

## WEAKNESS OR WISDOM? FUNDAMENTALISTS AND ROMANS 14.1–15.13

by  
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A couple of years ago I found myself embroiled in an online discussion of Romans 14 and its applicability to today's fundamentalist milieu. A number of the participants in the discussion were convinced that many fundamentalists, because of their penchant for strict standards of behavior, fit into the category of "weak brothers." One participant noted that since "the biblical description of the weaker brother is the one with stricter standards of living...most of fundamentalism is [made up of weaker brothers]. That's not an insult...just an attempt to wake us up to who we are." Another concurred, affirming that to the extent that fundamentalists implement "strictures that go beyond Bible boundaries," they are, by biblical definition, "weak." Another chimed in, adding that anyone who adheres to standards more strict than what Scripture explicitly demands is *ipso facto* evidencing weakness.

I was astonished by these comments. Taken to their logical conclusion, they implied that the most restrained and self-denying of believers are in fact the very weakest, and, contrarily, that the most libertine and self-indulgent of believers are actually the very strongest. Something seemed innately wrong with this conclusion. Is this really what Paul is suggesting in Romans 14? On the heels of exhortations for believers to arm themselves against sin and to "make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" (Rom 13:12, 14), is Paul now suggesting that any attempt to restrain the flesh that exceeds the explicit dictates of Scripture is to be dismissed as an evidence of "weakness"?

I am convinced that this is not the case. Indeed, Paul's point seems very nearly the opposite. Paul is instructing us, instead, that the "strong" believer most clearly evidences his strength of faith when he adopts strictures that exceed explicitly biblical boundaries for the sake of his own spiritual health, and more specifically, for the sake of the spiritual health of his weaker brothers.

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## THE IDENTITY OF THE “WEAK” AND THE “STRONG” IN ROMANS 14:1–15:13

A positive identification of the “weak” (ὁ ἄσθενῶν, 14:1, 2; ὁ ἄδύνατος, 15:1) and the “strong” (ὁ δυνατός, 15:1), crucial as it is to this discussion, is nonetheless difficult. And this difficulty, in turn, gives us pause before casually inserting into the category of “weak” the coterie of present-day fundamentalists and other conservative evangelicals who, for instance, abstain from dancing, drinking, smoking, playing cards, going to movies, listening to rock music, or wearing blue jeans.<sup>2</sup> The terms *weak* and *strong* are used but sparingly in this pericope, and their description is scant. As David Alan Black notes, “not even this passage, despite its length, has sufficient detail to give a completely satisfactory explanation of the identity of the ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ groups.... The events themselves that led Paul to address the conflict between the weak and the strong lie so deeply concealed that it is most difficult—if not impossible—to know exactly what they were.”<sup>3</sup> Some, in fact, suggest that the “weak” and the “strong” are merely hypothetical categories, and that there is no occasion to discover at all.<sup>4</sup> Since, however, (1) the epistle to the Romans is foremost an occasional document and (2) Paul adds specific details about the “weak” that differ from the semi-parallel account in 1 Corinthians 8, 10, it seems prudent to side with the majority and infer that a specific, local occasion is in view.

That Paul had a specific, local occasion in view, however, is not the same as saying that this occasion can be known today. Many, in fact, suggest that the occasion has been effectively lost.<sup>5</sup> And even

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<sup>2</sup>In fact, as we shall see, there is good reason contextually to suggest that this passage does *not* impinge upon most of these behaviorisms.

<sup>3</sup>David Alan Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness: Astheneia and Its Cognates in the Pauline Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1984), p. 203.

<sup>4</sup>Robert J. Karris, for instance, opines that Paul is addressing in general terms a hypothetical scenario to which specificity is assigned in 1 Corinthians 8, 10 (“Rom 14:1–15:13 and the Occasion of Romans,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 35 [April 1973]: 155–78; so also Wayne A. Meeks, “Judgment and the Brother: Romans 14:1–15:13,” in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament: Essays in Honor of E. Earle Ellis*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Otto Betz [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], pp. 290–300; and the earlier treatment by William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 5th ed., International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902], p. 385).

<sup>5</sup>J. Paul Sampley allows that there may have been a specific occasion in view, but that Paul was unwilling to speak to it with any specificity, purposely employing “oblique” rather than “frank” language in deference to an audience with which he was less than intimately acquainted (“The Weak and the Strong: Paul’s Careful and Crafty Rhetorical Strategy in Romans 14:1–15:13,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], pp. 43–36). Cf. also C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Moffat New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Row, 1932),

among those who make a determination, the answers are diverse. In the end, however, three basic views emerge: (1) that the “weak” were unbelievers, (2) that the “weak” were Jewish believers, and (3) that the “weak” were Gentile believers.<sup>6</sup>

### The “Weak” As Unbelievers

That the “weak” are described in 14:1 by the all-important phrase “weak in faith” has led some to suggest that the “weak” were deficient in *saving* faith. This understanding falls under two heads. The first, represented by Mark D. Nanos and others inclined toward the “new perspective” on Paul, suggests that the “weak” brothers (14:10, 13, 15, 21) were Jews who had “stumbled” over the Christ event, but who as yet were not so confirmed in this state as to “fall” (11:11). As such, Paul’s warning to the strong was to avoid practices that would cause these *ethnic* brothers (and not *Christian* brothers) to stumble further, become confirmed in their unbelief, and thus come to spiritual ruin (14:13, 21).<sup>7</sup>

A second head under this broad category is that the “weak” were professing believers who nonetheless believed it necessary to supplement their faith with the fulfillment of certain legal obligations in order to fully commend themselves to God.<sup>8</sup> Paul’s exhortation to the

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pp. 211–12. Others who take a more self-consciously agnostic approach include Leon Morris (*The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], pp. 12–14, 475) and John Murray (*Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2 vols. in one [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965], 2:173–74).

<sup>6</sup>That there are three *basic* views is notable here. Moo lists six options, Reasoner five, Cranfield six, etc.—and ironically, these lists do not correspond to one another. Collated together, these three authors alone posit nearly a dozen distinguishable possibilities for the identity of the “weak” (Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], pp. 828–29; Mark Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14.1–15.13 in Context*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 103 [Cambridge: University Press, 1999], pp. 1–22; C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975], 2:690–95). The three broad categories posited here, however, cover most of these variations and are adequate for the purposes of this study.

<sup>7</sup>Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 85–165.

<sup>8</sup>See, e.g., C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1957), pp. 256–57; also Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, in *Luther’s Works*, American ed., 56 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–86), 25:492. James Dunn regards the “weak” as Jews who viewed obedience to the Mosaic Law as “an integral part” of their faith, and as such seems to earn a classification here. What makes this classification difficult is that Dunn does not find “weakness” as something truly “defective,” and apparently allows it to be consistent with justifying faith (James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1988], p. 798).

strong in this case is to accommodate the “weak,” massaging their deficient understanding that justification is by faith and works until they arrive at the mature understanding that justification is by faith alone.

