

# THE INTERCONTINENTAL CHURCH OF GOD

## SPECIFIC BIBLE STUDIES - ROMANS 14

**SUBJECT:** Romans 14: Does it do away with Clean & Unclean Meats, the Sabbath and the Law?

**QUESTIONS:** What is this chapter about? Do any of its verses speak to doing away with the Law, clean and unclean meats or the Sabbath

### ANSWER:

To understand Romans 14, let us begin at looking at some of the Bible Outlines that are available to us.

Bible Book Outlines\New Testament\Romans

- E. Tolerance necessary for those with strong and weak consciences. 14:1-15:13.
  - 1. Differences of opinion over food or special days. 14:1-6.
  - 2. Judgment by the Lord, not by one's brother. 14:7-12.
  - 3. Removal of stumbling blocks. 14:13-23.

### (from The Wycliffe Bible Commentary)

Bible Outlines\New Testament\Romans

- IV. Practical exhortation (12:1-15:13)
  - A. The Christian's relation to consecration (12:1-2)
  - B. The Christian's relation to God's gifts (12:3-8)
  - C. The Christian's relation to fellow Christians (12:9-16)
  - D. The Christian's relation to mankind in general (12:17-21)
  - E. The Christian's relation to civil government (13)
  - F. The Christian's relation to a weak brother (14:1-15:13)

### (From The New Unger's Bible Dictionary)

Note: As we can see, Romans 14 is a chapter dealing with new members and/or those weak in the Faith. Nothing in these outlines would indicate that the doctrines of Sabbath, diet or the Law are done away.

## THE SUBJECT OF CLEAN AND UNCLEAN MEATS

Does anything in Romans 14 do away with the dietary laws?

Many believe that Romans 14 supports the idea that Christians are free from all former restrictions regarding meats. Verse 14, in which Paul wrote, "I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean," is often cited as a proof text.

This approach, however, fails to consider the author's perspective and the context of his letter to the Roman church. Many Bible resources agree that the book of 1 Corinthians was written about 55, although Romans was probably written from Corinth in 56 or 57. As demonstrated above, the food controversy in Corinth was over meat sacrificed

to idols. Since Paul was writing to the Romans from Corinth, where this had been a significant issue, this subject was fresh on Paul's mind and is the logical, biblically supported basis for Romans 14.

## **Understanding Paul's intent**

Those who assume the subject of Romans 14 is a retraction of God's law regarding clean and unclean animals must force this interpretation into the text because it has no biblical foundation.

The historical basis for the discussion appears, from evidence in the chapter itself, to have been meat sacrificed to idols.

Verse 2 contrasts the one who "eats only vegetables" with the one who believes "he may eat all things": meat as well as vegetables.

Verse 6 discusses eating or not eating and is variously interpreted as referring to fasting (no eating or drinking), vegetarianism (eating only vegetables) or eating or not eating meat sacrificed to idols.

Verse 21 shows that meat offered to idols was the dominant issue of this chapter: "It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak." Both meat and wine were commonly offered to idols in the Roman world, with portions of those offerings then sold in the marketplace.

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The Life Application Bible comments on verse 2: "The ancient system of sacrifice was at the center of the religious, social, and domestic life of the Roman world. After a sacrifice was presented to a god in a pagan temple, only part of it was burned. The remainder was often sent to the market to be sold. Thus a Christian might easily-even unknowingly-buy such meat in the marketplace or eat it at the home of a friend. Should a Christian question the source of his meat? Some thought there was nothing wrong with eating meat that had been offered to idols because idols were worthless and phony. Others carefully checked the source of their meat or gave up meat altogether, in order to avoid a guilty conscience. The problem was especially acute for Christians who had once been idol worshipers. For them, such a strong reminder of their pagan days might weaken their newfound faith. Paul also deals with this problem in 1 Corinthians 8."

What is the point of Paul's instruction in Romans 14? Depending upon their consciences, early believers had several choices they could make while traveling or living in their communities. If they did not want to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, they could choose to fast or eat only vegetables to make sure they did not consume any meat of suspicious background that might offend their conscience. If their consciences were not bothered by eating meat sacrificed to idols, they could choose any of the options. Within this context, Paul said, "Let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (verse 5) because "whatever is not from faith is sin" (verse 23).

