

## *A Disaster Averted: Romans 14:5-6*

I start by quoting the entire relevant passage in Romans, not just the selected verses in the title. It is vital to see the whole thing in context, the big picture:

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honour of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honour of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honour of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written: 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God'. So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and

peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building.

Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written: 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me'. For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Rom. 14:1 – 15:7).

I have become convinced that the problem in Rome, which Paul was dealing with in Romans 14 and 15 – and it was a thorny problem within the *ekklēsia* at Rome – arose because some converted Jews, even though they were living in the day of the new covenant, felt they ought to keep alive some of their familiar (and, no doubt, well-loved) Jewish customs, traditions, prohibitions, and the like, vestiges of the old, Mosaic covenant.<sup>1</sup> Other believers rightly saw no need for this, and might well have thought strongly about it. How would the two groups get on? How could the *ekklēsia* survive? Would it? That was the issue at Rome. And that is why Paul wrote this section of his letter.

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews was written to prevent Jewish believers leaving Christ, leaving the new covenant, and returning to the old covenant. That, it surely does not need to be said, would have been a disaster of the first magnitude.

The problem, of course, was not confined to Rome; it was a widespread, major – and very sensitive – issue for the first believers in general – who were, of course, overwhelmingly converted Jews.<sup>2</sup> And when Gentiles were being converted, followed by the eruption of the teaching of the false brothers – the *pseudadelphoi* (2 Cor. 11:26; Gal. 2:4-5) – with their insistence that Gentiles must be committed to some basic observance of old-covenant principles and practices if they were to be saved (Acts 15:1; Gal. 2:1ff.), the issue was exasperated, and sensitive feelings were aroused to boiling point.<sup>3</sup> The *ekklēsia* in Galatia, in Corinth, in Colosse, *et al*, had problems over the ramifications of the new covenant. And the Jewish believers to whom the writer of Hebrews addressed his treatise were in serious trouble over the discontinuity between the two covenants. But when the *pseudadelphoi* got to work, a crisis of a tender conscience was rapidly escalated into a divisive problem of major dimensions, one, which held within it the potential for very serious and long-term damage to the gospel. The *pseudadelphoi* were acting irresponsibly – as children playing with matches in a powder mill.

Paul, moved by the Spirit, could see the far-reaching nature of the issues that were involved, and clearly saw the consequences which would follow if the *pseudadelphoi* won the day. And so he dealt with it.<sup>4</sup> But, of course, the issue remained a hot potato for

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<sup>2</sup> Even before *pseudadelphoi* (see below) got to work, the Greek and Hebrew Jews who had been converted found living together posed real problems for them (Acts 6:1-7). One might comment: ‘Naturally!’ And in more than one sense. Think! If Jews from different cultures – but Jews nevertheless – found it hard, on conversion to Christ, to live in harmony with each other, avoid suspicion, and start firing accusations like grapeshot, what must it have meant for Jews and Gentiles to find themselves one in Christ? Jews and Gentiles! Think of the history of the Middle East! Think of the troubled history of the Jews, full stop!

<sup>3</sup> See my *False Brothers: Paul and Today*.

<sup>4</sup> I have written and spoken on this and associated issues a number of times. See, especially, my *False; Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*. Also, many items on my [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com) page.

some time. To add another metaphor from the world of heat, the risk did not melt away like snow in June. And to pick up on a previous image, if the spark had touched a powder keg, the gospel – and the *ekklēsia* – would have been blown to smithereens.

In facing and countering the teaching of the *pseudadelphoi*, both Paul and the writer of Hebrews<sup>5</sup> were adamant that Christ had come to fulfil the old covenant; that is, he had fulfilled all the shadows of the old covenant and established them in reality, in substance – all of them – in a spiritual sense, thus establishing the new covenant. We are talking about tabernacle, temple, priesthood, sacrifice, sabbath, feasts, altar, prophets, possession of the land... all existed in the old covenant, all were temporarily instituted by God for Israel for the duration of the old covenant,<sup>6</sup> and in order to give the Jews pictures, illustrations, foreshadows and types of Christ. But in the new covenant, Christ – the person and work of Christ himself – is the living embodiment of them all; and he, bringing all the shadows to their God-intended end, has brought in their eternal, spiritual reality, in their substantial, permanent fulfilment. They were the shadow; he is the substance (Matt. 5:17; Col. 2:17; Heb. 7:11-12,18-22; 8:5,13; 9:15; 10:1,9; 12:18-24). It can be summed up in one word, one person: Christ. As Paul declared: ‘Christ is all’ (Col. 3:11). The upshot: Christ rendered the old covenant obsolete (Heb. 8:13). He is the new covenant (Isa. 42:6; 49:8); he is all.

