

Understanding Disputable Matters:

Why Romans 14:1 Is Not Addressing Issues That “Don’t Really Matter”

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Abstract: In the early 2020s, politics, pandemics, and public health policies have produced countless arguments and divisions between professing Christians in Canada. Desiring to see arguments quelled, pastors may quote the Apostle Paul in Romans 14, telling our congregations to stop fighting over merely “disputable matters.” While this passage may initially seem to be applicable to our contemporary situations, it is actually addressing an urgent ecclesiological issue in the life of the Roman church; namely, how *Jewishly* do people need to behave now that they are Christians? This essay demonstrates that Romans 14 is not a text designed to help our people navigate issues that “don’t really matter,” nor does it assert that contentious dialogues are inappropriate, nor does it support a “your truth is your truth” epistemology for controversies. Consequently, this essay intends to lead readers to embrace the idea that “disputable matters” are worth dialoguing about, with patience and respect, for the health and strength of our local churches.

Keywords: disputable matters, adiaphora, Jew, Gentile, strong, weak, judge

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Introduction

Recent years have provided no shortage of controversial issues for Canadian Christians to discuss. In our digitally driven and mediated world, the potential landmines for disunity in local churches are legion. Pastors have had to find ways to keep the main things the main things, while also recognizing that their congregations are either experiencing (or are at least under the threat of experiencing) division around any number of supposedly “disputable matters.” There are little fires everywhere for Canadian pastors, and in this tribalistic and divisive landscape we are desperate to get our hands on an effective extinguisher.

For many of us, we find our “argument extinguishers” in the words of Romans 14:1, which says, “Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over disputable matters.”² We read this passage and, in times like ours, it seems like the perfect fit. We see our people despising each other because of their differences when we desire for them to accept one another in spite of their differences. Furthermore, many of these divisive debates in the early 2020s are regarding issues not explicitly mentioned in Scripture. The temptation for pastors is to say that since the contemporary issues in question are not addressed directly in Scripture they are therefore tertiary to the gospel itself; so we quickly adopt the language from Romans 14:1 and call all such conversations “disputable matters.” Therefore, when Canadian Christians begin arguing and despising one another over issues such as government mandates, public health orders, and vaccinations, we think to ourselves, and sometimes say to others, “If that’s not a *quarrel over a disputable matter* I don’t know what is! Let’s just move on!”

We may want to use Romans 14 to justify glossing over the “disputable matters” (by which *we mean* issues that aren’t core to the gospel) brewing in our churches. However, to read and utilise Romans 14 in this way is to fundamentally misunderstand and

² Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotes are taken from the NIV translation.

misinterpret what Paul is doing in Romans 14:1–15:16.³ To turn Paul’s treatment of “disputable matters” in Romans 14:1 into a grid for thinking through peripheral or insignificant issues would be both unwise and inappropriate.

Purpose

The main idea supporting this essay is that we ought not use Romans 14 as a grid for dealing with *adiaphora* in the life of the local church.⁴ The Apostle Paul, in this section, is working through the perennially difficult issue in the first century Christian church: what do Jewish Christians do with their culturally indoctrinated and scripturally ingrained notions of godly behaviour? This essay will articulate the contextual and exegetical rationales necessary to demonstrate that Romans 14:1–15:16 deals not with *adiaphora*, but with the crucial (and repeatedly addressed) issue of how Jews and Gentiles ought to relate to one another in the local church. Additionally, a few prompts for applying this text unit in our Canadian churches in 2022 and beyond will be provided.

³ I encourage you at this time to read this text unit in its entirety. The phrase “disputable matters,” frequently used in this paper, is how the NIV decided to interpret the Greek *διαλογισμός* (*dialogismos*).

⁴ *Adiaphora* is a classical theological term used to describe issues in Christian theology that are indifferent, tertiary, and non-essential for Christian orthopraxy and orthodoxy. While those issues certainly do exist, to use Romans 14 as an example of *adiaphora*, and therefore as a guide for working through such issues, is an imposition of a framework onto the text itself, not one expositied from it.

The Contextual and Exegetical Rationales for Romans 14:1–15:16 Addressing the Crucial Issue of Jew/Gentile Relationships in the Local Church

Contextual Rationale

The two primary contextual rationales for the assertion that Romans 14:1–15:16 does not deal with mere disputable matters as we may conceive of that idea, but rather with the centrally important issue within the first century of relationships between Jews and Gentiles in the local church are: historical context and grammatical context.

