

# Adiaphora

Romans 14

## Introduction

Think of the disagreements you have seen in the church. What have they been about?

When I was in seminary, I took a class on the book of Romans and when we got to chapter 14 I was introduced to the word “Adiaphora”. It is a Greek word that means “indifferent things”, or “things that don’t matter.” For Christians, adiaphora are things that are neither mandated nor forbidden in Scripture.

The vast majority of disagreements in the church center not on clear, core matters, but instead on adiaphora. That was true in the early church, as well, and Paul addressed it in chapter 14 of Romans (and 1 Corinthians 8-10).

Paul was dealing with an important matter that was caused by cultural backgrounds and not issues of salvation. What do you do when people disagree? Religious scruples vs. salvific truth. When Christians differ, what then?

### Did you know:

Some churches in the south will not allow men and women to swim together. They call it mixed bathing. Falls creek.

In some areas of the country, women would be looked down upon for wearing makeup. (probably by people who should be.)

Some of us would be offended if we went to a church supper in Germany and saw them serving beer.

We might be surprised that our missionaries in areas in Europe would not think anything about visiting a church member and drinking wine with their meal.

It may seem ironic to us that there are some very religious people in the northeast who will not use anything but the most basic of mechanical devices, dress only in plain colors, and hold to very strict social and dietary codes, and yet make their living growing tobacco in their fields.

### Here are some questions for thought:

Does unity in a church require a uniformity of conviction at every point of belief and practice?

Are all of the things that we believe and do of equal importance and therefore obligatory on all members of a church?

Do differences in religious and cultural backgrounds have any impact on our discipleship?

If so, how far can one group go to force their own scruples on others?

Romans 14 is one of the most important passages in Scripture for the church.

In this study, we will see some examples of adiaphora from the early church, learn Paul’s perspective about it, and hear his instruction on how we should handle such things, and then determine how we should act in the church today.

## Passages

<sup>14</sup>Now accept the one who is weak in faith, *but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.* <sup>2</sup>One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables *only.* <sup>3</sup>Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. <sup>4</sup>Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. <sup>5</sup>One man regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike.* Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. <sup>6</sup>He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. <sup>7</sup>For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; <sup>8</sup>for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. <sup>9</sup>For to this end Christ died and lived *again*, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. <sup>10</sup>But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. <sup>11</sup>For it is written, “AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.” <sup>12</sup>So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God. <sup>13</sup>Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this--not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way. <sup>14</sup>I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. <sup>15</sup>For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. <sup>16</sup>Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; <sup>17</sup>for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup>For he who in this *way* serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. <sup>19</sup>So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. <sup>20</sup>Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. <sup>21</sup>It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to *do anything* by which your brother stumbles. <sup>22</sup>The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. <sup>23</sup>But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *his eating* is not from faith; and **whatever is not from faith is sin.**

## Bible Study

What were the activities Paul addressed in Rom. 14? The two biggest ones seem to be related to trying to keep Jewish traditions in Christianity.

### Eating Meat – vs 2

This could have been either a religious vegetarianism or more probably a matter of continuing the Jewish traditions of diet. The parallel in 1 Corinthians 8 is specifically about eating meat that would be considered unclean under the Jewish traditions, that is, meat sacrificed to idols. It would have, in fact, made a Jew unclean just to go to the idol temple to purchase the meat.

There were Christians in the church at Rome that believed it was sin to eat meat and a sign of spirituality not to.

### Observing Days – vs 5

Placing this issue into the Jewish context causes us to infer that there were some Jews who believed it was wrong not to religiously observe the Jewish Sabbath and feast days.

This is not a matter of simply keeping the Sabbath, one of the commandments, but of holding to the religious following of the feasts and practices that had been a part of their Jewish tradition.

There were Christians in the church at Rome who believed it was sin not to keep the customary sacred days on the Jewish religious calendar and it was a sign of spirituality to do so.

### Drinking Wine – vs 21

In his later argument Paul adds drinking wine to the list. And yes, it was real wine. (Otherwise why would it have been an issue???)

### Other “Adiaphora”:

Can you think of any matters today that are not matters of biblical right or wrong, yet have Christians judging or holding contempt for other Christians who hold to the opposing view from their own?

Chuck Swindoll lists the following in his book *The Grace Awakening*:

“Going to movies  
Wearing cosmetics  
Playing cards  
Watching TV  
Going to the beach  
Not having quiet time every morning  
Going to a restaurant that sells liquor

Wearing certain types of clothing  
Driving certain cars  
Wearing certain jewelry  
Listening to certain music  
Dancing – square, ballroom, disco, ...  
Holding a certain job  
Wearing your hair a certain way  
Having lovely and elegant possessions  
Getting a face lift  
Drinking coffee  
Eating certain foods  
Working out in leotards”

To us today many on that list seem so ridiculous. And that just proves the point that often adiaphora change from culture to culture and from generation to generation.

I’ll add two more:

What translation of the Bible you use  
Having facial hair

**How do we know if something is important or a matter of personal conscience?**  
By studying God’s Word!!!!!!

What matters are clearly not adiaphora?  
Jesus, God, Trinity, Bible

What are?

Some things should be treated like adiaphora because God is not clear in Scripture where we should land.

**How do we know where to land in all of these unimportant areas?** Rom. 14:5b, 23 - We must get our answer from God!

### What Can We Do?

Rom. 14:14 - I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself;  
...

1 Cor. 8:8 - But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.

1 Cor. 9:4 - Do we not have a right to eat and drink?

1 Cor. 10:23 - All things are lawful, ...

Who was right??? Weak means weak.

