

## ***The Relative Right***

**Romans 14:1-19**

The other day my daughter, Emily, and I had an interesting conversation while I drove her to the airport to catch her flight home to L.A. The topic was food. She and her husband, Chris, maintain a fairly strict gluten-free diet and she was lamenting the fact that her east coast trip (which included one night in our home) required a break from her normal routine. Although Wendy prepared a gluten-free dinner, other stops along the way were not as sensitive or compliable. As she anticipated returning to her familiar cuisine, Emily regaled me with the benefits of her diet. I listened sympathetically, but by the time I reached the airport terminal, I wasn't convinced enough to give up my daily peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. She'll have her gluten-free diet and I'll stick to mine.

Along the way we reflected on how much our personal diets have changed over the years. Though we differ in how we've done it, both of us commented on how our nutritional intake used to include a lot of family recipes passed down from previous generations that were rich and fattening. Now we've trended toward a healthier balance as we became more intentional about it. We're certainly not unique. Awareness about the impact of good nutrition has come a long way in the past couple decades as more health consequences are known about bad food choices. Even an entire field of study has developed around nutritional justice, since access to and affordability of healthy options are significant social and economic issues, particularly for lower income people whose food supply is dependent on what's readily available.

When it comes to diets, though, being health-conscious isn't merely a 21<sup>st</sup> century concern; it's also inherent to some ethnic traditions and

certainly many ancient religious taboos. Most of us probably never thought too much about what we serve at church potluck suppers until we became engaged in interfaith gatherings where a *kashrut* or kosher (Jewish) or halal (Muslim) meal might be prepared. If you're an observant Jew or Muslim, you take your food choices quite seriously as a matter of religious practice, purity, and faithfulness. Similar restrictions are found in other traditions, e.g., never serve beef to Hindus, or any meat at all to practicing Buddhists, or offer after dinner coffee or tea to Mormons. When it comes to alcohol, many traditions forbid it altogether. So, part of the challenge of living in an increasingly pluralistic society is that one diet doesn't fit all and sensitivity to the traditions of one's neighbors is an important way of being hospitable and considerate before making assumptions about what they do or do not eat.

Where did these ancient dietary restrictions arise from? They didn't develop out of thin air; there was a context and need that prescribed virtually every taboo. In the Hebrew tradition, for instance, the prohibitions against certain meats and shellfish and the consumption of blood derived from the practical threat of diseases (e.g., trichinosis) and what would now be identified as bacteria-borne illnesses common to land or sea creatures—all this wisdom likely learned through tragic experience in a time before emergency medical care. There also was a sense of the sacred spirit in the lifeblood of an animal, therefore to consume that which was the source of life was to offend the Almighty One who created life. So, out of concern for the safety, welfare, and survival of Israel's own people, it's assumed the law of Moses included dietary restrictions to protect them. The need came before the prohibition.

A similar thing happened in relation to the biblical taboos around human sexuality. What came down in the biblical record as divine commandments in Leviticus or elsewhere, naturally arose from a very definite context and practical rationale. Much of it was related to tribal expansion and security in the ancient world. With the primary need for procreation to produce offspring and increase tribal size and strength, coupled with the threats to their safety, identity, and covenant unity, certain sexual behaviors or acts were rendered as taboo and legislated as moral sin. What has been treated by tradition as a divinely revealed ethical and moral code was more likely a matter of Israelites ensuring their interests in a growing population. That was the effect of the law of Moses; stone tablets didn't drop out of the sky with divine rules or revelation—rather, an existential need was identified and a prohibition was codified through their religious culture to ensure Israelites would conform for their protection and security. Such laws then became part of their racial and cultural identity. In time, as these things tend to develop, in many circles the rules themselves became more important than the rationale behind them; thus, being observant became an indicator of how faithful people were to the tradition itself, instead of the more utilitarian purpose of protecting them from potential harm.

This, of course, raises an underlying and essential question: on what authority are beliefs, cultural mores, or customs established, and are they intended to be universal, timeless, and absolute or are they situational to a particular context and people? Are biblical commandments, for instance, meant to be fixed and universally-applied, or are they relative to the historical setting and context and not always relevant as circumstances change? Is what ancient tradition claims as right versus wrong something

we should blindly obey without considering the relative circumstances? As people of faith, you and I wrestle with these questions all the time, as standards and circumstances change over time. Depending on your point of view and where you stand in relation to the tradition itself will reveal how strict you are in observing ancient commandments.

This has been debated for centuries, if not for thousands of years. Interestingly, the early Christian movement itself struggled with this in a significant way, more than we might realize. One place where this debate gets played out is in our text for today from Romans. Throughout this letter (or treatise), the Apostle Paul attempted to stake his claim and justify his rather innovative theology, making his case for why Gentiles (and ultimately Jews as well) were not required to conform to Jewish law, customs, or traditions if they believed in the gospel he proclaimed and followed in the ways of Jesus. This was no minor religious squabble over theological minutia; this was a major philosophical sea-change in their understanding of God and of Jewish identity, resulting in a huge fracture in the early church, with the mother church in Jerusalem, led by Jesus' brother, James, at times denouncing and distancing themselves from Paul and his mission (something we'll explore in more depth in my upcoming Tuesday night Bible Study). The antagonism went both ways. Paul basically refuted his own Jewish tradition in favor of his proclamation about Christ, dismissing in many ways much of what shaped the Jewish messianic identity and mission that characterized Jesus and the early disciples.