Historical Context for Romans 14:1–15:16

Paul is writing to the church in Rome, whom he has not visited. The dynamic between Jews and the broader culture in Rome was a complex socio-political issue. Acts 18:1-18 describes how the Jews were expelled from the city of Rome under the reign of the Emperor Claudius. There was sufficient frustration with apparent controversies and civic disruptions that, in the words of theologian Clinton Arnold, by the year 49 AD

Claudius was no longer tolerant and decided to rid the city of the Jews altogether. In his biography of Claudius, Suetonius corroborates Luke's account by verifying this expulsion: 'Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from the city.' The identity of 'Chrestus' is most likely '(Jesus) Christ.' This suggests that there were heated debates among the Jews in the synagogues in Rome with the Jewish Christians who contended that Jesus is the Messiah

(Christos), which did not go unnoticed by the Roman authorities.⁵

The Emperor Claudius reigned until the year 54 AD, at which time Jewish people began to slowly migrate back to Rome. However, it is not hard to imagine that tensions would have still perpetuated between the two groups. As the ethnically-Jewish Christians entered back into Roman life, the same tensions and experiences between Jews and Gentiles in the general Roman population would have also been experienced within the life of local Christian congregations. Given this societal dynamic, it would be impossible for Christians in Rome to have heard Phoebe reading Paul's letter without these weighty cultural and religious issues coming to mind.

Grammatical Context for Romans 14:1–15:16

It is clear societally that the Roman church would have been experiencing relational tensions between Jews and Gentiles. Throughout the letter Paul goes back and forth addressing the Jewish and Gentile contexts, and discusses how the gospel comes to bear in fullness therein. While the chapter divisions and subtitles in our modern Bibles may not help us intuitively understand this, it is evident from the content of his letter that Paul intends Romans 14:1–15:16 to be read as a unified section.

Time does not allow for an exhaustive summary of the letter to the Romans, but suffice it to say that Romans unpacks the glorious idea of salvation found in Jesus by grace through faith unto a life of obedience. Romans 1–11 deals with the issue of salvation by grace through faith for both Jews and Gentiles, while Romans 12–16 deals with the real life nitty-gritty implications of a life lived unto obedience to Jesus.

In Romans 12 and 13, Paul addresses a number of ways in which believers will present their lives as a living sacrifice in

⁵ Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: John, Acts.*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 397–398.

response to the gift of grace in Jesus. Then in chapter 14, Paul commands the Christians to “accept” the other in general, and the one who is “weak in faith” in particular. Paul goes on to explain and nuance, until 15:17, what he means by this acceptance within the Roman church. At this point, Paul’s “therefore” moves his attention away from addressing the church specifically in Rome and toward a reminiscence of his past missionary efforts amongst the Gentiles, as well as his excitement for future missionary endeavours among other Gentile peoples.

Summary

There is a perennial temptation for the modern interpreters of the Bible to apply passages directly to our situation without considering the historical context. Even the most seasoned of Bible readers can make the functional mistake of thinking that because the Bible was written and given *for us*, that means it was written *to us*. This error at times does not cause significant distortion in our understanding. However, reading Romans 14:1 without reminding ourselves of the historical and grammatical context can lead us to misunderstand and misapply what Paul was saying to the church in Rome as we begin to import our own definitions of who is the *weaker* or *stronger* brother in the particular issue in our mind. This kind of narcissism is inappropriate when the historical and grammatical context is considered.⁶

Exegetical Rationale

The historical and grammatical context surrounding Romans 14:1 undergirds the idea that Paul’s focus on this section is more than mere *adiaphora*; rather, it is nuanced practical theology for a church experiencing significant relational tension. This idea is further

⁶ Narcissism is a term used to describe the interpretive method of inappropriately reading ourselves and our situation into the text. I do not know the origins of the term exactly. I only know I did not make it up.

buttressed by some careful exegetical considerations. There are six key groupings of Greek words that elucidate Paul's purpose in Romans 14:1–15:16.⁷

διαλογισμός [*dialogismos*]

This is the Greek word found in 14:1 which the NIV translates as *disputable matters*. This English phrase is presumed to mean something that is tertiary or insignificant. *Dialogismos* does not have any inherently “indifferent” connotations, so we have no interpretive grounds to suggest that by the mere use of the word *dialogismos* Paul is referring to conversations that were illicit, unhelpful, or *adiaphoric* in nature.⁸ The basic sense of the word in Greek is *reasoning* or *disputing something*. That said, in the New Testament the word is used almost exclusively in a negative context. For example, Paul also uses this word in Philippians 2:14 in another appeal to cease with unhelpful discussions. It seems that the issue for Paul in both Romans and Philippians, and his intent in using this word, is that the dialogical fires were generating more heat than light. The problem at hand is not *that* an inconsequential conversation was happening, but *how* the conversation was conducted.

