when it was cheap. It was only cheap when it had been offered to false gods. Moreover, even for those Christians who weren't poor, there was always the danger that the meat they purchased might have been offered to a false god. Some Christians with weak faith, therefore, chose to be vegetarian because of meat's association with false gods. Other Christians with stronger faith realized that an idol is nothing (1 Corinthians 8:4) and that eating meat that might have been offered to a false god by someone else shouldn't defile their own conscience (1 Corinthians 8:4–13). This is the world in which eating meat meant you had strong faith and being a vegetarian meant you had weak faith.

The world is much different today than it was in ancient Rome. In most parts of the world, meat isn't offered to idols before it goes to market. Eating a vegetarian diet doesn't portray you as weak in faith, and eating meat doesn't show your faith is strong. Circumstances alter the conditions of things. In fact, in many parts of the world, meat isn't a luxury; it is a staple. Frequent consumption of meat has been shown to have a negative impact on our health. Today, someone with perfectly strong faith may choose to eat vegetarian because they see that diet as the best possible way to honor God with their body.

Meat or no meat, we should create communities where we welcome one another and refuse to judge or condemn those who differ from us on disputable matters (Romans 14:3).
DID JESUS MAKE UNCLEAN FOOD CLEAN?

Romans 14 raises important questions for those who believe that the Sabbath and the prohibitions against eating unclean foods are ongoing requirements for Christians. Paul reminds the Roman Christians that some people esteem one day above another and others esteem every day alike, and that each person is to be convinced in their own mind (Romans 14:5, 6). Paul is not writing about the Sabbath. He has consistently affirmed the vital role of the moral law in the book of Romans (Romans 2:25–29; 7:12, 16, 23). Paul believed that the requirements of the law would be fulfilled in the lives of believers (Romans 8:4; 13:8–10). It was also his practice to worship on the Sabbath (Acts 17:2).

People devoted other days to God. These days would be used as feast days or fast days (Romans 14:6). If someone chooses to have a feast day to the Lord or chooses to have a fast day for the Lord, they should be free to do so. There should also be no obligation to join with them and no fear of judgment or condemnation for enjoying a feast or fast day. Christmas could be a modern example of a feast day. It is not required or condemned by Scripture. Sometimes people are upset when churches have a Christmas service. We should be careful not to quarrel over these types of issues. If someone chooses to dedicate this day to the Lord, they should feel free. If someone chooses not to, they too should feel free.

The issue of unclean food comes up when Paul says that he is convinced no food is unclean of itself. It is only unclean if we consider it to be unclean (Romans 14:14). The word translated unclean is koinos and means common. This is also how the word is translated in Acts 10. There, Peter was hungry and had a vision of a sheet with all kinds of animals, some clean and some creepy crawlies (Acts 10:12). God asked Peter to kill and eat. Peter protested by saying he had never eaten anything common (koinos) or unclean (akathartos) (Acts 10:14). Unclean (akathartos) foods are defined in the Old Testament (Leviticus 11). Common (koinos) foods are defined by Jewish tradition. The Jews believed that if clean cows were kept in the same pen as unclean pigs, then the clean cows would become common (koinos). Jews not only avoided unclean foods they also avoided common (koinos) foods. The lesson of Acts 10 is clear. Clean Jews couldn't become common by spending time with unclean Gentiles (Acts 10:28).

When Paul says he is convinced that no food is unclean (koinos) unless we consider it unclean, he doesn't use the Greek word akathartos that means unclean. He uses the word koinos, which means common and refers to Jewish cultural traditions about food. His message is clear. We are not bound by Jewish cultural food requirements. However, Paul should not be understood to be teaching that God’s laws about unclean foods no longer apply.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Psalm 34:14
Acts 10:1–11:17
1 Corinthians 8:1–13
James 4:11, 12, 17

What other narratives come to mind about convictions, opinions, and tests?

Review your memorized verse from Romans 14.
HOW TO NOT GET YOUR WAY

Living in Christian community isn’t always easy. We won't always get our way, and it necessarily requires self-sacrifice. Some believers are strong in faith (Romans 15:1). Others are weak in faith. These differences will always make living in Christian community challenging and rewarding. Those with strong faith have a responsibility to avoid doing anything that would cause those with weaker faith to stumble, or further weaken (Romans 14:21). This means that not every thought or conviction should be expressed. For the sake of the unity of the church, some things we should keep to ourselves (Romans 14:22).

