

Our Fellowship and Our Conscience

Franklin Church of Christ
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Introduction:

“Who is my brother?” What a loaded question. Jesus asked it in **Matthew 12:48-50**. His answer was, “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother...” (ESV). Of course, Jesus had an advantage. He perfectly understood God’s will and the hearts of all men, therefore, He perfectly understood how to approach, talk to and deal with every person and issue. I, on the other hand, am growing (cf. **II Peter 1:5-8**). While I am convinced I understand the will of God in general and I am certainly convinced God’s entire will is understandable (**Ephesians 3:3-4; 5:17**), I recognize I am not Jesus. Therefore, I struggle to answer this question exhaustively. Further, considering **I Corinthians 5:11**, answering who is my brother does not end the discussion. Some people may wear the name “brother” and yet I cannot have fellowship with them. That is, I cannot jointly participate in spiritual work, sometimes not even a meal, together. How do I know when to sever fellowship? How do I know when to maintain it?

This question comes up almost anytime we disagree. Whether we talk about institutionalism, marriage/divorce/remarriage, head coverings, elder qualifications, pitch pipes or dress codes, someone inevitably asks, “Can we maintain fellowship with each other?” Someone else says, “**Romans 14**.” No matter what issue is discussed, **Romans 14** seems to be the final word. This chapter is about welcoming others even when we differ in practice. Sadly, because we most often study **Romans 14** only in the context of some present disagreement, we easily read into the chapter a meaning that will allow us to fellowship those we want and “disfellowship” (I use the term accommodatively here) those about whom we aren’t as concerned. Strive to examine this text freshly without thinking how it will impact what you believe about any hot topic in the brotherhood or what you think about any of the brethren who preach them. Then let its principles guide you in making your own fellowship decisions.

Discussion:

I. Misuses of **Romans 14**.

- A. **Romans 14** is not a band-aid to cover every difference. **I Corinthians 5:11** clearly demonstrates we must sever fellowship over some differences. So does **I Corinthians 15:33**. In context of the Corinthians allowing people to teach there was no resurrection, Paul said, “Bad company ruins good morals” (ESV). That is, the Corinthians were not to associate with the bad company teaching this error. We cannot use **Romans 14** as the universal eraser for all differences or to teach an unqualified unity in diversity.
- B. **Romans 14** is not an excuse to quit studying. Sadly, too many study an issue until they decide “That falls under **Romans 14**.” People are convinced “falling under **Romans 14**” means the issue doesn’t matter. Why spend time studying issues that don’t matter? That seems logical. However, **Romans 14:1** speaks of weakness in faith. Doesn’t it stand to reason if someone is weak in any sense, they need to pursue strength? Consider also **Romans 14:5**. That text says I need to be fully convinced I am doing right. The only way to be fully convinced is to continue studying. **Romans 14** is not an excuse to quit studying, but a reason to keep studying.
- C. **Romans 14** is not a straight-jacket with which to bind preferences. My friend, Max Dawson, was once told he should not wear his red tie while preaching anymore. The tie offended a sister and because of **Romans 14** he should no longer wear it. Offended preferences are not the same as violated consciences. **Romans 14** is not about likes and dislikes, but about someone sinning because they participate in something they are not convinced is lawful. Read **vss. 14-23**. The brother did not dislike eating meat. Rather, he was unconvinced eating meat was lawful. Therefore, when he ate, he was not sure he was obeying God. Whatever is not from faith is sin. Exercising this point takes some honesty. The sister I told you about a moment ago said the reason the tie offended her is it made her think of the devil and was therefore a distraction during the sermon. That sounds spiritual enough. She seemed to believe because she could remotely connect some spiritual issue to this tie, she had a right to use **Romans 14** to tell my friend he couldn’t wear it anymore. Another great example is the continual debate over modern songs in our congregational assemblies. You don’t have to like every song. You don’t have to like every kind of song. You don’t have to like old songs. You don’t have to like new songs. But please, do not attempt to turn your preferences into a standard for our congregational assemblies. Do not turn to **Romans 14** to get song leaders not to sing songs you don’t like. If the songs teach truth

and honor God, then just because you don't like the style doesn't suddenly mean they are forbidden by **Romans 14**. Be honest, are you really being caused to sin or are you being asked to do something you don't like? **Romans 14** is not a straight jacket to bind preferences.

