

## Romans 14:13-23 Demonstrating Christian love in the local church

### Introduction

How should Christians of different convictions get on together? How ought they to work together in a local fellowship? Should a Christian ...? Whatever specific issue is being raised with this line of questioning, the apostle Paul attempts here in principle to find some sort of answer to it. Our Church mission statement reminds us that we are: **Building a Christ centred church.** We do that by **looking to Christ –growing in Christ- sharing Christ.** Here in Romans 14:13-23 Paul unpacks further some further guidance on what it might look like in practice. Does Paul here give us a snappy list of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’? This would be one way of proceeding so everyone knew what was in and what was out. The problem is that to provide such a list in God’s Word that would be contextually relevant in each generation of human history is completely impossible. The reality is that no list could ever be long enough to cover each and every kind of situation that a Christian might come up against. However, that does not mean that anything goes and that we can live as we like as long as it appears to be a ‘loving’ thing to do when we make choices! Christian love, **agape** love, is wanting to live in such a way that I demonstrate to other people my love first of all for God, but equally as it is demonstrable and can be tested I model Christ centred concern for fellow believers through the attitudes I display; the choice of words I will utter in personal conversations as well as in public meetings, together with the actions I will perform.

It is very much a question of asking what do I think Jesus might want me to do in this situation? In the light of what I know of His earthly ministry what choices would He have made in these particular circumstances? When we phrase our questions in this way we can see a bigger framework in view than the simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers that might be given to certain types of scenarios, for example, should a Christian smoke? Or should a Christian attend shows at the theatre? The apostle wants these followers of Jesus, and by implication us also, to grow in their spiritual maturity and develop a way of thinking that can see the bigger picture of how our choices might impact other members of our family or of our congregation. What is more that because we want God’s best for each brother and sister in our midst, so we will, therefore, be willing to restrict our personal freedoms for the common good. Let us look carefully at Paul’s words and reflect on how our current lifestyle fits with what he has to say.

### 1. The principles a Christ centred Christian will affirm (Romans 14:13)

(a) Something we will choose not to do (Romans 14:13a) *Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.* Paul makes this strong assertion based on the fact that we will all be one day standing before the Lord Jesus to whom we are ultimately accountable. Therefore, it is both logical and biblical that we are gracious toward one another! Judgement is God’s work not ours or the media! Jesus poke about this in the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew 7:1-5: *Do not judge, or you too will be judged. <sup>2</sup> For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. <sup>3</sup> ‘Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> How can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? <sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.* In practical terms sometimes more outgoing Christian may judge someone more reserved in temperament for their reluctance to be involved in some form of public ministry or outreach activity. On other occasions we hear some, but far from all the details about another person’s struggles in life. Part of us may want to tell them to try harder to overcome that problem. There are people who simply need better

accountability structures to ensure they engage in appropriate self-discipline, but it is equally possible that there may be issues that person has experienced or is experiencing which make it extremely difficult to progress through the challenge we have noted. Our ignorance of their wider life circumstances might have caused us to think of their struggle in less gracious terms than we might have done. Evangelical Christians have at times been very harsh with one another over issues such as which Bible version they choose; or a range of lifestyle preferences which are sometimes influenced more by our cultural heritage than the biblical text. There is no sector of society or of the Christian Church where this is not an issue because we are all deeply affected by the sin nature within us that we like Paul battle to overcome. It is a fine line between inappropriate judging of other and godly wisdom which can assist us in guiding one another to become more like Jesus. What Paul and Jesus are saying in the passages quoted here, however, are 'a million miles away' from anything goes libertarianism. It is a call for personal godliness within combined with outrageous generosity towards other people. The only way we can do it is through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit who enables us to live out Romans 12:2: *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will.*

I've made mistakes at various times in life and had to apologise for them. Some times things said or done, at other times things I have forgotten to say or do; this will be the experience of each one of us with all the complexities and pressures of life. We do want to encourage one another to be the best we can be and practice high standards in our Christian discipleship. It maybe in the next twelve months that you may consider engaging with the pathway discipleship programme that is something we have been putting into place; or involvement with a home group which might not have been possible or maybe not a priority this last year. However, there is an intentionality here about our attitudes towards fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. We have to admit that we find it easier to get on with some Christians better than others. Factors such as temperaments, personal interests and age are some of the key determining indicators that influence our preferences. It is easy for all of us to think more harshly of the faults of people we have to work hard to get on with and to be more generous and accommodating to others with whom we are particularly close. Paul's strong advice here, though, is about the kind of church culture people should experience in our midst. Is it a positive and affirmatory one where we seek to highlight strengths and praise choices and conduct that honours the Lord or as in the case of some other churches where a critical spirit prevails and individuals seem to take a real interest in highlighting the faults and failings of others in their ranks. It is a very real personal choice here.