This pair of views has several strengths. First, they take seriously that the problem of the “weak” is that they are weak *in faith*. As we shall see below, a number of those who regard the “weak” as believers mute the idea of faith and turn it into one of opinion and preference. But as Nanos aptly notes, “Paul describes them as ‘weak in *faith*’ (v. 1). Paul does not describe them as ‘weak in *opinion*.’”<sup>9</sup> One might argue (and I do) that Nanos goes too far in suggesting that it is *saving* faith that is in view; but at a very minimum, this term suggests that Paul is not dealing here with issues on which God is silent. Instead, he is dealing with issues addressed in Scripture and, as such, issues that are subject either to faith or the lack thereof.<sup>10</sup>

A second strength of this pair of views is that they recognize the seriousness of Paul’s concern that the “weak” might stumble. Wrapped up in the terms used here is far more than a mere offense of personal sensibilities and scruples;<sup>11</sup> in fact, more is implied here even than narrower idea, adopted by some, that causing the “weak” to stumble is tantamount to inciting them to sin. The term πρόσκομμα (translated “obstacle” in v. 13 and “offense” in v. 20) is a severe term, and, setting aside the semi-parallel usage of the term in 1 Corinthians 8:9, is used elsewhere in the NT only to describe the failure of Jews to attain salvation by faith in Christ (Rom 9:32–33; cf. also 1 Pet 2:8). The term σκάνδαλον (“stumblingblock”—v. 13) is likewise severe, and “refers to the cause of spiritual downfall in all its NT occurrences: Matt. 13:41; 16:23; 18:7 (three times); Luke 17:1; Rom. 9:33; 11:9; 16:7; 1 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 5:11; 1 Pet. 2:8; 1 John 2:10; Rev. 2:14.”<sup>12</sup> We also note that Paul’s concern is not merely that the “weak” might be “hurt,” but that they might be “destroyed” (ἀπόλλυμι—v. 15), a reference to their “eternal destruction.”<sup>13</sup> In view here is the veritable *ruin*

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<sup>9</sup>Nanos, *Mystery of Romans*, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup>Specifically Paul addresses eating meat (14:2–3), drinking (14:21), and the neglect of special days (14:5–6)—practices that are either explicitly or implicitly sanctioned by God. God has authorized the eating of meat (Gen 9:3) and even of unclean meats (Acts 10:13–15). And while a case for total abstinence from alcohol might be made in today’s milieu, it certainly cannot be predicated of Paul’s day, as he himself comfortably affirms (1 Tim 5:23; cf. also John 2:1–10; Ps 104:15; Eccl 9:7; etc.). The issue of special days is less explicitly addressed in Scripture, but the non-necessity of observing special days may be easily deduced from certain Scriptures (e.g., Col 2:13–17).

<sup>11</sup>As Moo aptly notes, the offense here is “more than the annoyance or irritation that the ‘weak’ believer might feel toward those who act in ways they do not approve” (*Romans*, p. 854).

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 851, n. 11.

<sup>13</sup>Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur

of the “weak”—as Moo puts it, “failure to attain final salvation.”<sup>14</sup>

This pair of views fails, however, to correlate this passage with Paul’s severe treatment elsewhere of the genuinely legalistic, Judaizing element that existed in the early church.<sup>15</sup> In stark contrast to his irenic exhortation to “accept” and “bear with” the “weak” here in Romans 14:1 and 15:1, respectively, Paul excoriates those in Galatia who sought to justify themselves by their own righteousness—even to the point of anathematizing those who taught thusly (Gal 1:8–9). Such disparate responses clearly point to disparate situations.<sup>16</sup>

### The “Weak” As Jewish Believers

A favored view among modern commentators, and one that successfully answers the deficiency of the preceding, is that the “weak” were Jewish believers who believed the Mosaic Law to be God’s continuing code for the regulation of personal holiness.<sup>17</sup> For these, loyalty to the Mosaic Law did not contribute to *justification*, but was, as in OT times, something of a manual for the governance of the NT believer’s *sanctification*.

Much commends this view. First, the epistle’s recurring theme of the successful integration of “old order” people of God (Jews) into the “new order” (the Church) strongly suggests this explanation. This theme is explicit in 15:8–13, which functions as a conclusion at least to this specific subsection, and possibly to the whole epistle as well.<sup>18</sup>

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Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “ἀπόλλυμι,” p. 115.

<sup>14</sup>Moo, *Romans*, p. 854; cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 733–38.

<sup>15</sup>My comment that the Judaizers were “genuinely” legalistic demands some explanation. There is today a wide variety of definitions for the term *legalist* in evangelicalism. Definitions of *legalist* in popular literature range from (1) anyone with personal conduct more strict than Scripture explicitly demands, to (2) anyone who imposes such extra-biblical conduct codes on others, to (3) anyone who believes that observance of extra-biblical conduct codes reflects or results in higher levels of personal piety or spirituality, to (4) anyone who believes that observance of such conduct codes are necessary to justification and true Christianity. It is the last of these to which I refer when I speak of a “genuine” legalist. This is the error of the Judaizers.

<sup>16</sup>As Moo observes, “Paul’s plea for understanding and acceptance of the ‘weak’ within the community makes clear that they were not propagating a view antithetical to the gospel. This makes it impossible to view them as Jews who believed that observance of the law was necessary for salvation” (ibid., p. 830; cf. also Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:690–91; 694–95; Murray, *Romans*, 2:172–73; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], p. 475).

<sup>17</sup>So Moo, *Romans*, pp. 829–31; Schreiner, *Romans*, pp. 707–9; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:695–97.

<sup>18</sup>See the discussion below.

Second, the two major issues with which the “weak” struggled (eating meat and honoring special holy days) align well with Jewish concerns of avoiding *unclean* (κοινός—v. 14) meats<sup>19</sup> and observing Sabbath and festival days.<sup>20</sup> Third, several differences between the Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8–10 accounts point to disparate situations. Most significantly, the absence of references to idol meat (τὸ εἰδωλόθυτον) and the inclusion of sacred days in Romans 14 combine to suggest a Jewish and not a Gentile problem in Romans 14.<sup>21</sup>

Tensions with this view are twofold. First, there is a tendency among some (but not all) proponents of this view to minimize the import of being weak “in faith” in this passage. Cranfield, for instance, divorces the weakness of faith in 14:1 from the use of the phrase earlier in this epistle (4:19), allowing him to expand “faith” (v. 1) to include a wide variety of matters of personal “conviction.”<sup>22</sup> Others are less bold, but still explain “weakness of faith” as relating broadly to an unspecified body of *implications* of faith.<sup>23</sup> Such expansiveness of definition seems unwarranted, and seems to borrow illegitimately from the

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<sup>19</sup>A term used in the literature “almost exclusively” in a Jewish context (Reasoner, *Strong and Weak*, p. 136).