- D. **Romans 14** is not permission to do whatever I want without regard for my brethren. This may seem too obvious. However, I have seen people highlight their liberties, acting as though they may do whatever they want because "**Romans 14:10** says you are not to judge me on these matters." That is exactly opposite of the chapter's meaning. Reread **vss. 13-16, 20-23** again. Their whole point is we Christians must be willing to refrain from our "rights" to make for peace and edification among brethren. We can proclaim our liberty and rights all day, but if in that pursuit we cause others to stumble we will be lost.
- E. **Romans 14** is not to be used by us to tell everyone else what they are allowed or not allowed to do. Considering our last two points, we learn **Romans 14** is one of those passages intended to tell us how to act, not teach us how to tell everyone else to act. It is like **Philippians 2:3-4**, which tells us not to do anything from selfishness. The moment we start arguing with someone about how they are violating **Philippians 2:3-4** by not doing what we want, we are selfishly violating the passage. That is how **Romans 14** works. The moment we use **Romans 14** to demand others refrain from some action or cease judging us for some action, we are misusing the passage. The passage is intended to make *us* refrain from some action if it causes a brother or sister to stumble. It is intended to cause *us* to quit passing judgment when someone is involved in some issue about which we have doubts. **Romans 14** intends to make us look at ourselves, not everyone else.

II. Welcoming a brother according to **Romans 14**?

- A. As earlier mentioned, **Romans 14** is about welcoming a brother or sister who differs with us. With that in mind, what kind of issues "fall under" **Romans 14**? I cannot make a universal, brotherhood-wide list of issues that "fall under" **Romans 14**. In fact, I hope to demonstrate no one can. Such lists do not tell us what **Romans 14** teaches. Rather, they tell us where the list maker is spiritually. Instead, I want to demonstrate principles presented in **Romans 14** to help you make your decisions about which issues you will see in **Romans 14**. I believe an issue must meet all of these criteria to be a "**Romans 14** issue."
- B. For a matter to "fall under" **Romans 14**, it must be a matter of practice, not merely belief.
 - 1. **Romans 14** does not address every disagreement you and I might have. It addresses different practices. One person ate meats and kept days, another didn't.
 - 2. There are two areas in which this is important.
 - a. First, some disagreements do not affect practice and will not. For instance, while working with Max Dawson, we discovered we disagreed about the meaning of **Matthew 24**. He believes the more widely accepted view that **Matthew 24** deals with the destruction of Jerusalem through **vs. 35**. After that, he believes it directly addresses Christ's final coming. On the other hand, I believe the entire chapter directly addresses the destruction of Jerusalem and speaks of the final coming indirectly in the sense that all judgment follows a general pattern. We could work together because the only difference our disagreement made was the exact teaching on **Matthew 24**. It did not and will not change our practice on any issue. It does not impact our teaching on the kingdom. It does not impact our teaching on obedience. On the other hand, if he took a Premillennial view of the chapter, that would impact several issues of practice, including teaching on the kingdom and what it takes to be part of it. I could not have continued working with him in that scenario.
 - b. Second, some disagreements are matters of growth and understanding. Severing fellowship is not our first line of attack when we find out we believe something different. If we took that approach, we could not have fellowship with anyone and no one could have fellowship with us. If we believe we are all growing, we must also believe we are all wrong on some point. We continue studying that we might be corrected and draw closer to Jesus. Therefore, there will be periods of time in which we consciously extend fellowship to someone who disagrees with our belief and yet is not differing in practice. (In fact, I imagine we are all doing this unconsciously because we do not know what every person here believes about every issue. Nor should we set up a witch hunt to find out.)

