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# "In Nonessentials, Liberty"

## A Key Ministry Context from Romans 14:1–15:13

BY ROLLIN A. RAMSARAN

Paul's letter to the Romans exemplifies the enduring maxim appropriated by our Stone-Campbell forebears: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity."<sup>1</sup> In this paper I examine briefly the first and third clauses of the maxim (unity; charity) with respect to Romans. I then examine in greater detail the middle clause (liberty) in light of Rom 14:1–15:13. The ordering of my discussion reflects Paul's own reasoning pattern. The burden of my argumentation in the final section is (1) to stress the necessity of moral competence on the part of believers and (2) to sketch out the context in which proper moral reckoning can sustain the belief and practice of individuals *and* promote unity in the body of Christ.

### "In Essentials, Unity"

A dominant theme of Romans is the common mutuality of all believers<sup>2</sup>—Jew and Gentile—before an impartial and righteous God. Without doubt, Israel has enjoyed a special place before God, but God's presence has not been completely withheld from all peoples who demonstrate true faith and right behavior (2:6–11). All believers—whether Jew or Gentile—share a common past, present, and future. The past is marked by sin's strong, apocalyptic dominion of slavery, in which human beings are nonetheless culpable for their transgressions (3:9–18). The present, however, is marked by God's stronger, new-

covenant action, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, on behalf of those who believe with the faith of Abraham (3:21–4:25). Enmity with God is ended, slavery to the domain of sin is broken, and life is properly motivated and navigated with the help of the Spirit of God (chapters 5–8). The lordship of Jesus replaces the lordship of sin. The future is marked by the assurance of the presence of God's love into eternal life (8:31–39), including the return and place of Israel among the full new-covenant people of God (chapters 9–11).

In sum, there is, on the one hand, mutuality marked by rebellion, culpability, and failure, but also, on the other hand, mutuality marked by the atoning death of Jesus, peace with God, the sharing in the death of Jesus through a common baptism and transformed lives in the Spirit, and a destiny one with another through the love of God. For the Jew first, then the Gentile, mutuality and "unity in essentials" comes through a common story. Can there be boasting in privileges before an impartial God who has given equally to all? Can there be judging among those for whom God has cleared all paths to enmity? No, members of these believing communities must accept one another with full mutuality. If Paul's retelling of the larger story is successful, then perhaps the Roman Christians will (1) lay aside their differences with one another and (2) accept Paul as a mutual partner, despite slanderous reports of his law-



lessness (3:8), before sending him on his way to Spain.<sup>3</sup>

### “In All Things, Charity”

Living out a common story means that believers cherish mutuality through love and truthfulness. Love means acceptance and self-giving support for others as God’s will and life unfold amidst believers in an old realm that is still invested with sin’s power (13:11–14). How, then, is mutuality most effectively expressed? Paul answers in chapters 12–13 that mutuality is expressed when “love is without pretense” (12:9a).<sup>4</sup> Believers, then, must morally reckon together what the will of God is for their time and circumstances — “what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:1–3). Differences among believers, however, will be evident, since God has assigned a different measure of faith to each (12:3b). Yet faith’s proper direction is to grow increasingly stronger, and Paul suggests that this happens in community life when true humility is practiced and when every part of the body contributes to a fully functioning whole, in which gifts are exercised on behalf of all (12:4–8).

Given mutuality in love, Paul can provide a striking portrait of a properly functioning Christian community through a series of maxims:<sup>5</sup>

Let love be genuine [without pretense]; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. (12:9–17)

Now, love also counteracts vengeful inclinations, and it protects community members in the civic arena. Given the high likelihood of a tax collection prob-

lem in the imperial city at the time of this letter, any civil unrest within the Christian communities resulting from taxes would have threatened highly recognizable Jewish members with undue hardship or expulsion.<sup>6</sup> Hence, restraint on the part of Gentile members truly demonstrates mutuality born of love. Love works no evil (12:17; cf. 1 Thess 5:15). Indeed, true love *is* the fulfillment of the law, as believers live out their baptism between the present and the parousia (coming) of the Lord Jesus Christ (13:8–14). “In all things, charity.”

Paul’s reasoning suggests that love must be understood and in place before matters of difference can be engaged head-on. No doubt this is because the Pauline ethic, simply put, is “freedom constrained by love.”<sup>7</sup> Paul has hinted at these differences among believers in Rom 12:3–8 (“each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned . . . not all the members have the same function . . . have gifts that differ according to the grace given”), but he takes up the matter of differences directly in Rom 14:1–15:13.

### “In Nonessentials, Liberty”

There is a certain rhythm to Rom 14:1–15:13 that cautions us against dividing it up too readily. The section should be read as a whole, as indicated by the structural cues of ring device (2x) and repetition. With regard to ring device, we notice first the directives to “welcome” *the one abstaining or eating* (14:1) and to “welcome one another” (15:7). The warrant for this behavior is the example of God (14:3) and of Christ (15:7), respectively. Second, of equal importance, is the injunction to pursue “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (14:17) and the prayer “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (15:13). Finally, we should note the persistent theme of passing judgment on another in chapter 14 (vv. 3, 4, 10, 13).

