

## "OUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE WEAK" (Romans 14:1-15:13)

John Stott

Looking back over this whole section (14:1 -15:13), which is largely devoted to how the strong should regard and treat the weak, it is particularly impressive to see how the apostle buttresses his ethical exhortations with solid theological arguments. Although we have noted six, three of them seem to be central. They concern the cross, the resurrection and the last judgment.

First, *Christ died to be our Savior*. Since God has accepted the weaker brother (1A:1, 3), and since Christ has accepted us (15:7), we must complete the triangle and accept one another. How could we possibly destroy those whom Christ died to save? The second fundamental argument is that *Christ rose to be our Lord*. This is explicitly stated (14:9). In consequence, all his people are his servants, and are accountable to him, the weak and the strong alike (14:6ff.). Thirdly, *Christ is coming to be our judge*. We will all stand before his judgment seat one day, and each of us will then give an account of himself or herself to God (14:10ff.). To presume to stand in judgment on others is to usurp the prerogative of God. These are the three acclamations which are made in many churches during the Lord's Supper: "Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!" They not only inform our worship; they also influence our behavior.

As we have tried to follow the intricacies of Paul's reasoning regarding relationships between the strong and the weak, it must sometimes have seemed very remote from our own situation. Yet there are two particular principles which Paul develops, which, especially in combination, are applicable to all churches in all places at all times. The first is the principle of *faith*. Everything must be done "from faith", he writes (14:23). Again, "each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (14:5). We need therefore to educate our consciences by the Word of God, so that we become strong in faith, growing in settled convictions and so in Christian liberty. Secondly, there is the principle of *love*. Everything must be done according to love (14:15). We need therefore to remember who our fellow Christians are, especially that they are our sisters and brothers for whom Christ died, so that we honor, not despise, them; serve, not harm, them; and especially respect their consciences.

One area in which this distinction between faith and love should operate is in the difference between essentials and non-essentials in Christian doctrine and practice. Although it is not always easy to distinguish between them, a safe guide is that truths on which Scripture speaks with a clear voice are essentials, whereas whenever equally biblical Christians, equally anxious to understand and obey Scripture, reach different conclusions, these must be regarded as non-essentials. Some people glory in the so-called 'comprehensiveness' of certain denominations. But there are two kinds of comprehensiveness, principled and unprincipled.

Dr. Alex Vidler has described the latter as the resolve "to hold together in juxtaposition as many varieties of Christian faith and practice as



are willing to agree to differ, so that the church is regarded as a sort of league of religions [a sort of "United Religions" he might have said today]. I have nothing to say for such unprincipled syncretism.' The true principle of comprehension, on the other hand, he writes, "is that a church ought to hold to the fundamentals of the faith, and at the same time allow for differences of opinion and of interpretation in secondary matters, especially rites and ceremonies . . . ."

In fundamentals, then, faith is primary, and we may not appeal to love as an excuse to deny essential faith. In non-fundamentals, however, love is primary, and we may not appeal to zeal for the faith as an excuse for failures in love. Faith instructs our own conscience; love respects the conscience of others. Faith gives liberty; love limits its exercise. No one has put it better than Rupert Meldenius, a name which some believe was a *nom de plume* used by Richard Baxter:

In essentials unity;

In non-essentials liberty;

In all things charity.