

**Contentious Disputes in the Church, Romans 14**  
**Romans 14:1-15:7**  
**Jim Fredericks @ JimFredericks.Com**

**SYNOPSIS:** If we approach this crucial passage in Romans 14 on contentious disputes with the question, *“Who’s right?”* we have entirely missed Paul’s purpose. Yes, truth is of utmost importance to Paul (Titus 2:1). Eleven chapters of extraordinary truth prepare these crucial words to impact our faith-communities. One side in the dispute held to obsolete OT teaching. The other correctly held NT truth. Everyone in Christ is *free* to eat anything and hold every day as special. Yet Paul censures those holding *both* positions and describes both as *“weak”* (Romans 14:1-3).

*What could be more important to Paul than truth? How we put truth into practice to foster unity! It’s not what truth we hold, but how we hold the truth that “keeps unity of the Spirit.”*

Truth must be lived out in love, not judgment (13:8-10; John 13:34). If not, our attitudes and actions undermine the very culture of *freedom* Jesus sows in faith-communities. Even if our doctrine is spot-on. **Accept**, welcome and love one another in our differences, just as Christ accepts you (14:1+15:7). Only from mutual acceptance can we initiate honest dialogs that may shift our faith-community towards *unity*. We need *disputes* in the church, so we learn to be non-contentious and thus *“strong.”* The *“strong”* use our strength to temporarily accommodate the *“weak”* in order to provide time and space to best help them grow spiritually (Acts 20:35b).

*Contentious disputes in the church are nothing new. However, how can we embrace Paul’s prescription today with our opportunities to deepen unity and oneness without compromise?*

Embrace Paul’s heart-attitudes and take his admonitions seriously. The breach in *unity* will only widen if we begin with the *“Who’s right?”* of *diversity*. Instead begin where Paul does, with loving attitudes that consider others and launch dialogs on disputes without quarreling. Paul embraces mutual *equality* and respect as the context to celebrate *diversity*, so followers of Jesus make every effort to keep the *unity* of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3).

*A bit of the historical context is crucial to this passage on contentious disputes in the church.*

Emperor Claudius of Rome expelled the Jews around 49AD (Acts 18:2). At that time, the *“Messianic Christians”* led the Roman church. They were authentic Christians, many of whom still chose to practice the OT Law, even though Jesus fulfilled and replaced it with His death and resurrection. With the expulsion of those with Jewish background from Rome, the Gentile Christians stepped up into leadership, next man up. Shortly before Paul wrote Romans, the Messianic Christians returned to Rome. And they found their church had changed with new leadership. This clash of values and cultures within the Roman church sparked *contentious disputes* within the Roman church and threatened to disrupt church *unity*.

*Read these two verses now, Romans 14:1 and 15:7, the bookends for the context.*

**Accept** the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters (14:1).

**Accept** one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God (15:7).

*First, “disputable matters”* are contentious reasonings with one another that lead to friction. I think of these as antagonistic disputes. The NASB captures the idea with *“quarrel over opinions.”* These are not *grey areas* where the Bible does not speak clearly. Paul deals with such arenas in life in 1 Corinthians 6:12 and 10:23-24. The contents of the quarrel are not Paul’s focus, but the

quarrels expose attitudes that undermines *unity*. Again to reinforce this, it's not **what** truth we hold, but **how** we hold the truth that Paul corrects. Paul passionately deals with correct doctrine in other passages.

**Do all things without complaining or arguments**; so that you will **prove** yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation... (Philippians 2:14-15, **emphasis**).

In Romans 14:1-15:7, Paul calls the house churches to shine as bright lights in the world! He cares less about the subject of the dispute itself or which side we take. He focuses rather on how we **treat** each other in the church when we differ. Please hold this in creative tension with Paul's high value of how highly Paul values a clear grasp of Biblical truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

Yes, "*God is light*" (1 John 1:5), truth, insight, Reality. John also tells us that "*God is love*" (1 John 4:8+16). We must keep these two in creative *Both/And* tension. Paul has already laid out eleven chapters of ground-breaking truth.