ἀσθένεια [*asthenēma*], δυνατός [*dynatos*] and ἀδύνατος [*adynatos*]

These three terms help us understand the nature of the *dialogismos* happening in Rome. The term *asthenēma* refers to the

⁷ Each word grouping will include the Greek spelling, the English transliteration/pronunciation, and definitions to provide the sense of each term and how they are translated in the text unit in focus. The scope of this essay does not permit exhaustive treatment of each term's semantic range and usage in other New Testament letters. All definitions of terms are paraphrased from James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

⁸ My thanks to Levi Friesen for his contribution on this point.

state of being sick or weak and is used twice in this text unit, in 14:1 (translated as *weak*) and 15:1 (translated as *failings*).

While *dynatos* and *adynatos* are each only used once in 15:1, they provide a helpful framing for Paul's pastoral instruction. *Dynatos* (translated as *strong*) carries the sense of something or someone being *possible, able, or competent*, while *adynatos* is simply its negation (i.e. *impossible, unable, incompetent*).

This group of words help us understand Paul's framing of the issue at hand in the Roman church. In this community made up of Jews and Gentiles, there is a particularly Jewish *dialogismos* occurring: the dispute over what foods can be eaten and how certain days should be treated. Paul sees two groups of people in this dispute, the *dynatos* (competent) and the *adynatos* (incompetent). In Paul's eyes, the *dynatos* are able to eat all kinds of foods or treat all days the same, while the *adynatos* are living with an *asthenēma* (weakness).

πιστεύω [*pisteuō*], and πίστις [*pistis*]

The Greek *pisteuō* is the verbal form, and *pistis* is the noun form, of the words typically translated into English as *belief, faith, or trust*. When Paul uses these words, he is typically referring to someone's *faith in Christ* (as the verb), or their *Christian faith* (as the noun). However, in 14:1, 22, and 23 (twice), Paul does not use these words with Jesus or Christianity as the referent. He is using the words *pisteuō* and *pistis* to talk about someone's belief system or act of believing itself. This is almost certainly because Paul is specifically addressing Jewish people who have come to faith in Jesus from an already existing, and incredibly thorough, set of convictions about what is good, true, and beautiful. Some of these Jewish people are *dynatos* and others are *adynatos* on the basis of how they understand their former cultural and religious practices to inform their new life in Jesus.⁹

⁹ The Apostle Paul engages the Corinthian church surrounding a related but inverted issue. In the Corinthian church it is not Jewish people who are primarily having a hard time understanding how their former religious practices influence their new ethic as Christians, but pagans. Interestingly, in the Corinthian correspondence, Paul, the careful and

**κρίνω [krinō], διάκρισις [diakrisis], κατακρίνω [katakrinō],
διακρίνω [diakrinō], and ἐξουθενέω [exoutheneō]**

This fourth grouping of Greek words is the most extensive and most nuanced, and yet they are more closely linked than we might initially presume. The foundational word in this grouping is *krinō*, which, depending on the context, can be translated as *discern*, *decide*, *evaluate*, *prefer*, or *condemn*. In Romans 14:1–15:16, *krinō* is used eight times: four times in reference to someone’s decision *for* themselves, and four times in reference to deciding something *about* another.

The next three words in this word grouping are linked closely with the root word *krinō*, and each appears only once in the text unit. *Diakrinō* has the sense of wavering in judgment and is translated in 14:23 as *doubt*. *Katakrinō* has the sense of *deciding against* something, and is translated in 14:23 as *condemned*. *Diakrisis* has the sense of making a distinction between good and evil, and is translated in 14:1 as *quarrelling*. Paul is exhorting the Roman church to accept the *adynatos* among them and to not dialogue divisively.

The final word in this group, *exoutheneō*, is not connected directly to the core word *krinō*, but is strongly connected thematically to the previous three words. This word has the sense of *despising* and *disdaining*, is used twice in the text unit (14:2, 10), and, in both cases, is translated as *treating with contempt*.