Romans 14 is, in part, a chapter on Christian liberty-acting according to one's conscience within the framework of God's laws as they pertained to meat sacrificed to idols. Understood in its context, Romans 14 is not a permit to eat pork or any other unclean meat. When one understands that the historical food controversy of the New Testament dealt with meat sacrificed to idols and not which meats were clean, other scriptures become clear.

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Note: Thus we see that Romans 14 in no way does away with clean and unclean meat laws.

## **THE SUBJECT OF THE SABBATH AND THE HOLY DAYS**

In this section we are going to show that Romans 14 is not talking about the Sabbath or the Holy days. It is talking about pursuing peace with your brothers and sisters, some of who are new to the church or are weak in the faith.

Paul gives advice on this subject in Romans 14:19: "Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another." This seems so obvious that it need not be said, but God includes it in His Word because Christians within the church do not hold in check some of the very things that cause so much disunity in this world. The apostle entreats us to lay aside the causes of contention so we can live in harmony.

Sometimes we do not understand how competitive human nature is. It is proud. It feels it has to win, be vindicated,

and if possible, elevated over others. These attitudes do not make peace. Rather than pursuing the things that cause contention, Paul says, pursue the things that cause peace. It is a Christian's responsibility, part of his vocation. Emphasizing the positive is an incomplete, but nonetheless fairly accurate, description of what can be done.

Solomon writes in Proverbs 13:10, "By pride comes only contention, but with the well-advised is wisdom." Contention divides. Much of the strife and disunity in the church is promoted by those who seem bent on "majoring in the minors." This is the overall subject of Romans 14. Church members were becoming "bent out of shape" over things that irritated them but had little or nothing to do with salvation. They blew these irritants out of proportion to their real importance, creating disruption in the congregation.

Essentially, Paul tells these people to change their focus, to turn the direction of their thinking, because we agree on far more of real, major importance to salvation than what we disagree on. If we will cooperate on these major things rather than on private ends and prejudices, peace and unity will tend to emerge rather than strife and disunity. Paul further admonishes the irritated members to have faith in God's power to change the other: "Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand" (Romans 14:4).

### **Did Paul abolish the Sabbath?**

Many who argue that the Sabbath was abolished in the New Testament point to the apostle Paul's writings to justify their opinion. But is this correct? Three passages are commonly cited to support that claim: Romans 14:5, 6; Colossians 2:16, 17; and Galatians 4:9, 10.

A basic principle for understanding the Bible is to look at each verse in context, both in the immediate context of what is being discussed and in the larger social and historical context influencing the author and his audience at the time. Let's examine each of these verses in context and see if Paul indeed annulled or abolished Sabbath observance.

First, let's consider Paul's own statements about God's law. More than 25 years after the death of Jesus Christ, He wrote in Romans 7:12, "Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good." In Romans 2:13 he stated, "For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified." In Romans 7:22 he said, "For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man."

Many assume that, once we have faith in Jesus Christ, there is no more need to keep the law. Paul himself addressed this concept in Romans 3:31: "Do we then make void [Greek *katargeo*, meaning 'destroy' or 'abolish'] the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish [Greek *histemi*, meaning 'erect' or 'make to stand'] the law." Faith does not abolish the law, said Paul; it establishes and upholds it.

### **Are all days of worship alike?: Romans 14:5, 6**

In Romans 14:5, 6, Paul wrote: "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks."

From this statement, it could appear to some that Paul is saying that whatever day one chooses to rest and worship is irrelevant so long as one is "fully convinced in his own mind" and "observes it to the Lord." Does this mean that the Sabbath is no different from any other day or that we are free to choose whatever day we wish to observe?

To come to that conclusion, one must read it into the verse, because the Sabbath is nowhere mentioned here. In fact, the word Sabbath or references to Sabbath-keeping are not found anywhere in this epistle. The reference here is simply to "days," not the Sabbath or any other days of rest and worship commanded by God.