Now Paul focused on **how** we hold this truth rather than what truth we hold. The responses of the "*weak*" diminish **unity** and violate love. The "*strong*" strengthen love in a way that releases life and increases unity. Paul aligned himself with Jesus regarding the central role **unity** plays in the Christian community and its witness to the world (John 17:20-23).

***This passage teaches how to maintain our essential unity in the midst of disputes without compromising either our faith or our testimony to the world.***

*Second*, "*accept*" conveys the idea of engaging the person, welcoming with an embracing hug. Paul calls us to "*accept*" those who *dispute* with us.

**Why?**

Because Jesus welcomes us in love in order to influence towards our highest and best, when we are open (15:7). Jesus *accepted* each where they were, in the midst of differences, yet did not *agree* with all their beliefs and practices. He is our Model. *Acceptance* does not necessarily imply *agreement* but provides a soil for thriving relational growth as we work through our disagreements. Disagreements sharpen our reasoning, actually strengthening **unity**, if neither side is disagreeable.

*Third*, the two examples of their *disputes* are "*food and days*" (14:2+5). Some Messianic Christians still practiced the OT Law, eating only Kosher and holding to the Sabbath as the only day to worship. The others ate anything and celebrated Sunday as resurrection day, or all days equally.

*Which group do you think **felt** that they were "right"?*

The law-keepers would fight to the death for their practices and point to the divinely inspired OT. They were certain they were "**right**" and taught this passionately. The Gentile Christians understood what the first century church taught on the danger of law-keeping to please God. They were certain they were theologically "**right**" because Jesus had fulfilled the OT Law (Matthew 5:17).

*Who was "**right**" then, according to the NT?*

Certainly, the "*free to eat anything and celebrate any day group*" was "*right*." Jesus fulfilled the OT Law completely and provides a radically new way to relate with the Father, Son and Spirit (Hebrews 1:1-3; Matthew 5:17).

Read Jesus exposing the danger of the “*traditions of the elders*” as an interpretive lens for life in Mark 7:5-13. Jesus gave Peter a threefold vision to break off such narrow legalism (Acts 10:9-16). The 1<sup>st</sup> century church council condemned such law-keeping and provided practical, temporary boundaries (Acts 15). Paul passionately penned Galatians with the primary purpose to overturn law-keeping in his young converts. The outline of the entire book of Hebrews centers around “*Jesus is greater than...*” all the OT. This is an important and clear NT emphasis.

Who was actually “**right**,” according to Paul and Jesus?

**NEITHER group was “right.” BOTH groups fostered contentious disputes in the church.**

Two groups focusing on their own “**rightness**” in the church always arouse contentious disputes that disrupt **unity**. Unity is crucial because the One who created us is **unity in plurality and equality**. This focus on “**I see it right...end of discussion**” is the crux of the error Paul seeks to correct in this passage.

Romans 14:1-15:7 is *not* about “**right**” and “**wrong**,” culturally or morally, scientifically or theologically. That’s living in the world’s realm. Jesus brought us a new and better citizenship (Philippians 3:20; 1 Peter 1:11). Jesus calls us to know the nature of this fallen world is like and to be led by the Spirit to love others the way Jesus loves us (John 13:34-35, Galatians 5:14+16a+18+25). When we set our heart on what is clear and crucial (Colossians 3:1-2), we live more like Jesus (Colossians. 3:3-4).

Paul confronts **both** groups (14:3). Both groups feel that their “**right**” position is more crucial than respecting the boundaries and level of faith of the other group and forging **unity**. **Both** factions need changed attitudes and responses.

As important as doctrine is, in Paul’s mind as a mature follower of Jesus and mentor, **unity** was more crucial **at the moment** than strong doctrine. Paul focuses on how crucial this is in another passage in Philippians 2:2. Then he follows up his call to unity with **how** to foster **unity**.