- For instance, I was converted while a teenager because I became convinced I was to be a Christian only and not a Baptist kind of Christian. I became convinced I needed to be baptized for the remission of sins, which I hadn't done and was, therefore, not a Christian no matter how religious I had been. However, I was not initially convinced songs of worship and edification had to be sung without instrumental accompaniment. Was the congregation to hunt down every single incorrect belief I held and withhold fellowship until I toed the line? Of course not. I was and am a growing Christian. No doubt, had I begun to teach or practice differently, they would take action. But while I was willing to submit to the common practice and was not divisively teaching my own misunderstandings, the congregation could maintain fellowship with me. (I have since studied more and learned the New Testament does not authorize worshipping God or edifying our brethren with instruments of music. I believe and teach it is unlawful to do so.)
- C. ... it must involve individual practice, not congregational.
1. **Romans 14:2** tells of one person who eats meats and another person who eats only vegetables. **Romans 14:4, 10-12** say the matters of this chapter have to do with an individual's service to his Master. While the message of the chapter may sometimes bear on our decisions for congregational activity, this passage is not dealing with congregational activity, but individual. It is dealing with whether or not we eat meat in our homes, not whether we add meat to the Lord's Supper.
 2. Sometimes, the individual activity may be seen in our assemblies and yet still be an individual activity. Consider a contrast. A particular song leader may decide to use a pitch pipe to establish the pitch of the song he is leading. However, he is using that for himself; the congregation is not using it. You may have conscience against the pitch pipe and could not use it to pitch the song when you are leading, but the other's use of it does not mean you are using it. In contrast to that, if I pulled up a piano and started accompanying our singing, we would all be singing to unauthorized accompaniment. We cannot say, "Well instrumental accompaniment is a **Romans 14** issue," because the use of the instrument involves everyone. This is why I cannot be a member of an institutional church. In an institutional congregation, I could not pretend my contribution was being used only for authorized activities. When a church's funds are used for work I believe is unauthorized, my contribution is being used for that by nature of membership within the congregation. If I cannot give to support the congregation's work, I, personally, cannot be a member.
- D. ...one brother has a strong conviction; the other doubts.
1. Do not miss this, it is the most common mistake made about **Romans 14**. I have taught in the past and repeatedly heard **Romans 14** is about two people equally convinced in opposite directions on an issue. That is, it talks about one person completely convinced eating meats was lawful and one just as convinced eating meats was unlawful. Consider the following statement from F. Lagard Smith's book *Who is my Brother?*: "You can be sure that those who conscientiously refused to eat meat believed that those who did eat meat were doing so in violation of God's law. To them, eating meat was not a matter of scruples but sin. That is precisely why it was a matter of conscience."¹ Is that true?
 2. Reread **Romans 14**. Find the passage saying the weak brother is convinced eating meat is a sin and the brother who eats is violating God's law. For that matter, on the issue of days, which one believes the issue is one of sin? Does one believe you have to keep a day or you are sinning? Or does one believe you are sinning if you keep a day? That is not in the chapter. The chapter tells us what some people do and what some people don't do. The chapter begins by saying the person who doesn't eat meats is "weak in faith," (not weak in the faith). It doesn't say he is strong in his conviction of faith, but weak. Further, **Romans 14:23** does not say the weak in faith brother eats while convicted it is wrong, but eats while doubting. It is true **Romans 14:14** refers to one who eats what he thinks or reckons is unclean. But in the greater context of the chapter, why does he reckon it unclean, not because he has strong faith and conviction that God's word condemns it, but because his faith is weak, for one reason or other, that God's word allows it. For a people who seek authority and not

¹ F. Lagard Smith, *Who is my Brother?*, Cotswold Publishing, Nashville, TN, 1997, p 146.

- condemnation, we ought to perfectly understand how this fits within the context of **Romans 14** and the greater context of the New Testament as a whole.
3. **Romans 14:5-6** is not saying one person should be absolutely convinced it is lawful to keep a day and sinful to not keep it, while the other person is absolutely convinced it is sinful to keep the day. Rather, the passage is saying we must be absolutely convinced everything we do is lawful. Don't keep a day or eat meat unless you are absolutely convinced it is lawful to do so. If you doubt, it is sin to you. Clearly, if you are convinced something is sin, to you it is, but **Romans 14** is not dealing with that. We have too many passages that tell us what to do when we are convinced someone is sinning to think **Romans 14** says we don't do anything about some sins (*cf. Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians 6:1; II Thessalonians 3:14*). **Romans 14** tells us what to do when we are not convinced an action is lawful.
 4. In a practical world of growing knowledge and conviction, you and I will be at different points of conviction on certain issues. Thus, I doubt something is lawful, while you are convinced it is unlawful. To me it will be a **Romans 14** issue for which I cannot judge another. For you, it will be a matter of sin and you must judge, striving to restore him to what you believe is the right path. For instance, I am just not convinced as a child of God who is commanded to love his enemies that I am free to go over to Iraq to shoot down my enemies. On the other hand, I am not convinced doing so is a sin. Therefore, while I continue to study, I have not once said anything to my brother, Brad, who just got back from Iraq about it. Based on **Romans 14**, I don't believe I should judge him over this issue. Why should I use my doubts as a means to judge his spirituality? For me, the war question is a **Romans 14** issue. However, you may be absolutely convinced killing someone even in war is sinful and those who do are going to hell. You have a responsibility to restore the brother or sister who does it and discipline them if they refuse to repent. For you, the war question is not a **Romans 14** issue.
 5. Do you see why I say a preacher's "**Romans 14** list" says more about him than it does what **Romans 14** teaches? Your list is going to be different from mine. I know that doesn't make our decisions any easier. But it demonstrates your fellowship decisions are yours to make, not mine to make for you.
- E. ...it must involve inward reasoning, not God's stated law.
1. **Romans 14:1** says we are to welcome the weak brother but not to quarrel over opinions ("doubtful disputations"-KJV). The word translated "opinions" is "dialogismos" and deals with thoughts and imaginations. These are things on the inside of man and are often subjective. The weaker brother's doubts are not caused by the plain teaching of scripture, but by his inward reasoning. For instance, why would a weaker brother think he should abstain from meats? Certainly not because the New Testament said he should. Rather, he may have come out of Judaism and think since honoring God meant abstaining from certain meats under that law, he shouldn't just up and start eating those meats now. He can't do it without doubting its lawfulness. On the other hand, he may have come out of paganism and be worried about whether the meat had been offered to an idol. It is not an issue of the plain teaching of scripture, but his inward reasoning.
 2. That is not to say the weaker brother might not cite scriptures to defend his position. Those who would not eat meats might try to argue from scripture, but the fact remains, the scripture does not teach us to refrain from meat. For a modern example, consider dress codes for assemblies. I don't know about you, but I was raised it is wrong to dress casually for an assembly. I have heard all the scriptural arguments that teach we are to honor and revere God and I agree with them. **I Timothy 1:17** says we should honor God. However, the minute I start saying the way we dress to attend the assemblies demonstrates whether or not we honor God, I have left the plain teaching of Scripture and started reasoning inwardly. Apart from modesty, God has not said what kind of dress honors Him. In fact, the only passage I know of that talks about the way people dress in the assembly is **James 2:2-4**. It says if we think more highly of the finely dressed than the shabbily dressed we have become judges with evil thoughts. While I may not wear a suit to every assembly, you will not likely ever see me wearing jeans to one apart from extenuating circumstances. Dressing up for the assembly was drilled into me. No matter how well I logically know dress doesn't matter, I feel like I am not honoring God if I come to the assembly in jeans. But I am not going to judge you if