This word grouping is essential for understanding what Paul is accomplishing in this text unit. Paul is saying that both the *dynatos* Jews and *adynatos* Jews are making decisions (*krinō*) based on their convictions of what is best. Their actions are discerned based on their deeply ingrained theological and cultural convictions. What is being chastised is not the act of dialoguing itself, but dialoguing in a condemnatory manner. Neither is the decision-making being chastised, but rather the condemnation and contempt that is projected

contextual pastor-theologian that he is, does not use *πιστεύω [pisteuō]* or *πίστις [pistis]* as much, but more frequently appeals to the Roman concept of *συνείδησις [syneidēsin]*, which is translated in English as *conscience*.

onto *other* people's decisions.¹⁰ Both groups are making decisions that align with their doctrinal beliefs, and while the *dynatos* Jews are correct in their theology, they are still among the guilty for treating their fellow *adynatos* believers with contempt.¹¹

νοῦθετέω [noutheteō]

The word groups above make it increasingly clear that the issue at hand for the Apostle Paul is not mere *adiaphora*, but is actually crucial for the life of the church. Paul's exhortation for the Roman Christians to engage in *noutheteō* (meaning *instruction* or *admonishing*), in concert with his framework of *dynatos* and *adynatos*, makes it clear that there actually is a "right" and "wrong" in the issue at hand regarding dietary laws and special days.¹² Paul expects there to be a level of *noutheteō* happening in the Roman church from the *dynatos* towards the *adynatos*. The *dialogismos* is expected to continue, but just in a drastically different tone than has previously defined the situation. He expects the Roman church to patiently instruct each other in the ways of Jesus and the ensuing implications.

¹⁰ The only occurrence in the text unit where *krinō* is referring to someone's own decision making *and* carries a negative connotation is 14:22. Furthermore, English translations like the ESV and NIV divide the one Greek sentence into two. These decisions seem to me to misrepresent the sense of what Paul is exploring. I think this verse is better understood as saying something to the effect of, "So whatever you believe about these matters keep before God since a person flourishes when he does not decide for himself by what he approves." It is my position that the English translations are missing the sense of what is happening in this verse and unnecessarily import a negative and contextually counterintuitive connotation. However, I recognize that I am the minority opinion, and those teams of translators probably made the right decision for reasons I don't understand yet.

¹¹ Though 14:16 makes it clear that contemptuous thoughts went both ways.

¹² This point is made explicitly clear in Romans 14:14 and 14:16.

οἰκοδομή [oikodomē]

The final word in our exegetical exploration, *oikodomē*, appears twice in our text unit. The word carries a range of meaning, like *building* and *edification*, but also carries a sense of *home* with it. Paul's goal for his instruction is not that everyone feels good about their decision, but that the Roman church family is built with Gentiles and Jews (both *dynatos* and *adynatos*).

Summary

When Paul's language in Romans 14:1–15:16 is carefully considered, it is clear that he isn't casually engaging in *adiaphora*, but that he intends to pastor the Roman church to deal wisely and Christianly with the significant relational issue in their midst. Paul is engaging in an issue that he deals with repeatedly throughout all of his letters, which is no surprise given the nature of his apostolic ministry—the self-described Pharisee of Pharisees who is the missionary to the Gentiles.¹³ Paul is dealing here with people who have perhaps bought into the false teaching of the Judaizers, or, maybe more likely, Jews who simply have not matured enough yet in their Christian faith to know what Peter had to learn in Acts 10, what

¹³ The issue of *how culturally Jewish must a Jewish-Christian be* is addressed in many books in the New Testament to one degree or another. The book of Acts is dealing with the central thesis of the gospel moving out from the focal point of Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The Apostle Peter is taught in Acts 10 in a vision that all food is now clean, and that he should take up and eat. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 is where the issue is discerned theologically that people do not need to become or act culturally Jewish to be a Jesus follower. Paul himself, in multiple letters, with different levels of intensity, engages with this issue. The letter to the Galatians deals with this issue with the most force because the Judaizers were teaching contrary to the decision in Acts 15, saying that one *must* behave in accordance with Jewish practice in order to truly follow Jesus. The Apostle Peter himself was even rebuked for his own errors regarding how Jews and Gentiles are equal in Christ. Paul also instructs both Timothy and Titus about how to deal with “certain persons” who are propagating doctrine that is at the very least immature, if not an error on par with the Judaizers (see 1 Tim. 1:6-11; 1 Tim. 4:1-10; 2 Tim. 2:23-26; and Titus 3:9-11).

the *dynatos* Jews in Rome knew, and what Paul repeats in Romans 14:14: *nothing is unclean in itself*. The leaders of the church in Rome need to patiently teach this implication of the gospel to see maturity grow in the *adyatos*. In the meantime, however, the not-yet-mature in their beliefs ought to be welcomed into the family of faith.