<sup>20</sup>It should be noted that the “weak” in Romans 14:2 ate only vegetables, apparently eschewing *all* meats (not just unclean ones), and also abstained from wine—both practices which exceed the demands of the Mosaic Law. This fact has led some to look outside of Judaism for the identity of the “weak” (see, e.g., Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. Howard Clark Kee [Nashville: Abingdon, 1975], pp. 310–11; and esp. Max Rauer, *Die “Schwachen” in Korinth und Rom nach den Paulusbriefen*, Biblische Studien 21.2–3 [Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1923]). Others have conceded that the “weak” may be Jews, but must represent some syncretistic, ascetic, or otherwise heterodox sect thereof (see, e.g., Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], pp. 367–68; Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, p. 205; Barrett, *Romans*, p. 257).

In defense of a traditional Jewish Christian identification, however, it should be noted that Daniel, when exiled to Babylon, requested a diet of vegetables only (Dan 1:12), perhaps out of concern that the meats being offered him (even meats from “clean” animals) had not been properly prepared and were thus unclean. Likewise, he refused Nebuchadnezzar’s wine, perhaps for fear that it had been offered to pagan deities (Moo, *Romans*, p. 831; also Schreiner, *Romans*, pp. 709–10). It thus remains quite plausible that the actions of the “weak” could likewise be predicated of orthodox Jewish believers living in Rome, who may have had difficulty securing *kosher* meats and wines (Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:695; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1988], p. 801).

<sup>21</sup>For a particularly astute assessment of these differences see David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 359–60.

<sup>22</sup>Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:699–700; also Käsemann, *Romans*, p. 367. Schreiner criticizes both of these on this issue (*Romans*, 713).

<sup>23</sup>E.g., Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 714; Moo, *Romans*, p. 836; Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), p. 408.

semi-parallel account in 1 Corinthians 8–10.<sup>24</sup> What is in view in the examples supplied (eating meat, drinking, and special days) are not matters of implication, but matters to which God has spoken directly, and, as such, can be genuinely regarded as objects of *faith*. In short, while Paul is not referring to the faith-embrace of biblical truth claims fundamental to *salvation*, neither is he addressing issues of opinion, preference, and conscience upon which God is silent. He is instead, based on the examples provided, speaking to the faith-embrace of clear biblical truth claims that are incidental to salvation.

Regarding the “weak” as believers, second, also seems to mute the force of terms such as πρόσκομμα (“obstacle”/“offense”—vv. 13, 20), σκάνδαλον (“stumblingblock”—v. 13), ἀπόλλυμι (“destroy”—v. 15), and κατακρίνω (“condemn”—v. 23)—terms that bespeak failure to attain salvation in the final judgment. That the “weak” are viewed as liable to falling short of salvation seems to suggest either (1) that they are not saved or (2) that they might lose their salvation. It is probably best to say, in view of these facts, that the “weak” are *professing* believers whose professions might be exposed as false by a failure to persevere in faith.<sup>25</sup>

### The “Weak” As Gentile Believers

A few commentators have argued that the “weak” in Romans 14 are not Jewish but Gentile believers. These argue, along with the previous view, that the book of Romans is occasioned in part by the need to integrate believing Jews into the “new order” people of God (i.e., the church), but reject the idea that the “weak” are Jewish believers reluctant to give up the so-called “third use of the Law.” Instead they are Gentile believers who had either (1) imported certain pagan ascetic practices and superstitions into the church<sup>26</sup> or (2) overreacted *against*

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<sup>24</sup>In 1 Corinthians 8–10 the problem is weakness of *conscience*—an unwarranted and hyper-sensitive concern that meat might be tainted by ritual slaughter in a pagan temple. Paul dismisses this as an implication without warrant. The problem in Romans, on the other hand, is weakness of *faith*—a problem of much more significant import. As Garland aptly notes, “The word ‘conscience’ (1 Cor. 8:7, 10, 12; 10:25, 27, 28, 29) never appears in Rom 14–15, and the word ‘faith’ does not appear in 1 Cor. 8–10” (1 *Corinthians*, p. 359).

<sup>25</sup>The irony of this situation is stark. The “weak,” whose consciences were misinformed on non-essential matters, could, by disobeying their misinformed consciences, actually abandon the most basic of all their faith commitments—commitment to Christ’s lordship in their lives (Rom 14:23). And abandonment of this commitment is tantamount to failure to persevere in the faith.

<sup>26</sup>For instance, immature Gentile believers might still carry about the superstitious baggage of “lucky” and “unlucky” days either on the calendar or brought about by specific astronomical circumstances. The practices of vegetarianism and teetotalism might also have carried over into the church from a variety of sectarian practices observed by Gentile Christians before their conversion (see esp. Rauer, *Die “Schwachen” in Korinth und Rom*, pp. 76–184; Reasoner, *Strong and Weak*, chap. 6; also Morris,

pagan excesses and ritualism.<sup>27</sup>

The first of these two options, that Paul is calling on the “strong” to accommodate the weak in their *continuation* of pagan superstitions and asceticism, is highly unlikely. Such pagan practices and superstitions were by no means benign, but rather manifestations of an overtly non-Christian theological system and implicit expressions of idolatry. Paul would never have accommodated a syncretistic approach such as this.<sup>28</sup> The second of these options, that Paul is calling on the “strong” to accommodate zealous Gentile converts in their *overreaction* to their former Pagan lifestyles, however, is more plausible. This understanding has a solid precedent in the semi-parallel account in 1 Corinthians 8, 10.<sup>29</sup> It also accounts well for the fact that the “weak” were practicing *total* vegetarianism and *teetotalism*, practices attested in pagan practice, but not demanded by the Mosaic Law.<sup>30</sup>

Arguing against this second option, however, are several factors. First, Paul seems to imply in Romans 15:8 that the issue at stake was “serving to the circumcision” (i.e., accommodating the Jews) and not vice versa.<sup>31</sup> Second, as we have noted, the fact that there are significant differences between Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, 10 (esp. the absence of references to meat offered to idols) argues for disparate situations.<sup>32</sup> Third, this view does not explain well the inclusion of special days in Romans 14. This view, as it stands, argues that the *rejection* of special days is a manifestation of weakness (i.e., an overreaction against harmless pagan practice). Paul, ever the proponent of liberty, however, argues contrarily that it is the *recognition* of special days

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*Romans*, p. 475).

<sup>27</sup>Such would seem to be the case in 1 Corinthians 8, 10. In that passage, some Gentile believers, in their zeal to cut all ties with their former lives, apparently rejected not only the temple feasts (which they should have done), but also the meat from ritually slaughtered animals sacrificed at the pagan temples and later sold in the open market (which they did not need to do). Paul announces in this passage that even though the latter response was excessive, the “strong” should accommodate this otherwise benign practice.