But, as we all know only too well, it’s the living out of any doctrine that is the real issue.<sup>7</sup> In saying that, I am speaking about us, today. Doctrine may be discussed in ivory towers, delivered in

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<sup>5</sup> Not that the writer of Hebrews ever refers to them, but had their teaching percolated to his readers, and encouraged them in their defection?

<sup>6</sup> On the temporary nature of the old covenant, see my *Three Verses Misunderstood: Galatians 3:23-25 Expounded*.

<sup>7</sup> William Cowper, writing on ‘That God is love, and changes not,/Nor knows the shadow of a turn’, commented: ‘Sweet truth, and easy to repeat!/But when my faith is sharply tried/I find myself a learner yet,/Unskilful, weak, and apt to slide’.

polished sermons over pulpit desks, but it's down on the ground, among the occupiers of the pews (and, of course, as well as those aforesaid towers and pulpits) where it has to be worked out in daily action.

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Let me summarise what the New Testament tells us of the life of the early *ekklēsia* in regard to this Jewish/Gentile question. And it was a Jewish/Gentile question: that was the fundamental issue. All sorts of ingredients went into the mix, of course, but, at bottom, it was a racial problem, with the overriding factor of the transition between the old and new covenants; in itself, that was a radical discontinuity which required many passages of apostolic instruction to fix firmly in the thought and practice of believers. Both Jews and Gentiles were, in an instant – by regeneration, conversion, union with Christ – taken out their old comfort-zones (very different, they were, too) and transferred into a totally different environment, something that until then would have been utterly unthinkable – reprehensible, indeed – to both parties. No wonder some of them felt apprehensive. It's simply down to God's grace, and entirely by the effective working of his Spirit, that under such explosive circumstances the *ekklēsia* survived – let alone thrived.

Concerning the radical newness of the new covenant, Paul was adamant. Christ, in the new covenant, has abolished all distinctions between Jew and Gentile. What a contrast to the old covenant – which God designed (yes, designed) to distinguish and separate Jew and Gentile, and repeatedly insisted that Israel maintain that separation.<sup>8</sup> In that covenant (and before), a Gentile

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<sup>8</sup> God sent prophet after prophet to warn and exhort Israel to stay separate from pagans. See my *Evangelicals Warned: Isaiah 30 Speaks Today*. As countless passages of the Old Testament make plain, it was because both Israel and Judah failed to keep separate from the pagans, but adulterated the covenant by fraternising with pagans and their paganism, that both were taken into captivity.

had to become a virtual Jew to benefit (Gen. 17:11-13; Ex. 12:43-49; Num. 9:14; 15:15-16).<sup>9</sup>

In Christ, all is changed. As Paul put it, in the new age, the age of the Spirit, all the old Jewish distinctives – not excluding, the especially thorny ones of circumcision, sabbath, kosher food, festivals, dates – have disappeared. To return to such things is puerile, and to make an issue of such things is dangerous and – and here’s the punch word – sinful:

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building.

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<sup>9</sup> The book of Ruth shows the practical outworking of such a transformation.

Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Rom. 14:13-23; 15:1-5).

Do not forget the heavy personal price Paul had to pay over Peter's failure to keep to new-covenant principles when he publicly rebuked Peter, and the courage he showed in doing it:

When Cephas [that is, Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all: 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?' (Gal. 2:11-14).

In his writings, too, Paul repeatedly spelled out the position. Believers – whether they had been Jews or Gentiles before conversion – are new men in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20), one in Christ, and the practical effect of this must be maintained and fostered at all times:

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12-13).

It is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham [Paul clearly had in mind God's promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3): 'In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed']... Christ redeemed us... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise...

In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love...

Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation (Gal. 3:7,13-14,28-29; 5:6; 6:15).<sup>10</sup>

[God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son...

In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in [spiritual] baptism,<sup>11</sup> in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt [the law] that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God...

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all (Col. 1:13; 2:9-19; 3:11).

Perhaps the apostle's fullest statement on the practical side of this momentous change may be found in these words:

Remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called 'the uncircumcision' by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands – remember that you were at that

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<sup>10</sup> Do not miss the point: in the new covenant, 'neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything'; neither Jewishness nor un-Jewishness matters a bean. Nor do any of the other divisions mentioned in the text.