#### *Between Judgment and Conviction*

The general flow of Paul’s argument in Romans 14 is to shut down judging of others with respect to “opinions” and to increase self-testing/evaluation of one’s behavior according to religious and moral values. Specifically, Christians are to have well-



## Paul is adamant that the judging of another's conviction or faith is God's business.

thought-out and articulated convictions, which are not to be judged by others. Paul is adamant that the judging of another's conviction or faith is God's business: "Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand" (14:4).

Paul attributes differences among believers to differing strengths of faith—and this ordained by God! "[Each] must think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned him/her" (12:3b; my trans.).<sup>8</sup> Striking in this context is the level of moral competency expected of the Roman Christians regardless of the level of their faith. These "second-level" reasonings (NRSV, "opinions"), which proceed from "first-level" truths ("essentials"), are not unimportant. They are serious concerns that maintain one's relationship to God. God expects his people to live by conviction.

Moral competency is remarkably individuated in Romans 14. Paul is clear that there are morally relevant differences among believers based on strength of faith: "One believes he or she may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. . . . One person esteems one day as better than another, while another person esteems all days alike" (14:2, 5; my trans., based on RSV). Each individual must gauge his or her behavior based on judgment before God (14:6–9, 22). When Paul first moves into moral reckoning in light of another (from [each person's] "I" to "us"; vv. 7–8), it is between each believer and the Lord, not each believer in light of other believers. One determines one's liberty before God, then one adjusts the use of a liberty in light of others. Even when liberty is voluntarily laid aside, it

still remains available<sup>9</sup>—as a conviction applicable under other circumstances and situations.

Liberty is born of individual conviction that stems from a relationship with God. When one can give thanks to God for what one has received and what one uses, then liberty is present (14:6; cf. 1 Cor 10:30). Paul believes that this is the case with all foods (vv. 14, 20b). Liberty's boundaries, however, move in or out according to the faith maturity of the individual: "The faith that you [singular!] have, have as your own conviction before God" (v. 22a). Truly blessed (at peace) is the individual who holds firm to his or her principles before God (v. 22b). If, however, an individual doubts or wavers with regard to inner conviction, the trusting relationship with God is threatened, liberty threatens to become sin, and the course of action should be abandoned (v. 23).

### *Standards for Discernment: Paul's Maxim in 14:17*

Because individual inner conviction is *worked out before God*, a touchstone is maintained that keeps all such convictions from being articulated simply as self-serving interests of the individual. To bring God into the decision-making process is to value the plan and purposes of God to create an authentic people of God, a true community of the faithful. Paul addresses this aspect in Rom 14:13–23 with his emphasis on "walking in love" (14:15b) and the pursuit of "mutual upbuilding" (14:19b, a phrase synonymous with love—also 15:2; cf. 1 Cor 8:1b). Hence, Paul's ethic: the exercising of individual liberties, constrained by love when necessary.

Paul's pastoral moves in chapter 14 are worthy of attention. First, Paul's illustrations of clean or unclean are rather oblique with regard to the precise behaviors advocated by the weak and the strong.<sup>10</sup> Neat categories are difficult to assert—certainly, not the weak as Jewish believers and the strong as Gentile believers. Eating only vegetables, abstaining from certain days—even the issue of drinking wine—are rather broad categories of illustration rather than *the* specific problems in the Roman communities. Paul hopes to say something that will be applicable to any problem that is present or may arise in the Roman churches.

Second, in Rom 14:17 Paul casts his advice about love—that is, the proper context for exercising indi-



vidual liberties—in maxim form: “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” During Paul’s time, rhetoricians and philosophic moralists considered it a sign of maturity and stature to compose their own rules or maxims for proper living. Maxims reinforce Paul’s moral character as a speaker; here the maxim provides a capstone to a section of Paul’s argumentation, as evidenced by the strong endorsement that follows: “One who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by all!” (14:18; my trans., based on RSV).<sup>11</sup> Employing this maxim fits well Paul’s use of oblique illustrations as mentioned above, for maxims by nature require moral reflection and support a wide spectrum of applications from a general principle.

In composing his maxim, Paul adeptly contrasts undesirable behavior, “not [disputes over] food and drink,” with desirable (God-sanctioned, 14:18) behavior that leads to “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (cf. 1 Cor 4:20).<sup>12</sup> Verse 21 explicitly takes the application of this maxim beyond eating and drinking, for “anything that makes your brother or sister stumble” violates the goal of righteousness, peace, and joy. Hence, while Christians have individual rights, the exercise of those rights must support specific outcomes: fidelity in relationships, wholeness within the community, and the common expression of praise to God, which will result when such a course of action is taken.

### Overcoming Our Differences Today

In Rom 14:1–15:13 Paul does not give a ten-point plan for overcoming differences. Rather, Paul attempts to open up a gracious space in which unity—not uniformity—may take place. Cultivating certain mutual dispositions and learning to hold out open arms to one another seem to be crucial. The following practical suggestions may be helpful in creating the right character in our corporate gatherings that we call church.