When we examine our text for this morning, it's evident that Paul was attempting to navigate his way around the basic conflict, as it surfaced repeatedly over dietary standards alone. The conflict was this: in many

settings, Jewish believers felt compelled to maintain a kosher diet in order to reflect their Jewish identity in the context of the Roman world. The expectation was, if Gentiles believed in the Hebrew God and sought the promise of salvation and to follow the ways of a Jewish messiah, then they had to conform to the customs that Jesus, himself, followed as an observant Jew. It's easy to understand this sentiment. If anyone wants to be a part of a religion or culture or tradition, then it's assumed that he or she would follow its customs, rituals, and expression. As an outsider, it's not their place to disregard what isn't theirs to disregard. The ancient tradition is more significant than recent converts. We see the same expectations today with all sorts of religious traditions, perhaps to a certain degree, even our own.

Paul, however, was reinventing all of this and making what was essentially Jewish into a relative matter. For him the risen Christ, though Jewish, represented a new human reality which was larger than any tradition, greater than Moses and the Patriarchs. Hence, his mission wasn't governed by Jewish law and heritage. In that light, faith wasn't defined by following established customs rooted in an ancient context, but by the presence of the new Spirit of love within a person, uniting all people into right relations with God and with each other (which, incidentally, was already in accord with Jewish tradition). What was in dispute was Paul's rather dismissive claim about the role of traditional Jewish customs and practices, which for him were an unnecessary burden placed upon converts. The law and customs were relative, not obligatory.

As you might imagine, this was a hard sell, especially to traditionalists. Paul's innovative theology wasn't easily or widely embraced by most Jews. In many respects, he was an outlier, at least compared to the

more traditional leaders of the Jesus movement who viewed the transformed witness of Israel itself as the source of redemption for the world—it wasn't Jesus who saved the world, it was to be the new Israel led by their messiah, Jesus—a perspective that was shared among many of the earliest believers, including James and Peter. That would fulfill Scripture—all the nations would come to Zion to worship the one true God. To be saved meant to be joined with Christ in the new Israel—to reflect Israel as it was meant to be, not to completely disregard its cherished traditions altogether.

This conflict was fierce. Though he was controversial and at the time less influential than others, Paul was stubborn and adamant about his own beliefs and message—even calling traditionalists “weak” in their faith! He made his case about morality and ethical reasoning in a way that still would be controversial today, i.e., that morality and faithfulness are not about *conformity*, but rather, *conscience*. For Paul, conforming to tradition was unnecessary; instead, moral authority lies in a person's Spirit-inspired conscience, evidenced by loving actions. It's very idealistic claim to make on many levels, but it operates on an assumption that if your conscience tells you something is wrong, then don't do it; if your conscience tells you something is right, then do that. Trust in the Spirit to enlighten you to what is right for any given situation. What's right is relative to what your conscience believes is right in that context. Though ethicists might challenge this premise, for Paul it made perfect sense—loving one's neighbor was fulfilling the law and the prophets, so morality flows from that motivation.

The only caveat was, in order not to cause offense or division, Paul's counsel was to always consider the impact of your actions upon your

neighbor. If something would offend them, don't do it. Love and respect for others was the moral basis for guiding behavior.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another...If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love...So do not let your good be spoken of as evil.

Obviously, if we had more time, we could unpack this and explore the implications and reasoning Paul makes.

Suffice to say, for Paul it comes down to the profound recognition of the spiritual presence of God influencing the believer's conscience. It worked well for him as he tried to navigate the swirling waters of disagreement and judgment within his communities and between him and the more traditional leaders in Jerusalem. In many ways, it became the most practical way for the church to move forward in the conflicted environment between Jewish traditionalists and Pauline innovators, or in our jargon, between theological conservatives and liberals.

The implications of this message are clear for our own time, as conservatives and liberals battle it out on many issues in the American Christian context. It gets even more complicated when you bring in ancient mores and traditions from other faiths. Yet, it seems to me that a focus on the inspired conscience actually affirms the reality in which we live and the legitimacy of differing points of view, allowing for people to live into their conscience and, as the case may be, to draw different conclusions about what to do in a given situation—conclusions and judgments that cannot be made absolute and obligatory upon everyone. The key is, each one must follow their clear conscience influenced by the love and consideration they have for another, which is the expression of faith in the daily world. It is a situational ethic based on love.

In many respects, it's what we all acknowledge on a practical level: what's right is often relative—on a proverbial level: you eat what you choose and I'll eat what I want. If it's for the health of each one, then the freedom to choose is certainly allowable. You have your perspective and I'll have mine. That may not satisfy everyone, but it's a pretty good way to recognize we're all in this together and that the only rule that truly matters is the Golden one that leads us to mutually respect, love, and care for each other. Then we can leave all the rest, as they say, to God.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes  
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT  
17 September 2017