<sup>11</sup> See my *Infant: Baptist Sacramentalism: A Warning to Baptists*.

time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:11-22).

In his great mediatorial prayer, Christ specifically asked for all believers 'that they may all be one' (John 17:21). In due time, in accordance with Christ's promise (John 14:16-26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15), Paul fully fleshed out the change in covenant which brought this about – Jewish (old-covenant) observances (including the sabbath), slavery, dietary laws... all are abolished, fulfilled, made redundant in Christ. Converted Jews and Gentiles, being one in Christ, no longer have any barrier wall between them.

And the writer of the letter to the Hebrews left no wriggle room for doubt:

On the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.

And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him: 'The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever"'. This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever (Heb. 7:18-28).

Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

For he finds fault with them when he says: 'Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more'. In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away (Heb. 8:6-13).

The law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities... [Christ] does away with the first in order to establish the second... (Heb. 10:1-18).

Christ fulfilled the old covenant and rendered it obsolete, establishing the new. Believers, therefore, are not under the law, not under the old covenant; they are new men under the new covenant:

Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!... (Rom. 6:14-23).

...My brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code (Rom. 7:1-6).

Such is the massive discontinuity between the two covenants, old and new. It goes without saying that the staggering nature of that change must have been most keenly felt in the early days of the new age, and most sharply experienced by the early converts from among the Jews and Gentiles. We contemporary believers have, for good or ill, well-nigh two millennia of tradition to look back on, many examples – good and bad – to learn from; the first believers were plunged into the deep end, and it was they who had to learn to tread water in the drastically new environment. No wonder the new covenant ought to be thought of as the age of the Spirit. Only he could bring such a change into practical effect.

It surely goes without saying that those believers, on their conversion, were not suddenly turned into men and women who were absolutely and utterly delivered from all their previous prejudices and biases. And my use of ‘were’ can be – must be – replaced by ‘are’. Believers *are* a new creation, and all things have become new (2 Cor. 5:17) for believers today – or should be so in practical effect. Yes, but it takes a life-time of continual progressive sanctification for believers to be increasingly transformed into Christ-likeness in daily life. But that conformity

to Christ was always God's purpose (Rom. 8:28-30).<sup>12</sup> Believers soon discover that they are on a learning-curve, having to leave their familiar and much-loved cultural-baggage standing on the platform, while the gospel train they have just boarded picks up speed, powering its way towards the anticipated terminus. And this certainly applied in the early days when the Jewish/Gentile question was raging. No wonder then that Paul felt the need to urge believers:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:1-6).

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Clearly, although Christ ended one covenant and established another,<sup>13</sup> the inauguration of this once-for-all (Heb. 10:10) change produced an inevitable time of transition and adjustment. Let me illustrate. Although we are taught history as a matter of dates, the actual living-out of history, in reality, in practice, at the time, in experience, is rarely a simple date on the calendar; it is a process, a time of transition, not a sudden, universal, total change or lurch overnight. Take the Norman Conquest of England. William defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings (actually, at the Battle of Battle or Senlac) on 14th October 1066. That is an

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<sup>12</sup> It would extend my article overmuch to show how Paul dealt with slavery and male/female issues, for instance. But the glory of the gospel is that, by the Spirit, converted men and women, employers and employees, Jew and Gentile, educated and illiterate, could learn to live together in harmony. One of the great spin-offs of the new covenant, was it not?

<sup>13</sup> I would place this at the time of his death (Matt. 27:51; John 19:30), resurrection, culminating in the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. As Gal. 5 (just one example) makes clear, the age of the new covenant is the age of the Spirit.

indisputable fact. From that day, England was no longer an independent Saxon kingdom, but had been reduced to a Norman colony, a vassal state; things were never going to be the same. The last Saxon king was dead; the first Norman monarch was about to be crowned. The feudal Saxon lords had been replaced by knights from Normandy. Saxon estates now belonged to a master race from over the Channel, the land would be covered in a series of massive castles serving as constant reminders of Norman superiority over the English, who were, from now on, virtual foreigners in what had been their own land.