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility consider one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (Philippians 2:3-4, NASB).

Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand (Philippians 2:2b-4, *The Message*).

Since “*God is love*,” (1 John 4:8+16), how do we treat one another in love fostering unity (not uniformity)?

Remember, since 12:1 Paul writes to apply truth practically to life. Paul first laid down clear, foundational, essential truth. Now Paul demonstrates how this radical truth must *progressively* change our lives (*sanctification* for theologs). The key to this passage is: *progressively*. Not everyone in the church at Rome lived from the rich spiritual nutrition available in the thoroughgoing culture of *freedom* that Jesus brought with Him. We are all still in-process.

So, how do those of us who are **freer** in Christ (the “**strong**” in 15:1) relate in love that cultivates unity? How can we best help those who have arenas of life where they are still in bondage?

With this larger context as background, read Romans 14:1-15:7 again. This time, focus on the healthy community responses Paul describes. The distinction between the *strong* and the *weak*

has nothing to do with *what* position we hold or even if it is theologically accurate (although I'm into good Bible interpretation).

*It's less important what truth we hold than how we hold the truth and express it to others.*

Certainly, *advocate* for NT truth when the other is open, yet first *inquire* into their beliefs with a true listening and accepting heart (James 1:19-20). Yet without conveying any criticism or contempt, judgment or condemnation, dishonoring or despising. The Lord is their Master, not you (Romans 14:4).

With love and consideration for the other, with a willingness to listen without prejudice, and with a desire to change our views as needed, we join Paul as the *strong* (15:1). When we approach them with an agenda fixed in our mind or expressed attitudes that "*we are right and know best*" and they have little or nothing to add, then we mark ourselves as the *weak*.

We are the *weak* if our responses are contentious, even if our theology is spot-on or we lead a large, growing church or have decades of ministry experience behind us. Of course, work hard to know and correctly handle God's Word (2 Timothy 2:15). Also contend for the faith God has given us, yet without being contentious (Jude 3). Healthy doctrine is crucial yet how we *hold* that doctrine is equally crucial. Otherwise, we misrepresent who the Trinity is as perfect *unity*.

Here a few marks I gathered from this passage that indicate why Paul included himself with the strong (15:1, "*we*"). Add others you see as you weigh your personal approach to clashes.

1. We live wholeheartedly toward the Lord alone, an audience of One (14:8).
2. We don't put a stumbling block in the way of others (14:13+15+19b+20).
3. We intentionally sow what leads to peace and mutual upbuilding (14:19).
4. We don't condemn ourselves when we are fully convinced in our mind (14:5b+22b).
5. We bear with the weaknesses of others to build them up (15:1-2).
6. We develop the same mind towards others that Christ Jesus has in order to strengthen unity to bring glory to God (15:5-6).
7. We welcome those who are "*disputing*" like Jesus embraces us (15:7), even the contentious ones. Jesus meets each of us where we are and seeks to stretch us towards our highest and best in Him...if we are open. "*As Jesus...so His followers* always seek to bring praise to God alone (15:7; John 13:34).
8. We keep our controversial views on contentious "*disputes*" primarily to ourselves (14:22a). We don't need to get in the last word. It's not a debate to win but learning to love others the way Jesus does.

To amplify #8 regarding our society today, it seems that many are driven to share their opinions, almost as a necessity. As Christians, please don't fall into the way of the world, but put weight on Romans 14:22a. This seems often overlooked today in Christian faith-communities.

See ourselves and the world like Paul does, and James and Peter and John...and Jesus. We are not of this world, but His ambassadors sent by our Master into a foreign land to further His work. Our citizenship is in heaven.

It's OK to have opinions and observations. Be very careful which ones we pass along. My observation is that most people only allow us to challenge them a few times. Save these encounters for what's essential to God, not urgent to us at the time.