you do it. Why? Because that is exactly the kind of issue **Romans 14** is dealing with. At the same time, you shouldn't be going out of your way to force me into a situation to attend the assembly in jeans.

- F. ...both practices in question must be lawful.
1. This is very similar to our earlier point about personal conviction. But, strictly speaking, for a matter to be dealt with by **Romans 14**, both practices have to be lawful. It was lawful for a person to eat meats. But it was not required to eat meats. **Romans 14:6** says the one who kept the day and the one who ate meats did so unto the Lord. It also says the one who refrained from either did so unto the Lord. We cannot do something unto the Lord that is unlawful. As **I Corinthians 8:8** says, we are no worse off if we don't eat and no better off if we do. Both practices are lawful.
 2. I highlight this point to demonstrate again why no one can make a universal list of **Romans 14** issues. We are having this "**Romans 14** problem" because one of us is not convinced one side of the issue is lawful, but has doubts. With our differing levels of conviction, we will all view different issues differently in a **Romans 14** context. The point being, if we are absolutely convinced one side of the debate is unlawful, we simply cannot cover up the difference by citing **Romans 14**.
 3. But someone asks, "What if I am wrong?" First, that you ask that question may demonstrate you are not convinced but doubt, which kicks us back to our previous point on doubt versus conviction. That doubt is why you likely continue to have fellowship with people with whom you disagree in teaching and even practice on this issue. Let me assure you, while I recognize the theoretical possibility that I am wrong about the essential nature of baptism to salvation, I don't ever question what if I am wrong about it. Thus, I am not consciously in fellowship with those who have not been baptized for the remission of their sins. But I doubt when it comes to war. That is why I am very much in fellowship with those whose practice is different from my own without judging them for it.
 4. Someone will still ask, "What if I am utterly convinced something is lawful but it is not? Or what if I am utterly convinced something is not lawful but it is?" We can rest assured, God knows exactly what is lawful and what is not. Consider the war question I brought up earlier. I have doubts. You may be convicted it is lawful. Someone else may be convicted it is unlawful. We can't all be right. God knows which one of us is right. The ones among us who are wrong will make incorrect fellowship decisions. However, we must make fellowship decisions based on what we believe the Bible teaches. In fact, no matter what we think, we are making a fellowship decision. We have a tendency to believe the only fellowship decision is when we decide to withhold or remove fellowship. Actually, if we extend or maintain fellowship, we have decided to be in fellowship. That may be the wrong choice. Let's face it. I have doubts about the war issue. While I will not enlist in the Army, I will not judge others based on my doubts. However, let's assume for a moment it really is wrong to kill in war. In that scenario, I am making the wrong fellowship decision. However, I must make fellowship decisions and I can only make them based on what I understand the Scriptures teach. If at some point my study convicts me plainly one way or the other, I may have to make a different decision. I may be forced to sever fellowship with some or I may be forced to re-establish fellowship with some and apologize. Brethren, we must not make fellowship decisions based on what we all "kind-of" commonly agree doesn't really matter. We must make decisions based on what we believe the Bible teaches. Let me ask you this. Considering the fact that extending fellowship could be just as wrong as breaking it and we *are* making a fellowship decision no matter what we do, wouldn't you rather face God having made an incorrect fellowship decision but be able to say, "I understood your Word to say such and such and that is why I made the decision, forgive me for being wrong," than having to say, "I just decided most issues didn't matter and didn't give it much thought" or "Everybody else said those issues didn't matter"?
- G. ...there must be a safe practice that all involved may practice without violating their conscience.
1. Regarding the eating of meats, in both **Romans 14** and **I Corinthians 8**, Paul demonstrated a safe practice. The person who was convinced it was lawful to eat meats could refrain. He could certainly refrain in the presence of the doubting brother. The brother who kept a day