The truth is, however, on the ground, out in the sticks, in the hamlets, along the hedgerows where the rustics – the ploughboys, carters, shepherds and cowmen – sat, chewing their midday victuals while chewing over (what seemed to them) the great events of the day,<sup>14</sup> things changed at snail pace; time was meted out in decades, lifetimes. The English were now a subjugated race, but Saxon ways, Saxon thinking, Saxon talk – Saxon England, itself – only gradually died, being only slowly replaced by Norman. (In fact, the two often amalgamated and became Anglo-Norman. This is one reason why the English language is so rich). In one sense, then, in 1066 England was changed from a Saxon kingdom to a Norman colony. Overnight, on the calendar, simple, clear, cut and dried. But in reality, it was far more complicated, with many difficult, personal decisions to make.

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<sup>14</sup> Witness the conversations of the early-Victorian villagers (800 years after the Conquest) as perceptively and faithfully – not to say, amusingly – recorded by Thomas Hardy – surely the jewel in the crown of his prose work. Some earth-shattering event such as letting a side of bacon fall into the dust, or the flaring of a distant bonfire, being of far greater concern, and producing far more animation, than, say, any change in the government at Westminster. News of the grubbing up of an old apple tree triggered the amazed comment: ‘Rooted? – you don’t say it! Ah! stirring times we live in – stirring times’ (Thomas Hardy: *Far From The Madding Crowd*). Politics, regime-change, and such-like to these worthies would have been as remote and unknowable as the stuff of outer space. How much more so in the years following 1066.

Examples can be multiplied.<sup>15</sup>

On 9th November 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, but three and a half decades later and Europe (and the world) is still coming to terms with the consequences.<sup>16</sup>

On 31st January, 2020, at 23:00 GMT, the Brexit guillotine clanged down. Thump! But...<sup>17</sup>

Getting back to the supersession of the old covenant by the establishment of the new, the wonder is not that there was a time of actual transition in daily life, but that the change was accomplished at all, and accomplished, in the main, so relatively smoothly.<sup>18</sup> A lifetime of Jewish observance, sacrifice, priesthood, temple attendance, sacred Jewish dates and seasons – all abolished overnight? And, of course, it went far deeper than that. The culture of centuries was bred into the DNA of the Jews, and Jews had been born with old-covenant principles and practices (overloaded by layers of tradition) built into their genes, ingrained within their psyche.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Take the Roman Conquest of Britain, which led to the Romano-British period. Society at Bath wasn't suddenly, overnight, switched, like an electric light bulb, from Celtic-speaking, Iron-Age mystic barbarism, with its devotion to mysterious and ominous scooped-out heads, into a Latin-speaking Roman stateliness with its genteel 'taking of the waters' in the Great Bath of Minerva. Plenty of piping hot water had to flow from the spring before that happened! But, in part and substantially, that's what did happen! Even though the Icenian, Boudicca, or the Caledonian, Calgacus, to name but two, proved intransigent, Romano-Britain came into a settled-existence. Something similar applies to the decline of Romano-Britain. The books tell us that the Romans left Britain in 410. They did, and they did not! In some senses, they are still here!

<sup>16</sup> As I write (August 2023), the war still rages in Ukraine.

<sup>17</sup> That is, on 31st January, 2020 Britain left the European Union. Oh? As I write this (August 2023), things are still developing, painfully slowly at times.

<sup>18</sup> Consider the centuries of bitterness – the on-going legacy – of the slave trade from Africa to America. It is with us still.

<sup>19</sup> I confess that despite all that I have written and preached, I still have puritan genes in my DNA.

Moreover, it wasn't only the Jews who had to learn; converted pagans, too, had their world turned upside down. They, too, had to get to grips with 2 Corinthians 5:17. Anti-Semitism, for instance, didn't begin with the rise of Adolf Hitler in the 1920s.

All this potential for conflict was more than enough to torpedo the new covenant before the ship had left the wharf.

So, in those early post-Pentecost days, yes, of course, in Christ all the old-covenant Jewish practices had been fulfilled and were now rendered obsolete, over, finished, defunct. About this, there is no question. It happened at a stroke, But there is clear evidence that, in such cataclysmic circumstances as I have tried to spell out,<sup>20</sup> the apostolic writers were prepared to allow a certain amount of liberty to converted Jews to continue with such observances.<sup>21</sup> The same can be seen in the apostolic approach to the purchase and eating of meat from the shambles, meat which had been stamped in connection with idols (Acts 15:29; 1 Cor. 8:4-13; 10:25-32; Tit. 1:15; Rev. 2:20). Liberty was allowed – but, as I say, liberty under with strict limits, and under certain, specified conditions.

