

Romans Chapters 14-16: Living Peacefully with Different Values and Opinions

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Romans

Welcome is reconciliation in practice. Quarrels seek to exclude others, but welcome seeks to include them, even when it means respecting areas of disagreement.

“Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions,” begins Paul (Rom. 14:1). The “weak in faith” may be those who lack confidence in their own convictions on disputed issues and rely on strict rules to govern their actions. Specifically, some of the Jewish Christians kept the strictures of Jewish dietary laws and were offended by other Christians consuming non-kosher meat and drink.

Nonetheless, Paul’s response to their weakness is not to argue with them, nor to ignore their beliefs, but to do whatever will make them feel welcome. He tells those who do not keep kosher not to flaunt their freedom to eat anything, because doing so would require the kosher-keepers either to break fellowship with them or to violate their consciences. If there is no kosher meat to be found, then the non-kosher should join with the kosher and eat only vegetables, rather than demanding that the kosher-keepers violate their consciences.

Both groups feel strongly that their views are morally important. The strong believe that for Gentiles to keep kosher is a refusal of God’s grace in Christ Jesus. The weak believe that not keeping kosher—and the merely eating with people who don’t keep kosher—is an affront to God and a violation of the Jewish law. The argument is heated because both freedom in Christ and obedience to God’s covenants are truly important moral and religious issues. But relationships in the community are even more important. Living in Christ is not about being right or wrong on any particular issue. It is about being in right relationship with God and with one another.

Moral disagreements can be even more difficult at work, where there is less common ground. An interesting aspect in this regard is Paul’s special concern for the weak. Although he tells both groups not to judge each other, he places a greater practical burden on the strong. This means that those who are in the right, or in the majority, or who otherwise have the most power are called to voluntarily refrain from violating the consciences of others. In most workplaces, the opposite occurs. The weak must accommodate themselves to the dictates of the strong, even if doing so violates their consciences.

Imagine, for example, that someone in your workplace has religious or moral convictions that require a particular modesty of dress, say covering the hair or the shoulders or legs. These convictions could be a form of "weakness," to use Paul's terminology, if they make that person uncomfortable around others who do not conform to their idea of modest dress. Probably you would not object to that person wearing such modest dress themselves. But Paul's argument implies that you and all your co-workers should also dress modestly according to the other person's standards, at least if you want to make your workplace a place of welcome and reconciliation. The strong (those not hampered by legalism) are to welcome the weak by accommodating to their weakness.

Imagine if Christians had a reputation for making everyone feel welcome, rather than for judging others' tastes and habits. Would that help or hinder Christ's mission in the world of work?