

# The Accepting Church

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Romans 14:1-4

The badge of a Christian, according to the Lord of the church, is love.

A believer is one who calls heaven his home, and what is heaven but a world of love!

The church – the body of Christ – is called a family. We call our God our Father, adopted and named by Him who loved us with an everlasting love, and who spares nothing for us in giving us a Savior, our elder Brother, the eternal Son of God, the King who died for us.

We are animated by a new heart and a new Spirit as children of God. The Holy Spirit dwells not at a distance or next door to us, or even in the next room – but dwells in within us, forever.

If we have been received by the true God – why is we so mistreat one other?

This is where Paul leads us to how love is to be demonstrated.

Twice he has remarked on this in chapters 12 and 13. Now comes a lengthy section overflowing into chapter 15 – 36 verses in all! This is about the size of both Romans 6 and 7 combined!

It is unloving if we judge others. Verse 15 says we are no longer walking in love. And the aim is found in chapter 15: “Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you 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.” (Rom 15:5-6)

What riches are woven into this theme of church unity! It is as John Stott calls it a ‘remarkable blend of theology and ethics’.

Paul is grounded here in a radical God-centered life. He is living to the Lord Jesus. The death and resurrection of Christ are in v. 9. The judgment of the Lord in 10-12. And of course the kingdom of God on 17.

These are the bigger issues than vegetarianism, keeping holy days, unclean foods, and Jewish/Gentile differences.

Let us **begin** with understanding the two groups Paul speaks of.

We have one who is weak in faith and one who has faith to do what the first cannot.

Paul in 15:1 names that second group **the strong**.

The difference is found in verse 5. The one person is fully convinced in his mind one way, and the believer next to him is fully convinced in the other way!

Both are acting in faith however.

It is not one has more faith than the other. In the last verse of chapter 14, Paul says that all believers are to do all things by faith, and whatever is not from faith is sin.

The question of the difference practices then is not an internal one. It is a disagreement in practice.

One believes eating meat is fine; the other does not – both believe they are correct and are obeying the Lord. Yet, one is called strong, the other is called weak.

But what is Paul's biggest point? How they are to love one another.

Verse 1 says accept the one weak in faith, too weak to eat meat.

Verses 1 and 3 – the strong who eats meat by faith is not to sit in judgment over other in contempt. Verse 4 – the Lord is his or her master who is able to make them stand.

Verses 5-9 says both are living to the Lord, for the Lord, worshiping with thanks to the Lord, and in fellowship with the Lord's people and the Lord Himself.

Jesus owns them as their Lord – He died for them and rose again for them to be the Lord of all his church, strong and weak alike.

So this brings us to a **second** and important point to be made – there are differences in the church that are to be tolerated. And more than tolerated, they are not to hinder fellowship.

When Paul sees meat-eaters and vegetarians at odds, he does not pick sides and say – kick out the one or the other.

There is no question that Paul is referring to both the weak and the strong as brothers in the Lord, as part of the flock.

Oh, how we need to know the difference between the *unity* and the *uniformity* of the church.

This has caused such divisions in church bodies. The church is made of a variety of souls, all based on the same gospel, the same saving faith. But there are fathers, young men and little children in the church.

If someone says only fathers, or only children, what problems arise!

This is the gist of that wonderful statement:

In essentials, unity;  
In non-essentials, liberty;  
In all things, charity.

There are absolute essentials or fundamentals to the faith. Paul is not saying here, ‘Accept the one who is not believing that Christ came in the flesh; or that there is more than one God; or that we are saved by our works as well as faith; or accept the brother who is an idolater, an adulterer, a homosexual.’”

He is dealing with no essential of the Christian faith but secondary matters.

Again, we need to be loving to our enemies, to unbelievers, to the wicked. Jesus wept over Jerusalem – the enemies of God! And so should we.

But Paul speaks of those within the church; not those who need still to turn from their sins and be saved.

The biggest controversy in the NT was over circumcising Gentiles. Because the Judaizers made this mark part of salvation, Paul stood up against it. When Titus is pressured to be circumcised, Paul does not budge.

And yet Paul has Timothy circumcised so as not to be a stumbling-block in Jewish evangelism!

Romans 14 gives the Spirit’s reasoning. It speaks of liberty for the weaker brother to celebrate OT fulfilled holy days. But in Colossians

2, if it is adopted as an addition to the gospel, it infringes on the fundamentals of the faith, and is rejected!

So let this stand for Paul dealing with non-essentials, or liberty, and how liberty is to be carried in charity, in love.

**But now we tackle this first matter of liberty** – the weaker brother not eating meat, only vegetables.

And I will warn you that this is not well understood.

NT scholar Leon Morris said on this chapter 30 years ago: “Exactly what the problem was with which Paul was dealing is not clear.” And he went on to speak of how there was no consensus on the matter.