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<sup>20</sup> Such a sudden change must have been socially shattering. Try to imagine (for those of us living in the UK and US, for instance), if overnight, in one fell swoop, the UK and USA legal, social, religious and political systems were switched from Christendom convention to Sharia law. Think of the heap of personal problems a believer immediately would find piled on his plate, with no tradition to fall back on. Take marriage and family life, as just one example. And all in a virulent, hostile, unknown culture! Culture, singular? It's a miracle the early believers, starting so small and weak and insignificant, survived the onslaught of Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures in such intimidating circumstances, let alone grew in numbers to see the gospel expand into Europe! Who, in AD40, would have predicted that the *ekklēsia* would out-live the Roman Empire?

<sup>21</sup> Paul, himself, when necessary, took advantage of such liberty (Acts 16:3; 20:16; 21:17-26; 24:17).

All this balanced, sensitive fragility was, as I have said, put in jeopardy by the teaching and sinister design of those ‘false brothers’, the *pseudadelphoi*.<sup>22</sup>

I read Romans 14 and 15 in that light.

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The point is this: some Jewish believers in the *ekklēsia* at Rome (Paul described them as ‘weak’ believers) felt that they should (or possibly could) hold on to some old-covenant ways, while other Jewish believers (Paul described them as ‘strong’ believers), and, of course, Gentile believers,<sup>23</sup> saw no reason to observe redundant old-covenant practices. In this potentially explosive atmosphere,<sup>24</sup> the eruption of the *pseudadelphoi* and their teaching posed a massive threat to the *ekklēsia*. In these highly-emotive circumstances, the apostles insisted that all concerned should calm down, and gently come to terms with their difference of opinion or conviction, doing so on the basis of their union with each other in Christ. Love, in the power of the Spirit, should conquer all. Only the love of Christ shed abroad in the heart (Rom. 5:5) can conquer prejudice. But it must. And it will (John 13:34-35; Jas. 2:1-13; 1 John 4:19-21). Such was the spirit of the new age.

We need to be clear. When the apostle speaks of love, he does not mean ‘warm sentiment’. Spiritual love goes hand in hand with knowledge, discernment, and such like; love does not mean ignorance, minimising real differences and scriptural distinctions, making things fudgy:

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<sup>22</sup> All the arguments supporting these claims can be found in my works noted above. See in particular my *False*.

<sup>23</sup> Unless they had been infected by the *pseudadelphoi*.

<sup>24</sup> Witness the conflict between Protestants and Roman Catholics – with the police and the British Army writhing as a fated pig-in-the-middle – in Northern Ireland during ‘The Troubles’. This thirty-year conflict over a political-religious issue, fuelled by ranters on both sides, cost more than 3500 lives, leaving countless others scarred – deeply scarred – physically or emotionally, or both, to this day; indeed, for life.

It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God (Phil. 1:9-11).

As Paul told the Philippians:

...let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents (Phil. 1:27-28).

‘Love’ did not equate to ‘give up thinking’.

And the end of this combination of spiritual love and knowledge is unity within the *ekklēsia*, unity in the truth, with every believer ‘grow[ing] in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen’ (2 Pet. 3:18).

To facilitate this process among converted Jews and Gentiles, as I have said, the apostles allowed, on a temporary, transitional basis, a measure of controlled and disciplined liberty for the observance of certain old-covenant practices. The upshot was that all believers (‘weak’ and ‘strong’) learned to live with each other in love and harmony, with a measure of give and take – but even then under strict conditions. The life the *ekklēsia* had not only to survive, but blossom, and do so in such delicate and highly-sensitive circumstances. *That is what Romans 14 and 15 is about.* It was designed to lead to the decaying and withering, and eventual dying out, of all the points of difference between believers, resulting, in due time, in a complete cessation of all old-covenant observance.<sup>25</sup>

Let me stress this vital point. Paul’s teaching in Romans 14 and 15 concerns ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ believers. And it is self-evident that the apostolic aim was that the ‘weak’ should not stay weak but become strong – and thus bring the dispute to an end. That

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<sup>25</sup> Perhaps AD70 played its part in this.

was the whole purpose of Paul's counsel. Remember that the dispute was fundamentally racially-motivated, strongly coloured by a doctrinal appreciation (or, more accurately, a lack of appreciation) about the change of covenants. The dispute would wither and die – not by heavy-handed legislation, but with the passage of time, and the maturing of the 'weak'. The time would come when very few would be left who had the slightest glimmer of what the dispute had been about. Compare the way in which the Puritan Sunday has morphed and virtually passed into oblivion in contemporary UK, not excepting evangelicals.