

“WOE TO THOSE WHO CALL EVIL GOOD”

(Review of Romans Chapter 14)

Isaiah 5:20 “20 Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; Who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!”

An alarming number of preachers have promoted a view of Romans 14 that would open the arms of acceptance to virtually anyone who espouses error, as long as they are deemed to be “honest and sincere”.

Ignoring 2 John 9-11, Ed Harrell, in a lengthy series of articles in the now defunct Christianity Magazine, defended his choice to continue to have fellowship with Homer Hailey (now deceased), whom Ed admitted was teaching error on divorce and remarriage. His justification was based upon the assumption that Homer was honest and sincere (although without Scriptural authority to make this judgment) and his stated inability to determine from God’s Word what is sin.

As a natural result of such erroneous teaching, at least one preacher, who quotes extensively from Ed Harrell, has been reported to conclude that moral issues are just a matter of personal conviction, and we are not in a position to draw lines of fellowship with those whose moral standards do not agree with our own. He neglects to observe that God has established moral standards for all of us who are willing to accept the teachings of Jesus and His apostles.

In 1997, Jerry Basset published an article entitled WHICH, GODLY PEACE, OR SINFUL DIVISION? He contends that if we can have fellowship with those who believe that one can take up arms in war (see Luke 3:14) or as an officer of the law (see Romans 13:1-6), as well as those who believe to the contrary, we can have fellowship with those who believe and practice doctrines that are in opposition on divorce and remarriage. He does acknowledge that adultery is a matter that calls for congregational discipline and that murder would call for congregational discipline also...but he hesitates to define adultery (sexual relations outside the sanctity of a marriage approved by God) or murder (the unlawful taking of human life). Would he apply this “logic” to the subject of baptism... which is clearly commanded but often disputed?

Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2-4 “2 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.” This is what we see happening today with those who abuse the content of Romans 14. Nothing short of fables.

Paul wrote in Romans 13:11-14 “And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.” These false doctrines concerning divorce and remarriage are designed to make “provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.” To accommodate lust, they disregard the plain teaching of God’s Word, and turn aside unto fables.

In the context of the book of Romans, sins of immorality are condemned, along with strife and envy. This precludes Romans Chapter 14 from teaching the acceptance of what the larger context condemns: Having fellowship with those who are engaged in immorality.

Consider Romans 16:17-19 “17 Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not

serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil.”

Here, again, doctrinal sin / false doctrine is condemned. This passage does not allow for Romans Chapter 14 teaching the acceptance of the very thing Romans 16 prohibits - which is fellowship with such sin!

Consider also Galatians 5:19-21 “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” In Galatians 1:6-9, Paul says that anyone who preaches an impure or polluted Gospel is to be accursed!

And Ephesians 5:11 tells us to “...have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.” Therefore, it is inconsistent / wrong for the text of Romans 14:1-15:7 to be used to advocate fellowship with sinful doctrines and sinful practices, for this would be a violation of Biblical harmony and it would teach a doctrine that contradicts that which is clearly taught elsewhere in the pages of God’s Inspired Word.

Romans 14:1 admonishes us to “Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.” The KJV has: “doubtful disputations” and the NASV has: “not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.” Thus, our receiving a brother into fellowship is not conditioned upon an agreement or forced decisions concerning all his internal doubts. As Paul says in Romans 14:5 “One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.” Take note that the matters discussed here are NOT condemned by God - therefore they are neutral or matters of indifference to God.

Brethren may worship together even when they disagree in matters about which God is indifferent. Consider what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 8:8 “But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse.” Eating meat is a matter of indifference as far as God is concerned. A weak brother may have personal, inward doubts about authorized liberties that a strong brother may practice, but fellowship is not restricted because of this disagreement. Obviously this acceptance of limited disagreement does not involve sinful doctrines and practices, but things which are inherently "good," "clean," and "pure." (Romans 14:14,16,20). With "doubtful things" of this nature, fellowship includes acceptance of the actions in question without the necessity of change, without debating or questioning, without the threat of discipline. There must be no "contention," as is necessary about doctrinal matters (see Jude 3). Clearly, these instructions apply to matters of liberty, but could never apply to sinful matters condemned by God. When one is truly in fellowship with God, the brethren must receive such a one.

Note that the subjects of discussion: Meats and days are "authorized liberties"; doctrines and practices that are neither sinful nor condemned, but allowed. Since "authorized liberties" permit options, their practice or non-practice by saints is a matter of indifference to God.

Romans 14:1 defines "doubtful disputations" as things that are neither commanded nor condemned. A parallel passage, 1 Corinthians 8:9, sheds light on this: “But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak.” This option is a liberty as found in 1 Corinthians 10:23 “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.” Please note that this requires options to be "lawful," and "expedients" or that which is “helpful.” Thus, the "doubtful disputations" under consideration are matters of "authorized liberties," practices that cannot be sinful or condemned, but are allowed. Romans 14 addressed the liberty in Christ of both Jew and Gentile, which some wanted to limit. The

weak brother wanted to bind where God no longer bound and Paul instructed him to stop doing so. The strong brother was told not to flaunt his knowledge.

Neither brother sinned in the matters before them unless they wanted to bind where God had not bound. But there was no inherent sin in the practice or non-practice of meats or days.²

The strong brother is the subject of Romans 15:1 "We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves."

He was the brother who knew what had been revealed about meats and days. (Romans 14:2,14,23; 1 Cor. 8:1-7; 1 Tim. 4:1-5).

He knew his proper relation to God (1 Cor. 8:8; Col. 2:16)

He knew that an idol was nothing (1 Cor. 8:4)

He was able to practice eating and observing...he did it to the Lord, giving thanks (vs 6).

He was convinced in his own mind (vs 5).

He was warned not to be puffed up in his knowledge (1 Cor. 8:1).

He was tempted to "set at naught" the weak brother (vs 3, 10).

He was warned not to cause his brother to stumble (vs 21; 1 Cor. 8:9-13; 10:32).

He was innocent before God when he ate meats and observed days. No sin was attached to his actions.

Now consider the weak brother in Romans 14:1 "Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things."

He was the "untaught" brother- (1 Cor. 8:1, 4, 7)

He did not understand what had been revealed. He feared that observance would commend idols. His refusal was "to the Lord" (vs 6).

He was convinced in his own mind (vs 5).

He was innocent before God when he did not eat meat or observe days.

But he was commanded to stop being contentious about this!

He was "weak in faith" (Rom. 10:17) and did not have the proper knowledge to have suitable faith.

He was "judging" the strong brother to be sinful, when he was not sinful, and was commanded to stop such judging (vs 3,10,13).

He was warned not to violate his own conscience (vs 23; 1 Cor. 8:10).

What did they have in common?

Both were brethren, received by God (vs 3; 15:7).

Both were innocent of any wrongdoing in the practice or non-practice of "meats" or "days."

Both were to extend fellowship to the other. Both were to act in such a way as to "make for peace" (vs 19), not division.

Romans 14 does not authorize any sinful practice!

Romans 14 does not authorize us to fellowship sin.

Condensed from a sermon preached in Hemet, California, October, 1997 by Gailen E. Evans