- Is this contentious dispute clear and crucial in God's word? Or is it simply our preference or our personal "rights" or our views on a less clear point in the NT?

- If it's clear and crucial truth, are we holding it in harmony with other truths? Or is this our hobbyhorse, a caricature of truth? A caricature is a description or picture of a person where certain striking characteristics are exaggerated to create a comic or grotesque effect.
- Are the frequencies of our conversations on this truth out of proportion?
- If it's God's truth, where did Jesus speak on this? How clear is our position in the NT letters? Focus on the clear and crucial to further our purpose on our journey to "*be in the world but not of the world*" (John 17:16-19).

*Most people don't care how much we know until they know how much we care...and care for them right where they are.*

If you are in the group of the **strong** (15:1), your life will look like these eight above. If not, you are the **weak**, even if you are "**right**." And it's time to change!

Paul wrote Romans as a *missionary, theologian* and *pastor*, calling the church to return to *unity*. The first thing to go when we lift our individual "**rights**" above Jesus' love is peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (14:7). Jesus asserts that such a flawed interpretive lens actually nullifies the impact of Scripture for us (Mark 7:13).

*What do you think some of the 21<sup>st</sup> century "contentious disputes" are among church members today? Jot them down for yourself.*

As for the man who is a weak believer, welcome him [into your fellowship], but not to criticize his opinions or pass judgment on his scruples or perplex him with discussions (Romans 14:1, *Amplified*).

Jesus accepts and welcomes each and every person in love where we currently are. If a person is not convinced that we have their well-being on our heart, most become unteachable from us. Jesus loves us too much to leave us where we are, so influences towards our highest and best, according to our openness (15:7). This "best" includes a clearer grasp of Biblical truth. If you doubt this, please read the Gospel of John through with this statement in mind. Decide for yourself.

*However, what if the other person is **not** open to dialog without disputing?*

Respect their "stop sign" (Proverbs 9:7-10; Matthew 7:6). Practice Paul's eighth point above and keep it to ourselves (Romans 14:22a). It's above our pay grade to **decide** for others what to believe or to force our beliefs on others, even when we believe we are "**right**" (14:4+5b). If the other is not open, nothing we say impacts. It's **not** the truth **I** believe that frees the other, but only the truth that the other both receives and practices (John 8:31-32).

If **either** or **both** camps see the *dispute* as an area of Christian freedom or as unimportant to us, most of us would not *dispute*. So, how do we approach others when we believe they are caught in something harmful and appear to be blind to it? Paul gives us wise counsel in one of his leadership letters. The context is a believer trapped by the devil, like those who practice law-keeping to please God.

Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will (2 Timothy 2:23-26).

*Take each phrase and word and examine it as a gem to embrace.*

In the church, we truly need “*disputes*” so we can learn to listen to and love those who think differently from us *without quarreling*. Anyone can love those who love them (Luke 6:31-36). The world needs to visibly see the supernatural love in the community of faith. It’s not uniformity keeping us together, but a **unity** forged by the Spirit that freely “*disagrees without being disagreeable*.”

If we drink of the world’s cool-aid that focuses on *diversity* and differences, contentious *disputes* break out. Instead, begin with our **equality** as image-bearers who respect the other. Then dialog openly and kindly about our **differences** so we broaden understanding and deepen **unity** and oneness.

*What if their view in this dispute is clearly **sinful**?*

Well, that actually describes the Messianic Christians in this passage to a tee! They are still stuck in OT law-keeping. Jesus, Paul and the 1st century church spoke strongly against this.

- The Sermon on the Mount, chapter 5.
- Mark 2 with old/new cloth and wineskins.
- Mark 7:5-13 confronting His disciples that law-keeping “nullifies Scripture.”
- To Peter after the resurrection in Acts 10 with the threefold vision.
- Paul wrote an entire book to free Christians from law-keeping (Galatians).
- The first church council in Acts 15 focused on freeing the church from law-keeping to please God, whether for salvation or for sanctification.