(b) **Something we will choose to do (Romans 14:13b)** *Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling-block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.* Romans 14:13 is dealing at the level of principle. It is a determination that the spiritual wellbeing of my brothers and sisters in Christ is so important to me that I will be willing to forgo aspects of my liberty in Christ in order that others may be helped not hindered in their Christian lives. It is a question that each of us can ask ourselves in a quiet time before the Lord –am I willing to make this a principle undergirding the choices I will make in my own life in the years the Lord grants to me in the future? No-one else can ask this of you it is between each one of us and the Lord Himself.

## 2. **A Christ centred Christian prioritises the needs of fellow believers** (Romans 14:14-16)

(a) **A statement of principle** (Romans 14:14) *I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.* This is an incredibly strong assertion by Paul probably spoken to his

scribe with real passion. Although he is asking Christians in Rome, and by implication elsewhere, to be willing to restrict their freedom in order to safeguard the wellbeing of fellow believers, he is not giving up the principle of Christian freedom which he wants to restate at this point in the letter. What Paul does is in the spirit of Jesus who challenged the Pharisees on a number of occasions for their inflexibility over the traditions which they expected all their followers to keep. What is worse He made this accusation against them in Mark 7:13: *Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.* In I Timothy 4:3-5 Paul wrote: *They forbid people to marry and **order them to abstain from certain foods**, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth.* <sup>4</sup> *For everything God created is good, and **nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving**,* <sup>5</sup> *because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.* The particular issue that was most pressing at that time in the Gentile world was how to handle meat offered to idols. In principle, eating food over which prayers to idols have been uttered does not change the composition of the meal. Why? Paul answers this question in an extended comment in I Corinthians chapter eight. There is only one God. Even if many ‘gods’ are worshipped with all sincerity on earth it doesn’t change the situation (I Cor. 8:4-6). The logic of Paul’s position is that it is in principle okay to eat food under these circumstances. However, whether in fact one would do so depends on the circumstances, in particular the views of the other persons present at the meal. If I partook of this food under these circumstances how would they view my conduct? Now this particular issue is unlikely to be an issue in our community, but the principle here about the choices we make remains. I must be aware of and sensitive to the needs and concerns of my sisters and brothers in Christ. In the Christian Church it is about ‘us’ collectively in community, ahead of my individual preferences.

(b) **Christian love in action** (Romans 14:15-16) *If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.*<sup>16</sup> *Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil.* Paul’s choice is explained in more detail in I Corinthians 8:9-13: *Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling-block to the weak.* <sup>10</sup> *For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols?* <sup>11</sup> *So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.* <sup>12</sup> *When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.* <sup>13</sup> *Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.* It is a statement of the obvious to state that if I am going to be sensitive to the concerns of fellow believers then I have to take the time to listen to them and giving space to allow them to explain their views. Why – because each person is valuable in the sight of God. Or as Paul expresses it here in Romans 14:15, every Christian is *someone for whom Christ died*. If Jesus loves brother \_\_\_ or sister \_\_\_ so much to give His life for them then surely I can do something so minor in comparison to assist them in living for God as He desires. In an age where people are insisting on their ‘rights’ it is extremely counter-cultural to think and act in the way that Paul is advising here; However, a Christ centred Christian will wish to avoid making choices that distress fellow believers and certainly especially if they will hinder another Christian in their journey of faith. We must acknowledge that this is quite challenging to live out in practice. We have core principles, for example, the Ten Commandments, God’s moral law, that is non-negotiable. These guidelines from God must be followed. However, many practical applications of biblical principles can be to some degree culturally determined in particular contexts. Therefore, we must seek God’s guidance in prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to guide our conscience as we consider the choices we may have to make in daily living.