CEB Cranfield, a master on expositing the book of Romans, outlines 6 possible ways to understand Paul.

This matter of the weak abstaining from meat and eating vegetables sounds like the debates in Corinth and meats offered to idols.

But the Jewish community in Rome would be far larger than Corinth, and finding meat not offered to one of the gods would not be an issue.

I am persuaded that Paul speaks more of a Gentile problem.

Gentile ascetics seem to be in mind, who abstained not only from meat but also wine.

Seneca and the Stoics leaned in this direction as they saw the gluttony of fellow Romans.

So as moral Romans were converted, you could see them carrying this in with them as part of their practice.

In any case, the original audience would know what Paul was addressing. And the principles taught continue to be applied to a wide range of similar matters down to our day.

**That is our next point – the practical nature of this passage for us today.**

We still have vegetarians in the church. And we have many Christians who love their Tri-tip on Labor Day weekend!

The moderate use of alcohol has divided the church, as has the use of drinks with caffeine. So has the use of tobacco.

When a young Christian was put off by the gift of a box of cigars, and asked his pastor what to do about it, Spurgeon said – ‘Give them to me – I will smoke them to God’s glory!’

The church has had issues with eating meat on Fridays, movie-going, gum-chewing, TV watching, dating practices, hair length, skirt length, women in pants, musical tastes, birth control, family sizes, sports and dining on the Lord’s day, the proper use of certain medicines, medical marijuana, recreational marijuana, and that all besides worship styles, Christmas celebrations, Easter and the church calendar, the manner of taking offerings, the décor and architecture of church buildings, and on and on and on we go!

Sometimes it is a matter of personal preference that shapes our piety.

This brings us to **our last point** then – there are vital lessons for all of us here.

The benefit of showing love to each other outweighs the benefits of arguing all the time about our differences.

Are you strong? Does that mean beat up all who haven't caught up to you? Yeah, that works well at winning friends!

Resist the temptation to sit in judgment over weaker brothers and so sin. Stop playing God and despising your brother. Accept them so to bear their weaknesses and not just please yourself.

We have all seen Christians whose welcome mat extends only to those who are on the same page as they are. All others are frowned away. They accept one another on their own terms only, and not the Lord's.

If you are strong, you are only relatively so. There is another sense in which the best of believers are all weakness.

So beware of pride in setting someone beneath your feet. You demean your brother or sister for whom Christ died!

Then there is a lesson here for the weak.

If the strong tend to judge and look down in pride, the weak also show contempt against the freedoms of the strong.

See how both sides are provoking the worst in each other; flaunting their strength or weakness before the other.

RC Sproul shared how he had been invited out for a meal, and as the waitress came to the table, she asked if anyone would like a drink, when one of them said – “We don't drink – We're Christians!” Which you could see the reaction of the waitress, like she had done something wrong.

Sproul wished he had it to do over again, and ordered a Scotch, just to put the whole matter right.

Paul commands us – doesn't suggest, but commands to show love and tolerance under the Lord, the judge of all.

And be clear – all of us have room to grow. This is not a static picture but a call to greater faithfulness.

The strong are to grow more to show love to those who are weak in their Christian liberty; the weak are to grow strong to enjoy all that the Lord has for them.

The church needs direction and leadership that emulates love to the weak and liberty for the strong. The church cannot adopt the stance of the weaker brother, but it must provide a safe haven for them to grow.

What a travesty when the church settles for the lowest common denominator and does not mature into strength, stature and riches!

And where is her strength? Where is the blessedness of the living people of God?

It is found in the four words at the end of verse 4: *the Lord is able!*  
What a word of comfort for both the strong and the weak!

He is the strength of the strong – they do not stand on their own. God makes them do so! Rejoice and be humble!

Likewise, let the weak rejoice!

It is not the strength or completeness of your faith that saves you – it is the strength and completeness of your Savior and Lord who loves you and has given his life for you!

Jesus said the one who only bore one hour of the heat of the day receives the same wage as the one who bore the whole 12 hours!

You are no second-class citizen in the church of Jesus! There are no slums in heaven! There are no step-children in the family of God!

Amen? Let us put that into practice, shall we?

Next time, what is the Lord's day?

**Pray:** Help us Lord, who enables us, to keep our eyes fixed on Christ, beginning and end, first and last, author and finisher of faith, whether weak or strong.

Let us be sharper with ourselves, judging ourselves first, before attempting the mote from the eye of our neighbor!

Above all make us lovers of your church – to put others before ourselves.

Lord, you have said the greatest is the one who becomes like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

And Lord, you have not only taught us but shown us this, for which we give you thanks and pray for new lives to model you and your cross. Help us to follow you supremely!