could do so to himself. He wouldn't invite the doubting brother over to his home to celebrate the day. In any case, there was a safe practice through which all could keep from violating their own conscience and acting from doubt.

2. In our modern discussions, this demonstrates why most issues surrounding the debates on marriage/divorce/remarriage cannot be wiped aside by **Romans 14**. For instance, I am 100% convinced that the same law of marriage and divorce applies to all people today whether or not they are Christians. Therefore, if a non-Christians divorce for some reason other than fornication, based on **Matthew 19:6**, I believe they are sinning. If they marry again, based on **Matthew 19:9**, I believe they are committing adultery. The only solution is to leave the marriage to stop the adultery. However, if someone believes a different law applies to non-Christians than to Christians, they think any divorces before becoming a Christian are essentially nullified by becoming a Christian. For them, the lawful marriage is the one the person was in when he became a Christian through baptism. Thus, if the new Christian was to divorce for any reason other than fornication, they would be ending a lawful marriage. Do you see the problem? I believe the new Christian must divorce or he is in an unlawful and adulterous marriage. The other person believes the new Christian must stay married because he is finally in a lawful marriage. There is no safe practice. Perhaps, if we learn of a disagreement, we may maintain fellowship while we study. However, the moment you decide to stay in an unlawful marriage or start convincing people I believe are in unlawful marriages to stay there, I will have to sever fellowship with you. In like manner, the moment I start telling people you believe are in lawful marriages to divorce, you will have to sever fellowship from me. There is just no safe path on which both of us can walk together in good conscience. Though we go our separate ways, we will hopefully continue studying honestly. We may and should continue discussions with each other. After all, according to **II Thessalonians 3:15** we are not to treat each other as enemies but warn and admonish each other as brothers. However, without safe ground, we cannot walk together.

Conclusion:

No doubt, I have not remotely answered every question arising from **Romans 14** or our discussions of conscience and fellowship. Further, I have no doubt some may disagree with things I have taught. I am happy to discuss any question or disagreements. However, if I have done nothing else, I hope I have demonstrated that, as individuals, I cannot make your fellowship decisions for you. The elders can't, the "brotherhood" papers can't, the colleges can't. You have to study the Bible for yourself and make your own decisions based on your own Bible based convictions. Further, as a congregation, I want us to understand no one can make our fellowship decisions for us. The papers can't. The colleges can't. Another congregation can't. Our favorite preacher can't. We cannot submit to some ethereal list of issues the brethren have just tacitly decided not to make a big deal about. We have to make our fellowship decisions and we have to do it based on what we believe the Bible says. I hope the principles discussed in this lesson can help you make these decisions.

Before we leave **Romans 14** please notice **vs. 15**. I believe it tell us the whole point of this chapter. Paul did not write **Romans 14** to delineate a list of issues over which we must divide. Nor did he write the chapter to provide a list of issues to sweep under the rug. He wrote **Romans 14** to help us walk in love with each other. The aim of our charge is, after all, love that issues from a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith. Whether our study of **Romans 14** pushes us to refrain and abstain from some liberty, whether it encourages us to maintain fellowship with others despite our differences and our doubts, whether it encourages us to sever fellowship because we are convinced a brother or sister is sinning impenitently, we must do all things from love. That is, we must do anything with the heart of putting others in their place or trying to show we are better. Rather, we must always act with the desire of helping others get to heaven. That is love. Remember, Jesus gave up heaven to come to earth so we might go to heaven. Jesus gave up His life on a cross so we might go to heaven. How much ought we to give up to help our brethren maintain their conscience and go to heaven.