### 3. **A Christ centred Christian makes choices that are for the common good** (Romans 14:17-21)

(a) **What matters most?** (Romans 14:17-18)<sup>17</sup> *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,*<sup>18</sup> *because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.* Every Christian has a causes or causes that are dear to our hearts. When in our minds eye we look around our congregation those of us who have been committed members for some time are well aware of the particular ministries or issues prioritised within our ranks. On the whole, if Christians within both a local church and in the wider Christian community can divide up the mission needs amongst themselves and take responsibility for the different ministries and evangelistic tasks at home and abroad then a remarkable amount can be accomplished to the glory of God. Yet too often Christians can argue or disagree over matters of considerably less importance. Although there are occasions when genuine issues of principle are at stake too often friendships are lost or even divisions in congregations take place over comparatively minor things. In such contexts the bigger picture of what God's kingdom is about has been lost. We all know that hindsight is a wonderful thing, but how often looking back at things over which we may have got so upset or angry over or maybe made choices in the heat of the moment which in a more considered context might have been different. Prevention is always better than cure. Paul invites his readers then and us today in looking at God's work to discern how may we best extend His kingdom here on earth? In Matthew 6:28-33 Jesus urged His followers to take a step back and consider what is most important.<sup>28</sup> *'And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin.'*<sup>29</sup> *Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these.'*<sup>30</sup> *If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith?*<sup>31</sup> *So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?"*<sup>32</sup> *For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.'*<sup>33</sup> ***But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*** In other words, if we get the big decisions about mission and ministry right then the lesser things will in time fit into place. God will honour us as we honour Him. We have seen more encouragements than we might have expected in the first few months of our new work in Panmurefeld, for example. Why might this be? I believe that in line with these verses the premises were offered and received for one purpose alone – the extension of His kingdom. It was all about Jesus and people coming to know Him as Lord and Saviour. There were no other motives in our hearts over all our times of planning and discussion and prayer. In the same way as we look forward into the future of the work in St Vincent Street and whatever else the Lord may guide us to do, as long as His kingdom is central in our thinking, it will have a big influence for good on the choices we make.

(b) **What are our priorities?** (Romans 14:19-21)<sup>19</sup> *Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.*<sup>20</sup> *Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.*<sup>21</sup> *It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.* For Paul and the Jewish and Gentile Christians of the Early Church their struggles at that time concerned matters of food and drink that had a big influence on how they could work together. We must not underestimate how big a challenge that was for believers from communities that never mixed, even less would have entertained the notion of sharing food at a table. In each generation there will be different challenges to be overcome. In the contemporary Western Evangelical world there have been worship wars over choices of songs and music (or its absence!) in our ranks. There have been battles over who is eligible to

serve in particular ministries; other issues have revolved around our understanding of the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit; in Baptist churches over the relationship between baptism and church membership. The list will change from year to year, but Paul wants us to retain Christ-centred priorities.<sup>19</sup> *Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification* (Romans 14:19). *Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of...* [whatever it may be] (Romans 14:20a). We need to keep on our guard that the evil one cannot use any secondary issue to divide the work of the kingdom. In a Samaritan community that His disciples had never even considered as a place for a spiritual harvest Jesus declared: *'My food,' said Jesus, 'is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work.'*<sup>35</sup> *Don't you have a saying, "It's still four months until harvest"? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest* (John 4:34-35). His message was a clear call to see the bigger picture of our mission and ministry. In the aftermath of our church conference we need to pray for clear guidance as to how we can make the best use of all the resources we possess as a church for reaching people who have yet to come to faith with the good news, together with effectively discipling those who are committed followers of Jesus –for our good and for His glory.

#### 4. **A Christ centred Christian strives to have a clear conscience before God** (Romans 14:22-23)

(a) **The importance of personal conviction** (Romans 14:22a) *So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.* God has given us a conscience that prompts us in particular directions when choices are being made. Take good care of your conscience as it is one of the best friends you will ever have! When your conscience is ringing alarm bells, take heed. Whatever you are contemplating is probably not a good idea! By contrast, when our conscience as a Christian, informed by God's Word, directs us to stand for a particular conviction then we should take such a stand. The pressure is on us as Christians in an increasingly aggressively secular society. In our city we are extremely fortunate not to face issues that have arisen in other parts of the UK, but we cannot presume on our freedoms for ever. However, like Daniel (Daniel 6) when threatened with a lion's den we must quietly stand our ground. We must never go looking for trouble, but some believers have faced real trials for maintaining their convictions in England in recent years. Although, whatever we may face it pales into insignificance compared with the pressures on our brothers and sisters in Christ in the Middle East and in parts of Africa at the present time. The political context of Paul's words to Christians in the Empire's capital city was one of real hostility, especially to Jews and Jewish followers of Jesus whom the Emperor Claudius had ordered to leave Rome that year (see Acts 18:2). It is no surprise that Paul emphasises a quiet discrete witness together with a call for building a sense of community within that local church. A decade later many of the believers remaining in the city would be brutally killed by the next Emperor Nero. Yet the church survived to grow again on the margins of society in that city.

(b) **The significance of public behaviour** (Romans 14:22b-23) *Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves.*<sup>23</sup> *But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.* In essence, living a consistent Christian life where our words and our conduct are in harmony. In what would become increasingly troubled times the apostle calls these believers to demonstrate genuine Christian love and care for one another as they faced the future together. Our political context is much better than theirs, but his call for harmony and mutual love for one another is essential in every generation. Christians will never agree on every thing, but these words attributed to Augustine of Hippo are still appropriate: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." Amen