<sup>28</sup>See esp. Käsemann, *Romans*, p. 368.

<sup>29</sup>In 1 Corinthians 8, 10, Paul calls for the strong to accommodate Gentiles who had not only rejected not only the pagan temple meals, but also meat sacrificed in these temples and offered for sale on the open market. Paul regards this as unnecessary and over-reactionary, but ultimately harmless.

<sup>30</sup>Morris, *Romans*, p. 475; Byrne, *Romans*, p. 404; Reasoner, *Strong and Weak*, p. 137. However, see the appeals to Daniel 1, above.

<sup>31</sup>Käsemann, *Romans*, p. 368.

<sup>32</sup>In addition to Garland, *1 Corinthians*, pp. 359–60, see Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:692–93; Murray, *Romans*, 2:174; Käsemann, *Romans*, p. 367; Schreiner, *Romans*, 705–6; Moo, *Romans*, 830.

that is a manifestation of weakness.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

It seems likeliest, in view of the evidence, that the occasion in Rome was “strong,” primarily Gentile Christians free from the shackles of Mosaic observance accommodating “weak,” primarily Jewish Christians still loyal to the Law, not as a means of salvation, but as a way of life. That Paul is somewhat vague in his descriptions could point to a diversity of situations in Rome, and several scholars are so inclined.<sup>34</sup> Most probably, however, Paul has a narrow situation in view, and opts for deliberately ambiguous language simply to accommodate the possibility of application that extends beyond the Jew/Gentile schism.

As we have seen, however, the applicability of this passage is not without its limitations. It does *not* apply to those who believe that strictness of deportment commends them to God and contributes to their justification. This is the error of the Pharisees, Judaizers, and other true legalists, and is consistently the object of condemnation in Scripture, not accommodation. And as we shall see further, Romans 14–15 does *not* apply to those who voluntarily restrict their own liberties in the interest of self-discipline, personal purity, or the spiritual health of the Christian community. Instead, the application of Romans 14 extends strictly to *faith* issues (i.e., issues specifically sanctioned in Scripture) that are *non-essential* (i.e., issues that do not touch on the validity of a believer’s status as a Christian).

## THE NATURE OF THE *DIAKRISEIS* *DIALOGISMŌN* IN ROMANS 14.1

The preceding conclusion brings to the fore a critical phrase used in Romans 14:1 and calls us to inquire whether its meaning is consistent with the preceding. The phrase in question, διακρίσεις διαλογισμῶν, is central to the identification of the practices that Paul has in view in his exhortations in Romans 14. Paul has just enjoined the strong to “accept the one who is weak in faith,” and then adds the following: μὴ εἰς διακρίσεις διαλογισμῶν. A quick glance at the major versions reveals at once that the interpretation of this clause is one of considerable dispute:

- The NASB reads “but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.”
- The NIV reads “without passing judgment on disputable matters.”
- The ESV reads “but not to quarrel over opinions.”

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<sup>33</sup>See esp. Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:694.

<sup>34</sup>See, e.g., Reasoner, *Strong and Weak*, 137–38; Murray, *Romans*, 2:173–74; Morris, *Romans*, p. 475.

- The NRSV reads “but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.”
- The NLT reads “and don’t argue with them about what they think is right or wrong.”
- The NET read “and do not have disputes over differing opinions.”
- The KJV reads “but not to doubtful disputations.”
- The NKJV reads “but not to disputes over doubtful things.”
- The HCSB reads “but don’t argue about doubtful issues.”

The first term in this phrase, διακρίσις, has a range of meaning that includes discerning, judging, and disputing.<sup>35</sup> Some attempt to parse the meaning of this phrase on the basis of these nuances, but most agree that the term here carries the idea of discrimination to the point of quarreling.<sup>36</sup> As these English words imply, the term exceeds the idea of friendly debate over these issues and connotes a measure of vitriol: it is censorious. Paul is not saying, thus, that the issues in view cannot be the subjects of discussion or instruction; instead, he is saying that these issues should not become the causes of criticism and denigration: the strong are to accept the “weak” into fellowship without probate or censure with regard to these issues.

The attendant term, the διαλογισμός, is subject to greater question, and thus merits greater attention. The term appears in the standard NT Greek lexicon with four possible meanings, two of which are reflected in the translations above. The most common meaning for the term is that of *opinion*, or as BDAG puts it, “content of reasoning or conclusion reached through use of reason, *thought, opinion, reasoning, design*.”<sup>37</sup> Employing this definition (together with the first block of translations, above) Paul would be saying that the “strong” are to accept the “weak” into fellowship without probate or censure with respect to a broad assortment of inane *ideas, opinions, or scruples* that they maintain.<sup>38</sup> These English terms are expansive in nature, and tend to raise the specter of trifling personal preferences—and, indeed, the term διαλογισμός allows for this understanding. Lexicography alone, however, is rarely sufficient to establish meaning. As we have seen, context narrows the scope of discussion to a specific cluster of opinions, viz., biblically *wrong* opinions respecting issues of *faith*, but that are *non-essential* to one’s Christian essence. That the term *opinion* (or a synonym) may be used in translation is certainly not without lexical warrant; however, it must be stressed that the “opinions” in view are

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<sup>35</sup>BDAG, s.v. “διάκρισις,” p. 231.

<sup>36</sup>See, e.g., Moo, *Romans*, p. 837, n. 45.

<sup>37</sup>BDAG, s.v. “διαλογισμός,” p. 232.

<sup>38</sup>This understanding or a close equivalent is adopted by Moo, Schreiner, Cranfield, and nearly all modern commentators.

neither core doctrinal issues on the one hand, nor squabbles over issues on which Scripture is silent on the other. It is not legitimate, thus, to pack this term with countless banal opinions about the merits of playing cards, Christmas trees, motion pictures, folk music, etc. The “opinions” in question here are of a much narrower scope.<sup>39</sup>

Translators from the second block of translations, above, draw upon a secondary meaning of διαλογισμός in their translations, namely, “reasoning that gives rise to uncertainty, *doubt*.”<sup>40</sup> This adds a new dimension to the term. The three translations in question do not all integrate the dimension of doubt, however, in the same way. The NKJV and HCSB treat the genitive as an objective genitive, implying disputations *about* dubious views of the “weak.” The KJV treats the genitive attributively, implying that the disputations themselves were of a dubious nature and were thus of little value. None of these translations, however, convey the more ominous meaning implied in the lexicon as cited. The lexical definition, if employed in this text, suggests that the disputes in question *give rise* to doubt, that is, they cause one of the disputants (here the “weak”) to doubt. If this is the case, then

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<sup>39</sup>We might add that it is technically incorrect, even, to use the Reformational term *adiaphora*, or “things indifferent” to translate/interpret this phrase. This term, a favorite of many who comment on this passage, is often employed with little regard for the meaning of the term as originally set forth. The term *adiaphora* (a simple transliteration of the Greek ἄδιαφορα) is not original to Christianity, its roots stemming from Stoic philosophy, which applied it to a class of activities that were morally neither right nor wrong. However, it later came to refer almost exclusively to “church rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God” (*Formula of Concord*, chap. 10, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959], p. 610), and specifically, to certain Romanist rituals allowed by Philip Melancthon and the *Adiaphorists* and rejected by Matthias Flacius and the *Gnesio-Lutherans*. These rites came eventually to be governed variously by the Lutheran *normative principle*, which argued that whatever is not prohibited in Scripture is permitted in worship, and the Reformed *regulative principle*, which argued that formal worship is to be limited to rites and practices specifically warranted in Scripture.

That Romans 14 is speaking properly about *adiaphora* is dubious. First and foremost, the scope of Romans 14 extends beyond rites of worship to everyday eating and drinking practices. Second, the issues raised in Romans 14 are, in fact, addressed by Scripture. While it is true that these practices are neither mandated nor prohibited, and in this narrow sense may be described as things “indifferent,” they are not matters about which God is silent or ambivalent. In fact, the whole point of the passage seems to be that the issues at stake here can *never* ultimately be issues of neutrality and indifference, being rendered praiseworthy or blameworthy by their various motivations and effects (for a fuller treatment of the idea of neutrality please see the excellent treatise by Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* [South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991]). In short, it seems dubious to use the term *adiaphora* in this context. Not only is the term used quite loosely, it also tends to confuse the issue at hand. As a result, I prefer the phrase “non-essential issues” to “things indifferent” or *adiaphora* in this study.

<sup>40</sup>BDAG, s.v. “διαλογισμός,” p. 233.

Paul is introducing a theme here that becomes more prominent later in the chapter (cf. vv. 13, 15, 23). He is saying, literally, "Receive the weak, but not unto doubt-inducing disputes," or more colloquially, "Receive the weak without badgering them in such a way as to shake their faith."<sup>41</sup>

The decision is a difficult one. I am inclined toward the latter on a combination of lexical and contextual grounds. However, even if the more generic lexical option, "opinions," is selected, context still restricts the term significantly. The scope of the discussion is narrow.

### THE ESSENCE OF PAUL'S EXHORTATIONS IN ROMANS 14.1–15.13

The whole of Romans 14.1–15.13 is hortatory in nature, and is peppered throughout with exhortations to both the weak and the strong. The exhortations, however, are not evenly distributed between the two groups. Though weakness of faith is a serious problem,<sup>42</sup> the passage does not focus on the rectification of this problem. Instead, the onus of Paul's directives falls on those who are doctrinally established and spiritually mature, whom he instructs to curtail their liberties in the interest of church unity.

The fact that the Christian church has for decades been tending inexorably toward an unfettered and theologically blind unity has unfortunately led some conservatives to view Christian unity as more a vice than a virtue. And lest there be any question on the point, there is, indeed, a form of compromising unity that emasculates the church and lays waste the cause of Christ. We have ample scriptural basis for expelling and denouncing those who reject Christian essentials (Gal 1:8–9) and even for excluding professing believers who engage in deliberate, studied disobedience of plain mandates of Scripture (e.g., 1 Cor 5:13;

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<sup>41</sup>This view seems to be more common of the Reformation era. Calvin, for instance, describes these as "contentious questions which disturb a mind not sufficiently established, or which involve it in doubts" such that "press[ing] the matter urgently on them might shake their faith" (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen [reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], p. 493). Melancthon is likeminded, explaining that the "weak" are not to be "deterred by unusual examples so that they do not embrace the Gospel...[or]...fall into a state of doubt," resulting in "despair, hatred of the entire Gospel, and manifest ungodliness" (Philip Melancthon, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Fred Kramer [St. Louis: Concordia, 1992], pp. 231–32). See also the comments on this verse in Theodore Haak, ed., *The Dutch Annotations on the Whole Bible...Ordered and Appointed by the Synod of Dort* (reprint of 1657 ed.; Leerdham: Gereformeerde Bijbelstichting, 2000). Hodge predicates the same interpretation of Luther (Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [reprint of 1886 ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], p. 418), but Luther's own commentary on the topic seems to favor the "opinion" view. Hodge does not divulge the source for his comment.

<sup>42</sup>As Moo aptly observes, the idea of weakness "carries a pejorative connotation: it is certainly better to be 'strong' than to be 'weak'" (Moo, *Romans*, p. 835).

2 Thess 3:6–15). Those who engage in such are destructive to the church of God and have by their errors disunited themselves from the Christian community. To “unite” in these circumstances is, ironically, to shatter the integrity of the church.

Having said all this, however, we must not lose sight of the fact that ecclesiastical unity is an overwhelmingly positive theme of the NT. Even here in Romans, where believers are beset with serious “weaknesses” of a theological nature (15:1),<sup>43</sup> unity emerges as the divine imperative. God desires all those that he has “accepted” to in turn “accept” one another (Rom 14:1, 3; 15:7). The term used here (προσλαμβάνω) brings to mind the idea of formal reception into local church membership,<sup>44</sup> but probably extends beyond this idea to include the mutual welcome, forbearance, and true camaraderie (15:1) that should characterize the membership of every local church.<sup>45</sup> Specifically, this call to “acceptance” forbids the contemptuous sentiments frequently aroused by perceptions of exaggerated piety among the “weak” and, conversely, by perceptions of reckless impiety among the “strong” (14:3, 10, 13).

The point of the emphasis on Christian unity/mutuality in Romans 14–15, however, is not born out of some inane desire for all Christians to “get along” by jettisoning individual soul liberty and suppressing all thoughts contrary to the consensus. Nor does it envision a form of ecclesiastical unanimity that discards all but the very least common denominator of faith and practice in the supreme interest of utopian harmony. The unity prescribed here has as its end something greater than itself. Specifically Paul prescribes mutual acceptance

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<sup>43</sup>It must be stressed again that the ἁσθενήματα in view here are not morally “neutral” issues, but issues in which the weak are decidedly in error. Many translations highlight this negative idea by translating the term as “failings” (NIV, ESV, NRSV) and “infirmities” (KJV). Indeed, some of the same practices in view are described elsewhere in Scripture as “doctrines of demons” (1 Tim 4:1–5). What seems to keep Paul from describing these errors so harshly in Romans 15, however, is the fact that the faults here proceed from the uncertainty and timidity of an ill-informed conscience (and not the hardened, deliberate, and possibly Judaizing or proto-Gnostic proscriptions of the offenders in 1 Timothy 4). As a result, in Romans 15 it is unity and not censure that emerges as the prescribed response.

<sup>44</sup>See, e.g., article 46 of the 1st London Baptist Confession [corr. and enl. ed., 1646]; also Benjamin Griffith, “A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Church [1743],” in *Polity: A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington: Center for Church Reform, 2001), pp. 99–100; Samuel Jones, “A Treatise of Church Discipline [1805],” also in *Polity*, pp. 152–53; Baptist Association in Charleston, “A Summary of Church Discipline [1774],” likewise in *Polity*, p. 124; and a host of other, mostly Baptist thinkers.

<sup>45</sup>Perhaps Schreiner puts it best when he says that “any such distinction [between formal acceptance into the church community and informal acceptance in everyday life] is foreign to Paul’s thinking, and both are surely included here” (Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 716).

as a means to (1) the spiritual well-being of each member of Christ's body, and (2) integrity of worship as expressed by Christ's body. It is to these topics that we now turn.

### The Spiritual Well-Being of the Whole Church

We have already noted above the dire consequences which Paul is attempting to avert in this section—apostasy and “failure to attain final salvation.” And Paul is concerned that a disdainful reaction of the “strong” to the “weak” could trigger such apostasy. Specifically, Paul warns that a wanton maximization of all the liberties technically available to believers might destroy the “weak” by causing them to intentionally and systematically deny their consciences (skewed though they were) and thus sin against God. Such seems to be the point of 14:14 and 23, where a believer is described as acting contrary to faith, ironically, when he does something good that he *thinks* (λογίζομαι) is wrong. Sin ultimately takes place in the mind, Paul intimates, and as such exceeds mere action (cf., e.g., Matt 5:22, 28), and whenever a person *intends* to disobey or dishonor God through a given action (irrespective of the inherent virtue of that action), he sins. And persistence unchecked in deliberate, willful sin ultimately divulges not only a general lack of “faith” (14:23) but also (and more ominously) an unregenerate state (cf. 1 John 3:9).<sup>46</sup> As Paul goes on to intimate in Romans 15:4–5, hope is grounded in *perseverance*, and tends to evaporate when believers persistently act contrary to their faith.

The solution, here, as elsewhere in Paul's writings, is for the “strong” to unite in guarding the spiritual well-being of their weaker brothers by curtailing their liberties. Unlike his practice in 1 Corinthians 8–10, Paul does not actually use the term *liberty* (ἐλευθερία) in Romans 14–15, instead preferring descriptive terms like “clean” (καθαρά) and “good” (ἀγαθός) to convey the merits of these practices in Christian life. As we have seen above, while the practices in view are not *necessary* to the Christian life, neither are they issues that Scripture fails to address or leaves open to debate: they are practices upon which God has placed his direct imprimatur through

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<sup>46</sup>The sense of the term *faith* used here in verse 23 is widely debated (see, e.g., Moo, *Romans*, pp. 863–64; Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 738; and esp. Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:728–29). As we noted above, *faith* in verse 1 has reference to the ready acceptance of truth claims in Scripture that are “non-essential” or incidental to salvation. As we noted in that discussion, such weakness of faith is a serious problem, but not so serious as to raise suspicion concerning one's standing as a Christian. Here in verse 23, however, a person who acts contrary to *faith* casts serious aspersions on the credibility of his profession. Why? Because the faithlessness in v. 23 is not a hesitation over a non-essential biblical truth claim or a failure to appreciate its implications (so v. 1), but a calculated rejection of conscience/conviction that constitutes an act of defiance against God—a deliberate renunciation of what God ostensibly demands. And such a practice, if it persists unchecked, is no less than apostasy.

the holy Scriptures. Paul's discussion does not extend to practices that are "neutral" or undefined, but practices that are demonstrably *good*.<sup>47</sup> It is these "good" practices that Paul asks his readers to relinquish cheerfully as the occasion demands.

Paul is *not* saying, to be sure, that the curtailing of these "good" practices is an absolute one. Paul elsewhere advocated eating meat (1 Cor 10:27), apparently finding no compulsion to restrict his liberty when the spiritual health of those around him was not at stake. Instead, he imposed these restrictions only when he perceived that his actions might cause a brother to violate his conscience and thereby fall (Rom 14:21, cf. 1 Cor 8:13).<sup>48</sup> At all times Paul appears on the side of genuine liberty (1 Cor 10:29; Gal 5:1),<sup>49</sup> but he also at all times holds these liberties loosely, ever ready to relinquish them for the sake of the gospel and the spiritual health of the church. Each activity that falls under the umbrella of Christian's liberty, Paul adds, while good "in itself" (Rom 14:14), is never exercised "by itself." There is always a context of other believers (and ultimately God himself) that must be taken into account—a context that can render even "lawful" practices "unprofitable" (14:7; cf. 1 Cor 10:23). Indeed, Christ himself proved to be the ultimate demonstration of this sentiment when he gave up his liberties for the cause of God and his elect (14:9 cf. 15:3). The expectation that the "strong" should do the same, then, is only reasonable.

The essence of Paul's command, then, is that a truly godly believer must always be circumspect and ever ready to demonstrate love (Rom 14:15) in the exercise of his liberties. Specifically, he should relinquish those liberties whenever doing so forestalls the stumbling (14:13, 20),

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<sup>47</sup>Paul's announcements that "nothing is unclean" (14:14) and that "all things are clean" (14:20) must be read carefully in their context. Paul is not saying that all things without exception are clean, nor even that all activities on which the Scripture is silent are *de facto* clean. Appeals to this passage arguing that every music style, entertainment media, or clothing fashion is "clean" are frankly misguided. Such issues must be settled apart from these verses, because Paul's only point here in Romans 14 is that "no *food* is unclean" and that "all *food* is clean" (NIV, emphasis added; cf. also Moo, *Romans*, p. 852; Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 731; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:713; et al.).

<sup>48</sup>Paul is not calling on the believers to relinquish their liberties on the basis of mere disagreement on the part of other believers. It is not disagreement and disapproval that are in view (which the English words "offend" and "grieve" could convey), but *destruction* (so esp. Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 736). One might argue separately that the pursuit of peace (15:2) should also encourage the curtailing of liberty in the face of a brother's disapproval, but this is certainly not Paul's intent in calling on the strong to not "offend" or "grieve" their brothers.

It is worth noting that Paul goes on to argue in 1 Corinthians 9 that such a voluntary restriction might also be employed when it might be a distraction to the gospel (1 Cor 9:19–23). Again, however, it is a restriction that expires once the occasion passes.

<sup>49</sup>See esp. the discussions in Schreiner, *Romans*, pp. 730–33.

falling (14:21), and destruction (14:15, 20) of the weak, and conversely whenever doing so promotes edification (14:19) and peace (14:19) in the body.

