



+ This week at Magdalen Road church we had our penultimate sermon thinking about diversity in the Bible. We spent time in Romans 14 as Paul was helping the church there consider how to get along, when there were disputable matters within the church, over which they disagreed. The whole passage is leading towards 15v5-7 - because of Christ's mindset and acceptance of us, so we are to accept one another in love.

The division and disagreement came not over primary theological issues for which we are to stand firm, but rather secondary issues of theology that affects how we are to treat one another.

We said the passage fits, broadly speaking, under two headings:

### **+ Judgement is for Jesus**

There are two specific causes of division that Paul highlights: diet (believers: what believers can and can't eat) and days (whether certain days continue as sacred under the new covenant). What seem to be happening in the church is that there is judgement and contempt between the two parties.

Probably this is an issue between Gentile background believers and Jewish background believers. Paul describes the two groups in the church as the 'weak' and the 'strong'. By weak he does not mean physically weak or spiritually weak but rather those with a weak and tender conscience. Conversely the strong I'm not physically or spiritually strong but those with a strong conscience.

Consider the topic of diet for example - a Jewish Christian will have followed a plethora of dietary laws during their upbringing and pre-Christian life... but

now they are being told that food does not make them unclean. Actually it seems they are going a step further and eating only vegetables - perhaps because they are concerned that any meat has been sacrificed idols and so it is better to be safe than avoid it all. They are being judged by others in the church over this.

v14 Even though Paul would describe himself as strong, he is still encouraging the Christians in Rome to show kindness and grace to those whose consciences will not allow them to eat any meat. Paul wants them to remember that Jesus is the one who will judge and so they need to stop judging one another. One day they will give an account before God of how they have lived, it is his job to judge rather than theirs. Imagine what a church where mutual judgment of different parties is rife!

### **+ Liberty is for loving**

In our 'culture of rights' Paul's message to the Romans is at a stark contrast - Rather than standing on the rights he urges them to use the gospel freedom for the sake of others. Not only are they to not judge one another, over disputable matters we ought not to set up stumbling blocks for 'weaker' Christians. As churches, over disputable matters, we ought to be bend and change what we do to show grace towards those who are not on the same page as us.

### **+ Here are some possible questions to help conversations get started:**

From Romans 14 - what's the situation that Paul is writing to them about? How are the different groups treating each other? What language does Paul use? What does Paul urge them and why?

More broadly, what examples of 'weaker' and 'stronger' Christians can you think of? Have you been in churches where thought and care is given, so as not to set up stumbling blocks? What about what we eat, drink, wear etc? What aspects of 'western' or even 'Oxford' culture do we unwittingly replicate to the detriment of those who do not 'fit' with that culture?

How does this passage apply to us at MRC? If we were to better love and reach our neighbours how might we have to change how we 'do' church? Whether on Sundays or through the rest of the week?