These law-keepers misunderstood the freedom Jesus brought. Still Jesus says not to run their “stop sign” to correct them beyond the level of their current faith (Matthew 7:6 with 3-5), even though they might be wrong. God is their Master (14:3-4), not you. It’s His timing, not what you choose to force on the person. You come alongside, accept them and serve their highest and best, like Jesus does with you.

*Please reread the eight positive responses above again now.*

I also see two behaviors and attitudes that Paul commands them to **stop**. Stop **judging** (14:3,4,10, 13; looking down on the other) and **stop** showing **contempt** (14:3, 10; despising, dishonoring). “I’m “**right**” which makes you wrong unless you agree with me.” Some overwhelm others with *judgment* through rhetoric or passion, according to how they are wired. Or show *contempt* with the “friendly” chuckle, seeking to shame others with, “You don’t **still** believe that, do you?” Even if it may be subtle, or even couched in pious sounding words like righteous indignation. Both attitudes break **unity** in community, especially when it comes from leaders with the powerful influence their position brings.

Jesus teaches His followers that **unity** is the most powerful proof of the Father’s love to a lost world (John 17:20-23). In Paul’s description of the glory of the church on earth, Ephesians, Paul gave a seven-fold repetition of **unity** involving all three Members of the Godhead. Our Family-of-Three calls His people to be “*diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*” (Ephesians 4:3-6). An underlying theme in one of the greatest pieces of literature ever written, Romans, is unity in the local church.

Please don’t do the least thing to undermine the very **unity** that Jesus created His church to display (Matthew 16:18). I want to love all that Jesus loves, and He loves the whole church, even those whose doctrine may be off (as if **any** church or person has perfect, spot-on doctrine in every

arena!) You will not want to be responsible for dividing churches because you stubbornly propagate theories focused on this world, whether economics or politics, race or how poorly a government functions...even if you have great points.

Read Romans 14:1-15:7 again, only to spotlight the *certain* and unchanging Source of Paul's teaching. Set your heart on what follows and strengthen *unity*. If you are in the group of the *strong*, your life will avoid judging and contempt and look like the eight points above *because...*

1. ...God has already accepted those on each side (14:3).
2. ...God is on His throne to make all stand (14:4).
3. ...Christ died and was raised to be our Lord (14:9).
4. ...we will give an account for all our actions (14:10-12).
5. ...the Kingdom is not about *disputes* on external matters relating to this world system, but the essentials of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit as we serve others for their good (14:17-18). Major on the main and plain, the clear and crucial because our citizenship is not of this world.
6. ...if we overstep with our passion or logic (even if it's correct), we may be the impetus for our brother or sister acting beyond their faith. If they do, they violate their conscience and sin (14:23). That's heavy stuff!

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, **set your hearts on** things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. **Set your minds on** things above, not on earthly things (Colossians 3:1-2, **emphasis**).

Forcing our views on another, even if they are correct, pinpoints us as the "*weak*." To change others is above our spiritual paygrade.

The "*strong*" are strong enough to bend our knees to use our strength for others without attempting to shame or belittle or despise the other. The "*strong*" accept and welcome the other right where they currently are, even when they may make poor choices or have bad theology.

If we love them like Jesus loves us (John 13:34), the other may give us an opportunity to come alongside and help them break free (2 Timothy 2:23-26). If not, raise above by complying with their "*stop sign*" (Matthew 7:6) and going over their heads in private prayer (Matthew 7:7-10). This is how we and treat others like Jesus does (Matthew 7:12).

Trust is so difficult to achieve and so easy to lose.

We may think we "won" an argument when in Reality we have injured a relationship and missed a great opportunity for personal spiritual growth. Kindness and respecting people are such a large part of bringing people together in healthy faith-communities. We have so much more in common than what we differ on.

***Let's dialog with one another out of love and kindness.***