The creation of a healthy Christian community requires bearing with those who are weak in faith, because the entire Christian life centers around faith. If those who are strong in faith flout openly the convictions of those who are weaker in faith, it could lead the weak to change their behavior. If their behavior change doesn't come from a place of faith, then they are in spiritual danger, because everything that doesn’t come from faith is sin (Romans 14:23). Our love and concern for our brothers and sisters should inspire us to protect them. We should protect them from such a compromising position by bearing with their scruples and refusing to please ourselves (Romans 15:1, 2).

The reason that those who are strong are to bear with the scruples of the weak is the incarnation of Jesus (Romans 15:3). When God became a man in Jesus, He chose to seek our good rather than please Himself. He left the glory of heaven to be born in poverty and die a criminal's death on the cross. He chose to take the reproach of the outcast, the weak, and the sinful. Jesus is our example, and Paul hopes that our patient and comforting God would help us to treat one another as Christ treated us (Romans 14:5). If Jesus left heaven for our sake, then we could surely keep our opinions to ourselves. Then, with the unity we find by following the self-sacrificing example of Jesus, we would be able, with one voice, to bring glory to the Father and Jesus (Romans 14:6).

For Paul, Christian unity isn't found in uniformity in all our opinions. It is found by receiving one another, just as Christ received us (Romans 14:7). Just as Jesus received sinners (Luke 15:2), so we are to receive one another and not to quarrel about our opinions (Romans 14:1), because opinions are like belly buttons. Everyone has one, and we don’t need to know the details about it.
DEBATING FOOLS VS. DOING GOOD

“Debating ministers are generally disqualified to help the flock where they most need help. Having neglected practical religion in their own hearts and lives, they cannot teach it to the flock. Unless there is an excitement, they do not know how to labor; they seem shorn of their strength. If they try to speak, they do not seem to know how to present a subject that is proper for the occasion. When they should present a subject which will feed the flock of God, and which will reach and melt hearts, they go back to some of the old stereotyped matter, and go through the arranged arguments, which are dry and uninteresting. Thus, instead of light, they bring darkness to the flock, and also to their own souls.

“Some of our ministers fail to cultivate spirituality, but encourage a show of zeal, and a certain activity which rests upon an uncertain foundation. Ministers of calm contemplation, of thought and devotion, of conscience and faith, combined with activity and zeal, are wanted in this age. The two qualities, thought and devotion, activity and zeal, should go together.

“Debating ministers are the most unreliable among us, because they cannot be depended upon when the work goes hard. Bring them into a place where there is but little interest, and they manifest a want of courage, zeal, and real interest. They depend as much upon being enlivened and invigorated by the excitement created by debate or opposition, as does the inebriate upon his dram. These ministers need to be converted anew. They need to drink deep of the unceasing streams which proceed from the eternal Rock.

“The eternal welfare of sinners regulated the conduct of Jesus. He went about doing good. Benevolence was the life of his soul. He not only did good to all who came to him soliciting his mercy, but he perseveringly sought them out. He was never elated with applause, or dejected by censure or disappointment. When he met with the greatest opposition and the most cruel treatment, he was of good courage. The most important discourse that Inspiration has given us, Christ preached to only one listener. As he sat upon the well to rest, for he was weary, a Samaritan woman came to draw water; he saw an opportunity to reach her mind, and through her to reach the minds of the Samaritans, who were in great darkness and error. Although weary, he presented the truths of his spiritual kingdom, which charmed the heathen woman, and filled her with admiration for Christ. She went forth publishing the news, ‘Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?’ [John 4:29.] This woman’s testimony converted many to a belief in Christ. Through her report, many came to hear him for themselves, and believed because of his own word.”

inQuire

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What is the difference between a test of Christian faith and areas of opinion?

What things are there that may not be intrinsically sinful but you avoid them because of their association with your former life?

How do you feel when others do not share your conviction?

Recall a time when you quarreled over an opinion. How did it make you less (or more) spiritual?

Why do you think people feel it is so important to be right about their opinions?

In what ways could you modify your behavior to support those with weaker faith in your community?

How have people made you feel welcome in a community?

How can we create a more welcoming church?