770 ἀσθενέω astheneo {as-then-eh'-o}

AV - be weak 12, be sick 10, sick 7, weak 3, impotent man 1,  
be diseased 1, be made weak 1; 36

1) to be weak, feeble, to be without strength, powerless

2) to be weak in means, needy, poor

3) to be feeble, sick

1 Cor. 8:7 - <sup>7</sup>However not all men have this knowledge; but some, **being accustomed to the idol until now**, eat *food* as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.

The one who is weak and holds to a stricter position on a matter may be overly sensitive to it because of their past, not because it's actually a sin.

These matters are irrelevant. And as far as God is concerned, they are OK in principle.

But is there another question we should be asking???

## What Should We Do?

### Learn Our Boundaries

Rom. 14:5 - ... Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.

Rom. 14:22 - The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. ...

Rom. 14:23 - But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *his eating is* not from faith; and **whatever is not from faith is sin**.

We should not depend on others tell us what is right or wrong. We should find it out for ourselves from God.

How? Get into the Word!!!

### Love Our Brothers

Rom. 14:1 - Now **accept** the one who is weak in faith, ...

Rom. 14:19 - So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

1 Cor. 10:24 - Let no one seek his own *good*, but that of his neighbor.

### Limit Our Freedom

Rom. 14:13 - ... but rather determine this--**not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way**.

Rom. 14:15 - For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.

Rom. 14:16 - <sup>16</sup>Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil;

Rom. 14:20 - Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. ...

Rom. 14:21 - It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or *to do anything* by which your brother stumbles.

Rom. 15:1 - <sup>1</sup>Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not *just* please ourselves.

1 Cor. 8:9-12 - <sup>9</sup>But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup>For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? <sup>11</sup>For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. <sup>12</sup>And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

1 Cor. 8:13 - Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble.

1 Cor. 10:23 - All things are lawful, but **not all things are profitable**. All things are lawful, but **not all things edify**.

<sup>24</sup>Let no one seek his own *good*, but that of his neighbor. <sup>25</sup>Eat anything that is sold in the meat market, without asking questions for conscience' sake; <sup>26</sup>FOR THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS. <sup>27</sup>If one of the unbelievers invites you, and you wish to go, eat anything that is set before you, without asking questions for conscience' sake. <sup>28</sup>But if anyone should say to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat *it*, for the sake of the one who informed *you*, and for conscience' sake; <sup>29</sup>I mean not your own conscience, but the other *man's*; for **why is my freedom judged by another's conscience?** <sup>30</sup>If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? <sup>31</sup>Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Lenske writes: "My own freedom of conscience is not subject to the ignorance and the weakness of some other individual's conscience. He cannot arrogate to himself the right to sit in judgment on my liberty and to order me to do what his conscience considers right and forbid me to do what his conscience considers wrong. In regard to this meat my conscience is wholly free to eat as I may desire. In fact, my conscience would not at all raise the question whether

this is “sacrifice meat” or not. So it is not at all my own conscience but altogether that of the other person for which I have regard in this case.”

The reason we defer to another person’s conscience is not us letting them judge us or our conscience. It is our putting our love for them as a brother above our freedom.

We should not do anything that damages another person’s faith, even if it’s actually OK. Is it OK when they’re not around? Can we never do something that God says is OK just because someone else somewhere thinks it’s wrong?

### Summary

1 Cor. 9:23-27 - <sup>23</sup>And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

<sup>24</sup>Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only* one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. <sup>25</sup>And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. <sup>26</sup>Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; <sup>27</sup>but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.

1 Cor. 10:31-33 - <sup>31</sup>Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. <sup>32</sup>Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; <sup>33</sup>just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the *profit* of the many, that they may be saved.

Lenske: “Their liberty lies in the fact that they may or may not eat, yet not in the sense that they may do as they please, eat or not eat without reason or for a wrong or a foolish reason. Their liberty lies in the ability to choose between eating and not eating with entire freedom as long as they are guided by both true knowledge and true love.”

### What Shouldn’t We Do?

Rom. 14:1 - <sup>1</sup>Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on **disputable matters**. (NIV)

### Look Down on Those Who Are Weak

Rom. 14:3 - <sup>3</sup>**Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat**, ...

### Judge Those Who Exercise Their Freedom

Rom. 14:4 - <sup>4</sup>Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Rom 14:10-13 - <sup>10</sup>But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. <sup>11</sup>For it is written, “AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.” <sup>12</sup>So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God. <sup>13</sup>Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this--not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.

### Should we correct others on these matters of adiaphora?

Matt. 7:1-5 - <sup>1</sup>“Do not judge lest you be judged. <sup>2</sup>For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. <sup>3</sup>And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? <sup>4</sup>Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? <sup>5</sup>You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”

When you judge another person, you are implying that you do not have anything in your life that needs attention. That is not true, and therefore, your paying attention and judging another Christian is hypocrisy.

Matt. 18:15-17 - <sup>15</sup>“And **if your brother sins**, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. <sup>16</sup>But if he does not listen to *you*, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. <sup>17</sup>And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.

Jas 5:19-20 - <sup>20</sup>My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, <sup>20</sup>let him know that **he who turns a sinner from the error of his way** will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.

Both of these oft-quoted passages are talking about sin and theological error. Not matters of opinion.

If you think you need to approach someone to correct them about something, be very careful. Make sure you’ve thought about the outcome of your actions. And makes sure you do it in true, evident humility.

### Conclusion:

The worst thing is that we allow such insignificant issues to cause strife and division in the church. It is unacceptable. And the enemy no doubt cheers in delight when we allow such things to distract us from our purpose here and to give the world cause to mock and dismiss the church.

In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity.