

## Notes on Romans 14

This is a synopsis with minor modifications and additions of the relevant section of NT Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*: New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002).

### B. Unity Across Custom and Ethnic Identity 14.1–15.13

Rm 14.1–15.13 is a single section, and its final paragraph (15.7-13) also serves as the concluding paragraph for the major theological work not only of Rm 12–15 but of the letter as a whole (only greetings and a discussion of Paul's ambassadorial travel plans remain after that). Rm 15.12 will echo 1.3-5 (Jesus as the risen Messiah, the Lord of the whole world), and the word 'welcome' (*proslambanesthe*) in 15.7 makes 15.7-13 a summary and celebration of what 14.1 introduced with the same word— together with 14.3 and 15.7b, these are the only times Paul uses this word other than Phm 17.

Nowhere between 14.1 and 15.6 does Paul use the words 'Jew' and 'Gentile', or 'circumcised' and 'uncircumcised'. Perhaps ethnicity and circumcision were not issues *as such* in Rome, as they were in Galatia. But he does discuss opinions that people have on food, drink, and calendar. He insists in detail on the need for patience and love rather than straining one another's consciences. He speaks of the 'strong' and the 'weak'; he sees himself as one of the 'strong', but his eventual argument (15.1-6) is that the 'strong' should follow the example of the Messiah and not 'please themselves'.

In 15.7-13 Paul does finally speak of 'the circumcision' (15.8) and of 'the Gentiles' (15.9), and then concludes the entire section with a string of scriptural quotations that celebrate the fact that Gentiles are coming to join the people of the one God, under the worldwide rule of Israel's Messiah. At this point we are obviously back on the map of Rm 1–11. It seems that the divisions in Rome's churches have *something* to do with the Jewish/Gentile tension (even if it's not about ethnicity as such) that has been underneath so much of the letter, although the

'weak' are not necessarily Jewish Christians, nor the 'strong' Gentile Christians; Paul is himself a Jewish Christian and one of the 'strong'; and Galatians shows us that Gentile Christians might well be 'weak'. But disagreement has arisen, threatening to break up the united worship of the one God by all peoples, and this seems to stem from the continuing influence of the *Torah* within parts of the Christian community.<sup>1</sup> But to mention ethnic labels before the final summary paragraph would have given the wrong impression, because ethnic fault-lines were apparently not at issue, given that there were both 'strong' and 'weak' Jews and Gentiles. To point to ethnicity too early would have brought about the very thing he wanted to avoid. Paul wanted to insist that people from all sides should live and especially worship together.

All the people Paul has in mind in 14.1–15.13 are Christians (unlike Rm 11, where he is speaking of Jewish non-Christians). They all give allegiance to Jesus as Lord, a point he makes pivotal in 14.1-12; they all believe themselves to be sharing in the life of God's regime (14.17) and the service of the Messiah (14.18; 15.5,5-6). They have a duty to one another because they are all brothers and sisters for whom the Messiah died (14.15). This section isn't about how Christians should live with their non-Christian Jewish neighbors in Rome. These are instructions for the church. Rm 12-13 laid the foundation and Rm 14-15 now build on it.

We don't know as much about the church as Paul did. He assumes a lot that we can't even guess. The fact that

<sup>1</sup> Horace (*Satires* 1.9.71) describes how a fellow poet, Fuscus Aristius, refuses to talk business on a sabbath day for fear of offending the Jews, saying there are many others like him who have such scruples and are thus 'weaker' (*infirmior*). Those insisting on Jewish regulations might well be Gentiles, while Jews like Paul and his friends might not be so concerned.

he writes such a substantial and closely argued section of the letter oriented toward this topic, in the light of the spare and brief comments on several major matters in Rm 12-13, is a strong indication that he believed he was addressing a real, not a theoretical or merely possible, problem. His basic appeal to 'welcome one another' implies that the church was divided into various groups, probably each meeting in a separate small gathering, a different house, with mutual suspicions or even antipathies. It may be that the problem became acute when the Jews who had been expelled five or six years earlier by Claudius returned to Rome after Nero's accession. Christians like Paul's Jewish friends Prisca and Aquila (16.3-5; cf Ac 18.2-3), who had to live elsewhere for a while, were doubtless among the 'strong' like Paul; but the tensions between different groups who regarded some practices as mandatory and others as irrelevant, was bound only to increase under the circumstances. We can speculate that something like the personality cults reflected in 1Co 1-4 and the 'super-apostles' and/or the 'false apostles', whoever they were, mentioned in 2Co, may have emerged in Rome as well. Evidently several different Christian groups were meeting in Rome, with a spectrum of opinions. Paul is addressing all of them, and using this opportunity to promote unity.

The tensions we see in this section are similar to those we find in 1Co 8-10, but with significant differences. The problem in Corinth seems to have been primarily, in Witherington's choice phrase, the question of venue rather than of menu.<sup>2</sup> Granted that it was legitimate, other things being equal, to eat meat sold in the market even though it had probably been offered to an idol as a sacrifice, it was not legitimate for Christians to go into the idol's temple itself and take part in the cult, or its meals or other practices. This doesn't seem to be at issue in Rome, or at least Paul doesn't allude to the fact that Christians are being tempted to visit idol temples. But the question of whether to eat meat, and the discussion of how to avoid offending the conscience of a fellow Christian, joins the two discussions together. It's not unlike the different discussions of justification, of the promises to Abraham, and so forth, in Galatians, where a different but related situation causes Paul to draw on the same stock of ideas, producing overlap but not identity.

Rm 14.1–15.13 divides into three main segments:

14.1-12 The weak and the strong

- 14.1 Welcome one another
- 14.2-4 Not judging each other over food
- 14.5-6 Not judging each other over calendar
- 17.7-9 We don't live for ourselves but for the Lord
- 14.10-12 There is One Lord of all
- 14.13-23 How to cope when sides agree not to condemn each other
  - 14.13 Don't judge each other, but judge how not to trip each other up
  - 14.14-19 Different consciences, different demands
  - 14.20-23 Pursue peace and upbuilding
- 15.1-13 Mutual welcome in the Messiah, in the praise of the one God
  - 15.1-6 The Messiah leads the way, 'not pleasing himself'
  - 15.7-8 Mutual welcome, based on the Messiah's welcome
  - 15.9-13 The praise of God, as Scripture says.

**1. The weak and the strong 14.1-12**

**a. Welcome one another 14.1**

Paul launches without transition from his broad general statement of Christian obligation into a very specific topic: 'As for the one who is weak as regards faith...'— and his command is very abrupt: Welcome such a person. He seems to presuppose that this has not been happening.

Paul assumes that most of those reading or hearing this letter are, like him, 'strong' in the sense soon to be developed. The 'weak' are perhaps a minority; perhaps not even whole groups, but individuals within groups. They must be made welcome, and this means not disputing about 'distinctions' (*diakriseis*) and 'reasonings' (*dialogismous*). The range of meaning of the two words is such that the phrase could mean 'disputes about disputes,' and perhaps that's more or less what he means.

**b. Not judging each other over food 14.2-4**

The first instance Paul gives contains almost all the elements of the whole first paragraph:

- (1) naming the disputed area (*what* one may eat, i.e., kosher laws; note also Ga 2.11-14, where the issue is *whom* one may eat *with*);

<sup>2</sup> B.W. Witherington, 'Not So Idle Thoughts About *Eidolothuton*', *Tyn-Bull* 44 (1993) 237-54.

- (2) commanding both sides to back off from passing judgment, on the grounds of God's welcome of the other;
- (3) warning against 'condemning';
- (4) invoking the lordship of Jesus, and declaring that Jesus will vindicate either or both parties.

In Antioch, Peter, Barnabas, and others had originally eaten with Gentile Christians, but had separated themselves after 'certain persons came from James' (Ga 2.11-14). This is not an identical issue, but it belongs in the same family of disputes, at the center of which lay the centuries-old Jewish taboos regarding food, both what to eat, how to prepare it, and with whom and in what condition to eat it. Like any deep cultural issue, it would emerge in different forms in different situations, but always with family resemblance; and it is not difficult to imagine the context of the present warning. It seems most Christians in Rome were happy to eat non-kosher food, or to eat meat bought in a market though it had almost certainly been offered in sacrifice to an idol; but for some, this was unthinkable. And if in the Messiah God had been faithful to the *covenant*, if the Messiah was the goal of the *Torah*, how could Torah's dietary restrictions be set aside so easily?

Paul taught that when Jesus had fulfilled God's Torah, he had inaugurated a new Age in which the goodness and God-giveness of Torah were not denied, but those injunctions which related to the period when God's people were just one ethnic nation (see esp. Ga 3.15-29) were now set aside. If there was to be separateness, it was to be based on faith and purity of life, not diet (and, in the next subsection, calendar).

The NRSV's 'Some people believe in eating anything' (14.2) is misleading because it implies that (a) 'being able to eat anything' is what they believe in, whereas Paul surely means that they think they can eat 'anything' because their faith in what God has brought about in the Messiah permits eating 'anything' (kosher or not) as its corollary. One person believes s/he can eat everything, while another only eats vegetables because kosher meat was not available and the risk of partaking of idol sacrifices too great.

So far, Paul is just reporting that some Christians— himself included— have the settled conviction that there are no food taboos that separate Jews from Gentiles in God's regime, nor that the church is a society separate from others *regarding diet*. And he says, 'let the one who eats not despise the one who doesn't' (14.3a)— this is the basic command that governs the whole discussion.

This 'welcome' that he commands in 14.1 is not just a matter of social courtesy. 'God has welcomed' both eaters and non-eaters (14.3b), and that is why they are to 'welcome' each other (14.1). That God himself has extended his 'welcome' was his whole point way back in 3.21-5.11: being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Messiah, through whom we have received access to this grace in which we stand (5.2). None of this is far below the surface, and it will emerge in 14.17, when Paul defines 'God's regime' in terms that exactly summarize 5.1-5.

In 14.4 he personalizes the point: for one slave to look down on another is just inappropriate. His/her own master will be the judge, and will see whether s/he stands or falls. 'Standing' or 'falling' mean 'being vindicated' or 'being condemned', but 'being made to stand' (*stēsai*, 14.4b) is also a way of speaking about resurrection (see Ep 5.14; also Rm 11.20; 1Co 10.12). The Lord is 'able' (*dynatei*) to make the slave 'stand'— 'he is able' is the verb form of 'power' (*dynamis*), a word that Paul uses to describe how God raised Jesus (see, e.g., 1.4; 1Co 6.14)— and at the same time, the root of his word 'strong' (*dynatos*), which he applies to those who, like himself, believe they can eat anything. *Let's not forget where our strength comes from*. We must understand the present non-judging life of the community within its eschatological frame of reference.

### c. Not judging each other over calendar 14.5-6

The observation of special days is a second issue (14.5-6). 'Judging one day above another' most likely refers to the Jewish festival days. In view of the fact that he apparently observed them himself (cf Ac 20.16), it's interesting that he doesn't refer to the sabbath anywhere, but he does mention the 'first day of the week',<sup>3</sup> 1Co 16.22, the day of the resurrection, the day when Christians met for the breaking of bread (cf Ac 20.7).<sup>4</sup>

It might seem like Paul's open attitude here contradicts his strong condemnation of the Galatians for observing 'days, and months, and seasons, and years' (Ga 4.10)— that by adopting Jewish practices, they were effectively reverting to a variety of paganism. This is the same apparent tension that we find between his open attitude toward circumcision and uncircumcision in 1Co 7 and his strong condemnation, throughout Galatians, of Gentiles getting circumcised. But the tension is only superficial. The Romans were not thinking they had to become Jews in order to be part of Abraham's family. Rather, they

<sup>3</sup> What we call 'sunday', although the first day of the week did not acquire that name till later.

<sup>4</sup> Mt 28.1; Mk 14.12; 16.2,9; Lk 24.1; Jn 20.1,19.

were tempted to look down on non-Christian Jews—that was the whole discussion in Rm 9–11—and on Christians who believed it was important to keep to the ‘works of the Torah’ (the discussion here). The ‘weak’, of course, might themselves judge the ‘strong’ for being ‘too liberal’ or some such, but the main problem Paul is addressing seems to be that the ‘strong’ are looking down on the ‘weak’, the ‘traditionalists’ (as it were).

Paul’s principle here, which will become more important as the chapter proceeds, is that everyone should be fully convinced in their own mind. If observing the day, eating or not eating, etc is done ‘for the Lord’ — the sign of which is giving thanks to God— then there should be no cause for complaint (14.6).

**d. We don’t live for ourselves  
but for the Lord 14.7-9**

Paul explains the argument so far by grounding it in the very heart of the good news. Rm 14.7 starts with ‘because’ (*gar*), and states the principle, then explains this in turn (*gar*) by 14.8, and this again with *gar* in 14.9. The essential point is that everything Christians do is done, not in relation to themselves alone, but in relation to the Lord. To ‘live for oneself,’ the position Paul rules out in 14.7, is to order one’s life in relation solely to one’s own background, culture, desires, and wishes. These may not be wrong in themselves, but everything must be judged in relation to the Lord himself (see the parallels to this idea in 2Co 5.15; Ga 2.19–20). We’re still in the metaphor of masters and servants here, but by mentioning living and dying, Paul comes to the deepest explanation of the whole business: The Messiah died and lived in order to rule as Lord over dead and living alike (14.9). This proves more than Paul needs to prove for the immediate argument, but it points, as we shall see, to the larger issue that stands behind the entire section. The good news announcement that Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is the Lord of the whole world is the reason for unity across the barriers of custom and taboo.

**e. There is One Lord of all 14.10-12**

The argument has developed through the discussion of practical matters, but the underlying principle has been about God and the Lord. God welcomes all believers (14.3); the Lord will make them stand (14.4); the Lord is the one before whom all is done (14.6), especially when thanks are offered (*eucharistei*) to God (14.6). The Lord is the one for whom we live or die, to whom we belong, because the Messiah died and rose to become the Lord of all (14.8–9).

This underlying sequence now reaches its climax in what begins as another rhetorical question about condemning or despising, but is actually a statement of the final

judgment (compare 2.1–16 and 2Co 5.10), backed up by a passage from Isaiah that was obviously of vital significance to him. ‘You, there! and, yes, you too!’ (14.10–12)— he addresses one who is judging and another who is despising (compare 14.3). As they squabble, they need to look up: the judgment seat (*bēma*) belongs to none other than God. All disputes over inessentials are irrelevant (14.12).

Paul’s language here also calls to mind the whole of Rm 2, which began, ‘Therefore you are inexcusable, O human, everyone who goes around judging... And do you think, O human, who go around judging people who practice things like that, and doing the same, that you will escape God’s judgment?’ (2.1,3).

Between the statement of 14.10 and the conclusion of 14.12, Paul quotes Isa 45.23 (‘to me every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall swear to God’, 4.11). This is introduced by ‘As I live, says the LORD’, a phrase that appears only four times in the OT,<sup>5</sup> but not in Isa 45.23; its rarity makes it seem specific, and of the four occurrences, Isa 49.18 is often cited as the background here— but it’s not clear why. However, the phrase always introduces a judgment, and ‘as I live’ picks up how the Messiah ‘died and lived’ in 14.9; which living is, again, why and how he’s now installed as judge. Also, ‘Lord’ (*kyrios*) is no longer just a name for God, because Jesus, the risen Messiah, is in fact the judge, and Paul has already attributed the title (God’s title!) to him several times. (For ‘resurrection, therefore Messiah,’ see 1.3–4; 15.12; for ‘resurrection, therefore judge,’ see 2.16; Ac 10.42; 17.31; for ‘Messiah, therefore judge,’ see Psalms 2; 72; *Pss. Sol.* 17; 2Tm 4.1.) In other words, from an OT speech about God, this quotation again applies to the *Messiah* both ‘Lord’ (*kyrios*) and ‘God’ (*theos*). And in doing so, it emphasizes the universal sovereignty of the God of *Israel*, exercised in and through the risen Messiah and Lord. This goes way beyond the present argument to Paul’s underlying agenda (more about this in a moment).

Paul is once again linking his argument to the theme of Isaiah 40–55, suggesting that his readers should understand their present position in terms of that overall story of the unveiling of God’s righteousness through the strange work of the Servant. They are the people for whom the promises— and now the responsibilities!— are coming true.

Paul initially highlights ‘faith’ in 14.12, and returns to it in 14.22–23. ‘Faith’ has been a major theme in the letter so far, especially in 3.21–4.25 and 9.30–10.21, but it might seem as if Rm 14 had little to do with what he’s been

<sup>5</sup> Nm 14.28; Isa 49.18; Jr 22.24; Zp 2.9.

talking about in those earlier sections. After all, how does 'having faith that one can eat anything' (14.1-2) even though others are 'weak in faith' regarding this, have to do with accepting that God had raised Jesus from the dead and confessing him as Lord (10.9; cf 4.24-25)? But the first major argument of the section (14.1-12) has hinged at every point on the fact that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead. The word 'Lord' (*kyrios*, or the cognate verb) occurs no fewer than 10 times in 14.4-11. The heart of the passage, 14.9, declared that the reason the Messiah died and rose was to become Lord of both dead and living; and this gave rise, as in 2.1-16, to a statement of God's future judgment at which everything will be put right.

So— Jesus is the crucified and risen Lord of all, and both weak and strong face the judgment together and must work out their present status in the light of that (4.12). This is, in fact, another variation on the theme of Rm 3-4 and 9-10. As we learn from the first time 'justification by faith' occurred in Paul's writings (Ga 2.11-21), part of what this means is that all who believe in Jesus as the risen Lord should be able to eat together despite cultural and ethnic differences.

So 'faith' really does mean here what it meant elsewhere in Romans. Those who are 'weak in the faith' may not be wobbling over whether they believe in Jesus' resurrection and lordship, but like those with a weak *conscience* in 1Co 8, they haven't worked out its full implications. They need to do so, but Paul knows that people can't be hurried on some issues and, provided they share the basic faith itself, their relative 'strength' or 'weakness' shouldn't hinder Christian fellowship. 'Justification by faith' includes 'fellowship by faith' as one of its key elements— particularly when the church offers its 'thanksgiving' (*eucharistia*, cf 14.6). All who believe the good news of Jesus the risen Messiah and Lord are in one family. Like the later canons of the church, Paul's 'practical instructions' in Rm 14-15 are based on his deep and detailed theology of justification. He's saying, This is what justification by faith looks like when you sit down at table in Christian fellowship. And this ultimately poses a challenge to the surrounding pagan culture itself.

In these practical instructions, Paul is pointing out two implications of his bigger picture for the potentially divided Roman church:

On the positive side, he wants to assure them that they are truly an outpost of the coming great empire of Jesus himself, the world's true Lord. In Rome as elsewhere in Caesar's territory (including colonies like Philippi and Corinth, and centers of imperial cult like Ephesus), Paul is intent on maintaining communities, united in loyalty to

Jesus as Lord, right under the nose of Caesar, who prided himself on maintaining in the world a unity of peoples under his own rule as Lord. The unity of Christians across traditional barriers is a sign to the principalities and powers both heavenly and earthly that a greater rule than theirs has now begun (see, e.g., Ga 4.1-11; Eph 3.10). Maintaining that unity, then, is not just a matter of the kind of good manners that will keep squabbles and bad feeling out of the church. It's part of essential Christian witness to the one Lord. If the church divides along lines related to ethnic or tribal loyalty, it's still living in the world of Caesar.

On the negative side, squabbles over the implications of the gospel could inflame tensions between Jewish and Christian communities in Rome, which could give Caesar an excuse for persecution; memories of the expulsion of the Jews under Claudius were still recent. Differences of cultural practice within the church should not be allowed to give Caesar a chance to exercise his delegated authority in the wrong way.

Each Christian, then, will have to give an account of him/herself to God. There's no tension in Paul's mind between this and 8.1, where there's no condemnation for those who are in the Messiah. He has already indicated in 2.1-16 that there will be a coming day when all will be judged; the fact that the Christian believer is assured of a favorable verdict on that day doesn't make it any less serious, as 1Co 3.10-17 indicates well enough. But in the light of the coming judgment we have no business judging one another ahead of the time. Indeed, condemning others is itself an offense for which one should be rebuked (cf 2.1ff).

Underneath the whole argument, as a theme at first almost out of sight but emerging gradually until it becomes clear and central in the closing verses, is Paul's insistence that if Jesus is Lord, Caesar isn't. The repeated reference to Jesus as Lord throughout 14.4-8 opens this theme. Regarding 'slaves' (14.4), anyone in Rome would know who the ultimate master was supposed to be. But the Messiah has died and lived in order to rule as 'Lord' over dead and living alike (14.9), and reference now to God's tribunal places God and Caesar in explicit competition. And when Paul then quotes Isa 45.23, he certainly intends the Caesar reference.<sup>6</sup> Paul has said much more than he would need if he only wanted to show that differences of customs are irrelevant when God has welcomed everyone, and that judging one another is inap-

<sup>6</sup> As also in Ph 2.10-11, not least because of the link with Ph 3.20-21, where it's explicit. See N.T. Wright, 'Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire,' in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*, ed. R.A. Horsley (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 2000) 160-83 (also available online at [www.ntwrightpage.com](http://www.ntwrightpage.com)).

appropriate in view of God's coming judgment. Paul is emphasizing that the regime to which those in the Messiah belong is superior to, and in fact replaces, that of Caesar. Subsequent similar hints (14.17; 15.12) offer further confirmation.

But why is Paul saying this, in this context? For one thing, tensions between Jewish and Christian communities in Rome could give Caesar an excuse for persecution; memories of the expulsion of the Jews under Claudius were still recent. Differences of cultural practice within the church should not be allowed to give cause for Caesar to have to exercise his *delegated* authority over them. But more importantly, Rome's churches truly are outposts of the great empire of Jesus himself, the world's true Lord. In Rome as elsewhere in Caesar's territory, Paul is supporting communities united in loyalty to Jesus as Lord right under Caesar's nose, who prided himself on maintaining in the world a unity of peoples under his own rule as lord. The unity of Christians across traditional barriers is a sign to the principalities and powers both in the skies and on earth that a greater rule than theirs has now begun (see, e.g., Ga 4.1-11; Ep 3.10). Christian unity isn't just about preventing squabbles and bad feelings. It's part of our Christian witness to the one Lord. If the church divides ethnic or tribal loyalties, it's still under Caesar's regime.

## 2. Conscience and God's Regime: How to cope in practice 14.13-23

This paragraph divides into two segments that cover the same ground from slightly different angles, as each unpacks 14.13 in its own way:

- In 14.14-18 Even things that are not unclean in themselves become so if someone believes them to be, and that this could mean ruin for someone lured into going against conscience.
- In 14.19-21 Avoid things that make a fellow Christian trip up.

Then the last two verses form a conclusion (14.22-23).

### a. Judge how not to make someone stumble 14.13

Rm 14.13 introduces the positive side of Paul's exhortation and forms a bridge between the first and second of the three parts of Rm 14.1-15.13 as a whole. All right, says Paul: if you're so keen on judging, judge how to avoid making life hard for each other!<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This is completely obscured in the NIV and NRSV. The KJV keeps Paul's verbal flourish ('let us not judge one another... but judge this rather').

### b. 14.14-18

In 14.14a, and again in 14.20b, Paul insists that all foods are 'clean'. This early Christian belief must have been hard to hammer out and maintain, since it appears numerous times in the NT.<sup>8</sup> Paul says here that he 'knows', and has been 'persuaded' of this 'in the Lord Jesus'.

The idea that what is clean can be unclean just because you think it is makes it important to make up one's own mind and act accordingly. People mature at different rates and we can't force them to accept positions they can't in conscience allow. We actually harm people when we try to do this (14.15), and that's a failure in the basic Christian virtue of love (13.8-10). The word 'because' (*gar*) at the start of 14.15 (omitted in most translations; even KJV has 'but' instead of 'for') indicates that Paul is *explaining*— not what he said in 14.14 ('nothing is profane by itself')— but what he said in 14.13, 'don't judge each other'. Acting in a 'strong' way can even cause a fellow Christian's 'destruction,' despite the fact that the Messiah died for them (cf also 1Co 8.10-13). One could risk betraying a 'weak' person into some acceptance of idolatry, and jeopardize their allegiance to Jesus altogether. This would put the 'strong' Christian at odds with the Messiah himself, who had given his life for them. Something may seem 'good' to you, but the weaker Christian may curse it— and you as well (14.16).

Paul explains this with one of his rare statements about God's 'regime' (*basileuō*, the verb form of *basileia*, 'reign', 14.17-18).<sup>9</sup> 'God's regime' is not an expression he uses very often, even though the theme is often present; in this case he clearly has the discussion of 'grace reigning' in 5.12-21 in mind. There, he was speaking of Adam and the Messiah and of those who receive grace as a free gift, over against the reign of sin (see 5.14,17,21; cf 6.12,14). That passage was one of Paul's central statements of the entire Christian worldview and narrative, and played a major role in the structure of Rm 5-8 and hence of the letter as a whole. So Paul's definition of God's regime here in 14.17 forms a tight summary of 5.1-5: God's kingdom doesn't mean food and drink, but 'righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit'. This would be Paul's own link from the present practical issues to the central theological matters discussed above, and a shorthand account of what he thought 'God's regime' was all about. God's regime isn't a 'spiritual', as opposed to 'worldly' one; 5.12-21 is all about the rule of sin and the rule of grace, the two powers that compete for every cubic inch of creation at every moment of time.

<sup>8</sup> Mt 15.11,17-20; Mk 7.18-19; Ac 10.15,28; 11.9; Titus 1.15.

<sup>9</sup> Other Pauline mentions of God's regime: 1Co 4.20; 6.9-10; 15.24,50; Ga 5.21; Ep 5.5; Col 1.13; 4.11; 1Th 2.12; 2Th 1.5; 2Tm 4.1,18

So if 5.1-5 is threatened even by something good, then whatever poses the threat must take second place. Rm 14.17 explains 14.15-16 (*gar*): you must not cause your fellow Christian to suffer, possibly even to be lost altogether, by what you eat, because 5.1-5 ('justified... peace... joy... Holy Spirit') is the most important thing there is, and food and drink, by comparison, rate nowhere on the same scale.

This is the way to behave, he says in a final explanation of the sequence of thought (*gar* again, 14.18): you are serving the Messiah, the king, and if you do so with his kingdom as your priority (see Mt 6.33) you will be, as 12.2 insisted, 'well-pleasing' to God. What is more, other people will recognize and approve what you have done.

**c. Avoid things that make a fellow Christian trip up 14.19-21**

Paul now puts a second coat of paint on the previous argument. He begins with a summary of the positive aim that one should have in all these things (see too 1Co 14): peace and mutual upbuilding (14.19). This leads to a command that covers again the ground of 14.15, but whereas he there stressed the importance of honoring, and not jeopardizing, the Messiah's achievement in his death, he here emphasizes 'God's work', perhaps meaning not simply God's work in that individual but God's work in creating the church as a whole, which should be built up, as the previous verse says, and not destroyed (cf. 1Co 3.17).

All things are pure. Earlier he pointed out that food became unclean for one who believes it so, but now makes the point that it becomes 'evil' (not just 'unclean') if your eating it makes someone else stumble. The 'strong' might well consider all foods clean, but they have to realize that things can become unclean even for them if it makes a fellow Christian, a 'brother,' that is, a member of God's family, stumble (14.21).

**d. Keep to the faith you have, for what is not of that, is sin 14.22-23**

Paul concludes with another second-person singular address: 'You there!' He returns to 'faith', as in 14.1-2: You must hold the faith you have— that is, the interpretation of faith and its outworking— as a matter between you and God. (Obviously he doesn't mean that whatever private interpretation you come up with is ok, else he would never have bothered to write letters!) Blessings on the one who can make up his or her mind and then have no scruples, no self-judgment, in following it. To 'condemn oneself for what one approves' may either be ironic— some people might 'approve' of something when in fact their conscience condemns them for it— or else he's rubbing in the point of 14.20: you may sincerely approve

it, but you are blessed if, when you go ahead and eat it, you do not have to judge yourself for causing another Christian to stumble.

The concluding verse (14.23) looks back to the first (14.1): Welcome the 'weak,' but not in order to have disputes about disputes. But it also looks back to 4.20-21: Abraham did not 'waver' or 'doubt' in unbelief, but 'grew strong in faith', being 'fully convinced' that God was able to do what he had promised. This echo of the argument that led to 5.1-5, which, as we've seen, is also in Paul's mind here, is hardly accidental. Abraham had good reason to be 'weak,' to doubt whether God could give him a child, but he believed strongly and without wavering. All along, Paul has been talking about something basic to Christian faith.

It's perhaps with Abraham and his type of faith in mind that he makes the sharp distinction that sets such a worryingly high standard for all Christian living. To doubt isn't to sin; but to act on something when one has serious doubts about it is to fall under condemnation, because the action doesn't flow from faith. Everything that isn't of faith is sin. We're either with Abraham or with Adam. We're either living like Abraham in unwavering trust in God and God's promises; or we're turning away from God and living by some other means. It's not just that the weak may be convicted of sin if they eat when they're actually doubting— but that the strong, knowing this, must take care lest they entice the weak into stumbling, and sin against the weak (14.20; cf 1Co 8.12). This complex little analysis of motives, responsibilities, and results is a classic exercise in thinking through demands of love (13.8-10) and humility (12.3-8) within the Christian community.