### **Integrity of Worship from the Whole Church**

It is tempting to close the discussion of Paul's injunction at this point, but to do so would be to overlook the whole of Paul's conclusion to this passage (15:7–13). Again, the unity of the body and spiritual wellbeing of its members, important as these may be, are in turn directed toward a greater end, namely God's reception of an expression of worship that is marked by mutual integrity.

A negative forerunner of this theme may appear as early as 14:16, where Paul warns against a careless use of liberties that might result in "evil speaking," that is, verbal revilement (βλασφημέω).<sup>50</sup> Exactly who is reviling and what is being reviled is a matter of some debate. Schreiner suggests, arguing from parallel passages (e.g., Rom 2:24), that exploitation of liberties by the strong can "become an occasion for the reviling or despising of the gospel by outsiders."<sup>51</sup> In light of the context (in which "outsiders" are not in view) and structure (in which the "doing of good" is the object of βλασφημέω, not God or the gospel), Moo's suggestion that it is the "weak" who are reviling the exploitation of liberties of the "strong" (and perhaps the "strong" themselves) seems more plausible.<sup>52</sup> Whatever the case, Schreiner's observation that "Paul's primary concern...remains the glory of God" should not be lost.<sup>53</sup> When the church disintegrates into a mass of mutual revilement and ill will, it loses sight of its purpose offered later in this section: "To be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:5–6).

Here, then, is the climax of the passage and the centerpiece of Paul's concern: the glory of God in the whole church. And such glory does not come, Paul infers, from the individual voices of church members that are out of sorts with one another. It does not come from the individual voices of some church members who are running roughshod over the weaknesses of others. And it surely does not come from the hollow voice of the "weak" man who, out of a desire to "fit in" actually

<sup>50</sup>This term, properly translated as "blaspheme" when it has a divine object, has the more vapid sense of "reviling" when it takes a human, or in this case, an *impersonal* object (see, e.g., BDAG, s.v. "βλασφημέω," p. 178).

<sup>51</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 740; so also Barrett, *Romans*, p. 243; Morris, *Romans*, p. 488; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:717. It may also be noted that this is Paul's chief concern in the semi-parallel exhortations in 1 Corinthians 8–10.

<sup>52</sup>Moo, *Romans*, pp. 855–56; so also Byrne, *Romans*, p. 420.

<sup>53</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 740.

“condemns himself by what he approves” (14:22). God desires to be worshipped, but he desires a worship that is marked by both unity and integrity.

Thence follows in 15:7–13 a fitting conclusion to this pericope specifically and also to the book as a whole.<sup>54</sup> In it Paul reiterates a theme that appears frequently throughout the letter—the successful amalgamation of both Jews and Gentiles into the newly founded body of Christ. Such a merger was not an easy one, and there were many interpersonal factors weighing against its success. But Paul points out sagely that there were two overwhelming factors that commended it: (1) Christ’s example and (2) the fact that the driving factor here was not interpersonal fondness but the mutual praise of God. And though the circumstances that occasioned this letter have passed, the church has much to glean from these observations even today.

### THE PRESENT-DAY APPLICATION OF PAUL’S EXHORTATIONS IN ROMANS 14.1–15.13

Having ascertained carefully the identity of the “weak” and “strong,” the nature of the problem in Romans 14–15, and the essence of Paul’s solution, we come now to the issue with which this article began—the application of this passage to the present day and specifically to the current milieu of fundamentalism. As we have seen, the occasion for this section is extremely specific and has very few parallels in today’s church. As such, we must use ingenuity and yet caution as we seek to determine what present-day applications may and may not be legitimately drawn from this section.

#### Illegitimate Applications of Romans 14.1–15.13

Misapplication of this passage typically begins with the misidentification of the “strong” and the “weak.” As we have noted, the “weak” are *not* simply people that have strict personal standards of conduct. As Cranfield points out, there is nothing in this passage to inform those who voluntarily eschew what is intrinsically “clean” with the goal of “disciplining the body and...bringing it under control.”<sup>55</sup> There is simply no room for using “weak” as a descriptor for Christians

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<sup>54</sup>As noted above, commentators are divided whether 15:7–13 should be regarded as a broad conclusion for 14:1–15:6 (e.g., Moo, *Romans*, p. 874; Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 753) or whether 15:7 is to be regarded as a succinct conclusion to this section and 15:8–13 as part of a conclusion for the whole book (e.g., Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, pp. 844–45). Romans 15:8–13 highlights the recurring theme in Romans of the successful transition from the old order to the new, of which 14:1–15:7 reflects one aspect, so the latter understanding is surely plausible. Syntactical and rhetorical markers, however, seem to favor the former interpretation. The decision is not ultimately determinative to any conclusions on this article.

<sup>55</sup>Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:693.

(fundamentalist or otherwise) who place extra-biblical fences between themselves and sin in the interest of “making no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts” (Rom 13:14). Such practices are not manifestations of “weakness” in a Romans 14 sense, but instead expressions of wisdom. They show a wary acquaintance with the debilitating power of temptation and prudence in thwarting it. It is ludicrous at best and downright dangerous at worst to use these verses to dismiss cautious believers with a heightened sense of self-distrust as “weak,” and celebrate incautious and permissive believers as “strong.” This simply is not Paul’s point.

It is not even Paul’s point to chasten those who “impose” extra-biblical strictures on others in the interest of protecting vulnerable believers in their care. Certainly we err in placing such strictures on par with Scripture (Matt 15:9) or in regarding violations of these strictures as “sins.” But there is nothing in this text to suggest that a parent is “weak” if he places controls on internet usage in the home or that a Christian school administrator is “weak” if he establishes institutional codes of dress or conduct.<sup>56</sup> Even the imposition of such strictures in a church covenant is not weakness in the Pauline sense.<sup>57</sup> Of course, such practices are open to abuse and even to the absurd. However, at the heart of most conduct codes of this nature is not “weakness” or “legalism,” but an admirable desire to *uphold* the spirit of Romans 14–15 by eschewing practices that might result in “stumbling.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Indeed, borrowing a statement from another context, “Even sinners do that!” (Luke 6:33, NIV).

<sup>57</sup>One is reminded, for instance, of countless church covenants that forbid “the sale and use of intoxicating drinks” (see, e.g., the covenant of my own church, Inter-City Baptist Church of Allen Park, Michigan, available at <http://www.intercity.org/pdf/bylaws.pdf>) and other practices such as smoking, abusing drugs, gambling, or viewing pornography—practices that are condemned by no explicit biblical text, but which are, to a greater or lesser extent, regarded by a great many churches as imprudent and/or vile practices.

<sup>58</sup>Note well that it is the *spirit* of Romans 14–15 to which I appeal here, and not the actual command. As Moo correctly notes, the “weak” “are not ‘weak’ in respect to handling alcohol; they are ‘weak’ in respect to their faith (14:1). And Paul urges the ‘strong’ to abstain, not because their example might lead the ‘weak’ to drink in excess but because their example might lead the ‘weak’ to drink and so violate their conscience (14:22–23)” (Moo, *Romans*, p. 881). As such, the examples of parental internet controls, institutional dress codes, and strict church covenants are not directly addressed here—these deal with a different kind of “weakness” entirely. Nonetheless, they *do* conform to Paul’s expectation that the believer should guard the spiritual welfare of his Christian brothers and refrain from introducing them to practices and correlate temptations, which Paul notes could “destroy” them.

There are, of course, potential hazards against which one must guard in creating extra-biblical rules in any given context—they can, if unchecked, lead to a Pharisaical confusion of the teachings of men and teachings of God (Matt 15:9); they can breed self-righteousness; they can breed a theological lethargy that trusts a code rather than true Christian vigilance in the sanctification process; they can even extend Christian

Finally, it is not Paul's intent to speak to diverse interpretations and opinions about texts and other religious matters. This passage does not teach individual soul liberty, i.e., the freedom of each believer to interpret Scripture and to practice his faith apart from the restraints of secular or ecclesiastical magisteria.<sup>59</sup> Instead, Paul is speaking narrowly to the NT believer's newfound liberty from Mosaic restrictions that had not yet been fully accepted by all.

The search for a precise connection of the injunctions of Romans 14 with the cultural milieu of today's church, it would seem, comes up very nearly (and possibly entirely) empty. Of course, we may find Christian vegetarians today, but this idiosyncrasy is generally due to peculiar dietary views or an excessive sympathy for animals—not a belief that Mosaic restrictions against certain meats are still in vogue. Teetotalism is strong in fundamentalist circles, but this is due to factors such as civic pressure, avoidance of drunkenness, disturbing changes in the production of alcoholic beverages, and cultural advances that render alcohol consumption unnecessary and imprudent—not fidelity to the Mosaic Law.<sup>60</sup> And even the practice of observing special days, which Moo identifies as the “only real parallel” of Romans 14–15 to the present day,<sup>61</sup> is a somewhat strained parallel.<sup>62</sup> In short, except in isolated pockets of the church where Jews are being actively evangelized, this passage has little and perhaps no *direct* applicability to today's church.

### Legitimate Applications of Romans 14.1–15.13

If, then, the occasion for Paul's injunctions in Romans 14–15 is past, what principles may be drawn from the passage and applied to the present day? Well, in keeping with the headings under which I discussed Paul's commands, it would seem that the passage has at its heart vigilance in the interests of the spiritual health of the whole body, so that the whole church worships God in unity and integrity. In short, it is the responsibility of all believers to do whatever is necessary

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adolescence by postponing the development of the Christian discipline of decision-making. These potential hazards all cry out for the supplementation of such rules with guidance and instruction to guard against abuse; they do not, however, call automatically for the abandonment of rules...and neither does Paul.

<sup>59</sup>This Baptist “distinctive” is a worthy one that merits a robust defense—but it is not Paul's point here.

<sup>60</sup>See the comments in Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 736, and Moo, *Romans*, p. 881.

<sup>61</sup>Moo, *Romans*, p. 881.

<sup>62</sup>The only “special day” observed today that has any connection at all to the Mosaic Code is the Sabbath. And very few modern-day “Sabbatarians” are really “Sabbatarian” at all, but “Sundayarian.” Further, many of these do not observe the day out of fidelity to the Mosaic code, but out of fidelity to a broader “creation principle.”

to keep a brother from either *sinning* or *intending to sin* and thus despoiling the integrity of his worship. To this end, the passage calls in principle, for the restriction of personal rights, whether real or perceived.<sup>63</sup>

The passage also calls on believers to pursue peace with one another (14:19) and seek to please one another (15:2). More narrowly (and contrary to many popular and casual appeals to this passage) the onus for this injunction falls expressly on *permissive* believers, not *strict* ones. In short, Paul calls for a peace that is built on the restriction and not the expansion of individual liberties. Paul expresses no concern in Romans 14–15 for the more libertarian believer who is being pressured to *stop* doing what he thinks is *right*. Instead, Paul's concern is for the stringent believer who is being pressured to *start* doing what he thinks is *wrong*. The former may experience annoyance, but the latter commits sin, and Paul is infinitely more concerned about sin than he is petty annoyances. Admittedly, the pursuit of peace and unity is the responsibility of all. But it is notable that, in principle at least, Paul does not call on strict believers to "loosen up" for the sake of peace and unity; he calls on permissive believers to "tighten up" for the sake of peace and unity.

## CONCLUSION

Fundamentalism has traditionally erred more by restricting Christian liberties unduly than by expanding them to excess. And we must be frank in our admission that some fundamentalists have *truly erred* in this matter. Paul is clearly on the side of liberty and advocates the thankful enjoyment of all of God's gifts...so long as that enjoyment is not at the expense of the unity, spiritual health, and integrity of the body of Christ. And it is in view of this caveat that Paul, in Romans 14:1–15:13, instructs all believers to be circumspect in the enjoyment of their liberties and even to promptly abandon them not only for the sake of the "weak," but by logical extension for the sake of any believer who might sin and thus despoil his worship as a result of some careless

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<sup>63</sup>As noted above, the passage calls most narrowly for the relinquishment of liberties *explicitly* stated in Scripture (which I have labeled "real" rights). By argument from the greater to the lesser, however, it seems quite legitimate to suggest that believers be willing to relinquish "liberties" either *inferred* from Scripture or *assumed* apart from Scripture (which I have labeled "perceived" rights). In fact, I should be even *more* willing to relinquish the latter because of their more tenuous identity as "rights." I might be convinced by some Scripture inference that it is acceptable to play cards or relax with a good movie, but these are not rights worth fighting over, and they surely should not be maintained to the spiritual detriment of my brother.

This does *not* mean that all Christians need to revert to the strictest common denominator and automatically give up movies, playing cards, etc., etc., merely because a single believer adheres to such strictures. However, it does mean that we should be *willing* to forfeit these perceived rights if continuance in them would cause a brother to violate his conscience, sin against God, and thus pollute his worship.

expression of Christian liberty. And in this matter fundamentalism has often enjoyed great success. Far from violating the spirit of Romans 14–15 and exhibiting “weakness” with their restrictions of liberty, fundamentalists have in fact honored the spirit of this passage, exhibiting obedience and wisdom through their restrictions of liberty. Has fundamentalism ever erred in this matter? Oh, yes. But the fundamentalist heritage of rigorous conservatism, expressed in the restriction of liberty, is squarely in keeping with the expectations of Paul in Romans 14–15, and should not be viewed as a cause for embarrassment.