Keep in mind that Paul, earlier in this same epistle, had said: "The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Romans 7:12); "The doers of the law will be justified" (Romans 2:13), and "I delight in the law of God" (Romans 7:22). If he were saying here that Sabbath observance is irrelevant, such an assertion would be completely inconsistent with his other statements in this same letter.

### **What days did Paul discuss?**

What are the days Paul mentions here? We must look at the context to find out.

Paul was writing to a mixed church of Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome. In verses 2 and 3 Paul discussed vegetarianism ("he who is weak eats only vegetables") and continued this theme in verse 6 ("he who eats...and he who does not eat").

The passage in question about days is in verses 5 and 6, immediately between references to eating meat and vegetarianism in verses 2, 3 and 6. There is no biblical connection between Sabbath observance and vegetarianism, so these verses have to be taken out of context to assume that Paul was referring to the Sabbath.

"The close contextual association with eating suggests that Paul has in mind a special day set apart for observance as a time for feasting or as a time for fasting" (Everett F. Harrison, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 10, p. 146). It is apparent that Paul was discussing Roman or other special days during which feasting, fasting or abstaining from certain foods was practiced.

The context shows us that some members of the congregation there were eating meat, and others were abstaining from eating meat. The vegetarians were likely members who "feared lest they should (without knowing it) eat meat which had been offered to idols or was otherwise ceremonially unclean (which might easily happen in such a place as Rome), that they abstained from meat altogether" (W.J. Conybeare and J.S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 530).

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul addressed the issue of eating meat that may have been sacrificed to idols and consequently could have been viewed by some members as unfit to eat. Paul's point in that chapter was that any association of food with idolatrous activity had no bearing on whether that food was otherwise suitable for eating.

It appears likely that Paul was addressing the same issue in both groups, namely whether members should avoid meats that may have been associated with idolatrous worship. This may be indicated by Paul's reference to "unclean" meat in Romans 14:14. Rather than using the Greek word used to describe unclean, or prohibited, foods listed in the Old Testament, he used a word meaning common or defiled, which would be appropriate in describing meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 8 was the same as his conclusion in Romans 14:15: Be especially careful not to offend a fellow member, causing him to stumble or lose faith over the issue of meats. What is clear is that the Roman members' reason for avoiding meat was directly related to the days they were observing.

In no way was this related to Sabbath observance because God's Sabbath is a "feast" day (Leviticus 23:1-3), not a day when one must abstain from eating meat. The Sabbath is nowhere mentioned in Paul's letter to the Romans; it simply wasn't the issue. The days mentioned here are obviously connected with avoidance of meat, indicating that they are Roman or other observances and not any days of worship commanded by God.

So we now understand that Romans 14 in no way is speaking of the Sabbath much less doing away with it.

### **From our Doctrine on the [Sabbath](#):**

Certain scriptures in Paul's writings are often adduced as proof of his alleged attitude that Sabbath observance is unnecessary or even evil. For example, it is often held that Romans 14:5-6 shows that it does not matter which day one keeps holy, but this is actually nowhere stated. Since eating is mentioned several times in the passage, some commentators suggest it may be a question of fast days or something else to do with food. Verse 5 speaks of esteeming one day above another but says nothing about the reason for the preference. The word "esteem" (Greek *krino*) is not otherwise used of keeping a holy day. Similarly, in verse 6, the word *phroneo* ("regardeth," KJV; "observes," RSV) is not otherwise used to refer to the observance of festivals. To use this passage as proof that Paul no longer believed Sabbath observance to be necessary requires anti-Sabbatarians to demonstrate that this is in fact what lies behind the statement—something that has not been done up to this time.

## **IS THE LAW DONE AWAY**

This one is easy to answer. Paul states clearly that the law is still in effect.

### **Rom 7:12-14, 22**

12 Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.

13 Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.

14 For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.

KJV

22 For I delight in the law of God after the inward man:

KJV

**1 Tim 1:8**

8 But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully;

KJV

Note: There is no way for Romans 14 to be against the Law when so many other places show the law to still be in effect.

**CONCLUSION**

We have established that Romans 14 is speaking of our relationships with the brethren, be they new to the faith or weak in the faith. Nothing in Romans 14 is speaking to or doing away with the Law, the Sabbath & the Holy Days or clean and unclean meat or dietary laws.