First, teach the common story of all believers. God cares for all humanity and works to create, sustain, and redeem it both for and to God’s purposes. In the present time, God has shown the greatest act of love by giving over Jesus to death that *any* who

respond by faith might live. To those who respond, he has given the Holy Spirit and gifts for a *common life* together. As believers, we come *humbly seeking* before a gracious God who retains the right to be the ultimate Judge of every human action.

Second, teach moral competency to our church members. Believers should know that they are to be people of conviction before God. Moral reckoning might begin with asking the question, Will this ac-

While Christians have individual rights, the exercise of those rights must support specific outcomes: fidelity in relationships, wholeness within the community, and the common expression of praise to God. . .

tion produce righteousness, peace, and joy? (Variations: What is the “good news” in doing this or that? How would such a course of action reflect the character of God?) As our communities grow in maturity, we should seek to engage hard issues rather than ignoring them. And we must be prepared to realize that within our local body of believers, there may be significant disagreements based on true conviction before God.<sup>13</sup>

Third, cultivate a nonjudgmental disposition among congregation members. If our essentials are reinforced in a common story, and our differences that are based on conviction are openly discussed and recognized, then a nonjudgmental disposition will be cultivated in concrete welcoming contexts: worship services, small groups, shared meals, hand-



in-hand work on service projects for the needy. Differences (stemming from race, gender, socioeconomic status, and disputes over "opinions") move to the side for those who actively welcome one another and interlock their arms in common experience. Might we dare to say that what is true at the local church level is also applicable to interactions between congregations—both within our own tradition and without?

Finally, then, sisters and brothers, welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you! For the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. In serving Christ, we who seek to guide all our actions by these standards are acceptable to God and approved by all!

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This maxim is traced back with questionable surety to the seventeenth-century Lutheran theologian Peter Meiderlin. For a short history, see Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1975), 92–93.

<sup>2</sup>I define "mutuality" here as sharing a common perspective, belonging to one another, and living together in interdependence.

<sup>3</sup>Briefly, then, I identify Paul's purposes in writing the letter to the Romans as, at least, twofold: (1) to rectify tensions within the Roman house churches, including Gentile pride, and (2) to argue for a sense of mutuality and openness that would pave the way for Paul's own acceptance among them on the way to Spain. For extensive discussion on this point, see Karl P. Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991) and A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

<sup>4</sup>On the translation of this phrase and its centrality to the paraenetic section in Romans 12, see the fine study by Walter T. Wilson, *Love without Pretense: Romans 12.9–21 and Hellenistic-Jewish Wisdom Literature*, WUNT 46 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991). All scripture translations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup>On the function of these "maxim stacks" in Paul (cf. 1 Cor 16:13–14; 2 Cor 13:11b; Gal 6:1b–6; 1 Thess 5:16–22), see J. Paul Sampley, *Walking between the Times: Paul's Moral Reasoning*

(Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 96; Rollin A. Ramsaran, *Liberating Words: Paul's Use of Rhetorical Maxims in 1 Corinthians 1–10* (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996), 3, 83 with n. 13; and, in more detail, Rollin A. Ramsaran, "Getting to the Point: Maxims in Paul's Moral Reasoning," in *Paul in His Greco Roman World*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (Valley Forge: Trinity, forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup>Cf. the discussion in Neil Elliot, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994), 218–26. Elliot, though more reticent about the historical situation, views the rhetorical purpose of Rom 13:1–7 in a similar manner. See also Justin L. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty, and Survival* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 184–85 with n. 24.

<sup>7</sup>See Ramsaran, *Liberating Words*, 64–73.

<sup>8</sup>On this issue of an individuated measure of faith apart from, but in addition to, the believer's initial response of faith, see J. Paul Sampley, "Faith and Its Moral Life: A Study of Individuation in the Thought World of the Apostle Paul," in *Faith and History: Essays in Honor of Paul W. Meyer*, ed. John T. Carroll, Charles H. Cosgrove, and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 221–38, esp. 232.

<sup>9</sup>This is why Paul can speak in 14:16 of one's good—which remains a good—being tarnished by others' comments on its misuse. Note Paul's personal example in 1 Corinthians 9, which includes the retention of his individual rights and his voluntary setting aside of rights in the context of self-control. For a full discussion, see Ramsaran, *Liberating Words*, 51–56.

<sup>10</sup>Noted by J. Paul Sampley, "The Weak and the Strong: Paul's Careful and Crafty Rhetorical Strategy in Rom 14:1–15:13," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 40–52. Sampley discusses these examples in light of the rhetorical convention of "oblique speech." For a different view, see the recent study by Mark Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14:1–15:13 in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 88–101.

<sup>11</sup>For a full discussion of maxims in the rhetorical handbook tradition, as well as their identification and functions at the time of Paul, see Ramsaran, *Liberating Words*, 5–63.

<sup>12</sup>On the criteria for recognizing and evaluating rhetorical maxims in Paul, see *ibid.*, 22–29. For an evaluation of Rom 14:17, see *ibid.*, 37, 117 n. 82, 122 n. 123, 141 n. 1.

<sup>13</sup>In this piece I am attempting to set a context rather than establish a pure method for moral reckoning and decision making. For this latter enterprise, see Luke T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) and Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).