Concluding Prompts for Applying Romans

14:1–15:16

Every Canadian church is facing different issues and needs to consider how this text unit applies in their unique setting. The Apostle Paul presents the large text unit Romans 14:1–15:16 to the church in Rome for his own pastoral and discipleship reasons. This topic, which accounts for nearly 10 percent of his entire letter, is not dealing with mere *adiaphora*, but is rather a significant relational tension that is deeply intertwined with Jewish traditions and laws. If we were to use the schema articulated by Gavin Ortlund in his book *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, Paul is dealing with a “second-rank doctrine” that is urgent for the health and practice of the church.¹⁴ If we are going to appeal to the language of *disputable matters* from Romans 14:1, we should do so in a way that aligns with Paul’s intent. We should not appeal to this passage to silence conversations we believe are inconsequential, or claim this passage presents a relativistic “you do you” or “your truth is your truth” paradigm for the Christian’s belief and behaviour within a Christian community. Rather, the following prompts present a better applicational road forward when using Romans 14:1–15:16 in our churches. These observations are in no particular order, and may or may not be helpful fodder for you to consider for your particular church context:

1. We tend to read and apply the Bible too individualistically, and we need to proactively counteract that tendency. To use this text to engage tertiary theological issues that may be

¹⁴ Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 19.

relevant in our lives (e.g. whether or not Christians can drink alcohol, whether or not Christians can go to movies, etc.) is to misunderstand the intent of the text. Even in reading our text unit, the temptation to read the *oikodomē* (build up/edify) goal in personal and privatistic ways is very strong. We need to consider ways to evaluate the condition of our church family as a whole more than merely the anecdotes of individuals.

2. There is a perennial temptation for Christians to view those with whom they disagree with contemptuous thoughts. We need to remember that we are fellow heirs with our brothers and sisters in Christ; we are not endowed with the responsibility to ultimately discern the heart of other professing believers. We all share the same Lord. When we feel contempt for others, that is a prompt for us to repent and trust Jesus to be a just Lord and Judge, and for the Holy Spirit to be powerful enough to work in the lives of the elect.
3. Pastorally, there are many contemporary issues that we are tempted to say do not matter for living a life of holiness. However, even if such a category of theological, ethical, and practical issues did exist, using the language and schema of “disputable matters” from Romans 14 is inappropriate since this passage is dealing with an issue of urgency for the Roman church. Therefore, we need to actively resist the temptation to go directly from the language of our English translations of the Bible and narcigetically import them into our everyday situations, even if they *seem* to apply seamlessly.
4. This passage does not chastise the discernment about whether someone believes the right things or acts properly, but rather rebukes the one who views others with contempt. It is not good for *adynatos* to be weak. To leave a believer in a state of immaturity and error is not loving; it is also not loving to condemn the *intent* that is motivating a believer to act in wrong ways or believe immature things.

5. In Romans 15:14, Paul expected the community of faith to be able to instruct each other in the way of the truth, and he exhorted his protégé Timothy to “patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with careful instruction.”¹⁵ There is objective truth, and we should seek to embrace it and align our lives with it. We should also desire for others to embrace it and align their lives to it, within a welcoming relational context of full belonging. It is because of the reality of objective truth that Paul’s paradigm of “strong/weak” is actually helpful for the Roman Christians. Not everyone can be right at the same time while holding diametrically opposing views, and we need to be willing to not only kindly correct but also humbly receive correction, since maturity as a Christian will require us to both give and receive admonitions.
6. The temptation for us to use Romans 14 as a “let’s just agree to disagree” text may be strong, but it is not exegetically responsible. It is also an unfortunate abdication of a potential discipleship and maturation process. Engaging with fellow believers in robust dialogue that seeks to understand the truth and its necessary implications, in a manner that smells like the Fruit of the Spirit, will mature disciples of Jesus, not damage them.

¹⁵ 2 Tim. 4:2 (ESV).