

Introduction

- Sadness that I occasionally found myself playing the game of "where do you stand" at School of Evangelism last week:
 - judging people, perhaps looking down on them, because of something they or I believed...

Roman Disputes

- Two, or possibly three, are mentioned in the passage:
 - possibly wine/alcohol in 14:21 "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall"
 - certainly special days in 14:5 "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike."
(possibly things like our Easter and Christmas or saints days, more likely Sunday vs other days)
 - and mostly issue of meat sacrificed to idols; eg 14:2 "One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables."
- Since this last one is perhaps the most vexing, fill in a bit more of the background:
 - Jews had special food laws, especially relating to what could and could not be eaten, and how those animals that could be eaten were killed - **kosher**.
 - Gentiles had no such laws
 - when they came into the church, there was an issue - should the Jewish Christians give up their old habit, sanctioned by Scripture? Or should the Gentile Christians adopt Jewish cultural practices? Or what?
- When this problem first came up, James, leader of the church in Jerusalem, offered this judgement:
 - (Acts 15:19-20) "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood."
 - *but, those idols are no more than lumps of wood - so how could meat offered to them be polluted?*
 - and in a city where virtually all the butcher meat came from the local pagan temple, or was mixed in with such meat so you couldn't tell where what you were buying came from....
- So, in many places, there were Christians happily eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols alongside Christians studiously not eating such meat, even to the point of only eating vegetables!
 - and worse, each group had begun to look down on the other, judging them poorer Christians, or possibly wondering whether they were "real" Christians who could do such a thing as they judged acceptable/unacceptable
- In light of the gospel, in light of the "therefore" of Romans 12:1, what does Paul say they should do?

Three Responses

- Paul lays out three principles in this passage:

1. Accept your brother (14:1, 13)

- First is that we accept our fellow Christians, as they are
 - accept they are a Christian
 - consequently treat them as a brother
 - perhaps taking particular care to act in this way since it may not come naturally, fighting against the mere natural instinct to treat well those who we like!
 - don't judge, don't talk about them, don't go looking for a fight over the issue in dispute
- We may think that their spiritual growth will be fostered by accepting our position,

but we don't put that before accepting them:

- growth can come in time, if that is the road God leads the other person down, without us forcing the pace

2. Adapt to your brother (14:15 etc)

- **Second** is that we **adapt our behaviour for the sake of our fellow Christians**
 - not serve "tainted" meat to someone for whom that would cause offence
 - not refuse to offer hospitality to someone who has been "defiled" by eating such meat
- We adapt our behaviour to not put our brother in danger or difficulty!
 - think of that person's spiritual health!
 - for instance, perhaps someone has been converted from pagan religion, used to sacrificing to idols; see another Christian buying idol meat; **assumes** this Christian is actually still paying some heed to the idol; is caused to doubt or lose trust in the absolute efficacy of Christ's sacrifice as the only way to gain access to God!
- Underlying principle is that we think of others before ourselves!
 - love your neighbour as yourself - this one particular application
 - hard to put self and deeply held beliefs to one side for the sake of the spiritual well-being of another, to make the judgement call that sees whether this is the time to fight for what you believe or not

3. Admit your uncertainty (14:23)

- And the **third** is that we **play safe** whenever we are not sure which course of action is truly Christian
- First two principles have been about how we treat our fellow Christian with whom we disagree over some matter under dispute
 - this third one is about how we ourselves deal with something disputable
 - when we aren't sure which way to go on an issue...
 - perhaps we've read Scripture and books, and not been absolutely swayed by the arguments of either side
 - perhaps we've just discovered that there are Christians out there who think differently on a particular issue
- In these situations, Paul suggests we should play safe:
 - (14:23) *"But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin."*
 - someone isn't sure about idol meat, so he shouldn't eat it;
 - someone isn't sure about whether particular days are holy; he should treat all days as holy

Why Respond in those ways?

- Paul gives some reasons as to why those are appropriate responses to one another when we disagree
 - 1. It is for God to judge, not us (14:11)
 - 2. God's kingdom - the bringing of salvation, justice, transformation - that is more important than what we eat! (14:17)
 - 3. In this we follow Christ's example (15:3)

Today's Disputes

- No problem to find areas in church life today where we can fall out with each other!
 - **baptism** - infant vs believers
 - **communion** - not just validity (RCs) but also frequency, common/individual cups, frequency, who can lead... DSA with different sections, worse extremes exist!
 - **charismatic gifts** - what is valid, what is not? if not exercising them, are we being less than biblical, or is it character dependent?
 - **church government & leadership** - Presbyterian, Anglican (bishops), independent; Ordination!
 - **place of women** - especially wrt leadership and teaching

- **dress** - especially in worship, both for minister (collar, robes!), and for congregation
 - **hell** - eternal damnation, or final annihilation?
 - **drinking** - OK, or dodgy?
 - **place of Scripture** - saving faith, but....
- Folk here this evening who disagree on some of those!!
 - yet we are very directly part of the same church family, as well as called to be in fellowship with others in other congregations

Conclusion

- How will we apply Paul's teaching to some of our disputes?
 - how will I go about **accepting my brother** who disagrees with me over how we celebrate communion? (or whatever)
 - how will I **adapt to my brother** who disagrees with me over how to express worship? (or whatever)
 - how will I **admit my uncertainty** when I don't know whether infants should be baptised or not? (or whatever)
- **Pause for personal reflection just now:**
 - suggestion: pick out one issue of dispute, and seek to apply the three principles to the people you would tend to disagree with or look down on
 - then sing **Give thanks with a grateful heart**
 - then go into **case study** where we will have a try at applying these principles to a "real life" situation