

4.3.2. *The Conflict between Strong and Weak in Rome (by Peter Lampe)*

Some years later in Rome Paul dealt with what was probably another conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians observed holy days and food regulations (Rom. 14:2-3, 5), and Paul called them “weak in the faith” (14:1). By contrast, for the Gentile Christians and for Paul nothing was in and of itself unclean “in the Lord” (14:14). What is noteworthy is that at first glance Paul’s decision in this conflict is completely different from his decision in Antioch. For the Romans, Paul recommended that out of love to the Jewish Christians the strong believers should forgo their freedom from the Law and at the common meals eat only kosher food (14:21).

Paul was able to do that because in its symptoms the situation was different. In Antioch the behavior of the Judaizing Peter constituted an assault.

For all practical purposes it forced the Gentile Christians to act like Jews. In Rome — and this was the first difference — it was probably the law-free members of the community who aggressively (cf. 14:1) went after the Jewish Christians. They had no patience (cf. 15:4-5) with them and their weak faith that still clung to the Torah. It was not the “weak” who posed conditions; the “strong” obviously wanted to get the weak to practice their own freedom from the Law, and thus were demanding something the weak were not yet able to give (cf. 14:14, 20). Therein lay the second difference from Antioch. In Antioch the Jewish Christians had already shown that their faith was strong enough to live without the Torah. Previously they had eaten food that was not kosher and had lived free of the Law. In Antioch the “strong” and “aggressive” members were Jewish Christians. In Rome they were Gentile Christians.

What do Rome and Antioch have in common? Paul says that the strong people in Rome do not accept the weak ones as they are (Rom. 14:1), even though Christ has accepted them (14:15; 15:7). With their uncharitable attitude they are in danger of defaming the saving work of Christ, who also loves the weak and died for them (14:20, 16, 15). As a result they must receive the same reproach Paul leveled against Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:21). Both of them act contrary to the gospel of Christ’s saving death, except that each one represents it differently. Either way, one disgraces Christ’s saving death. The gospel of this death on the cross is the sole criterion for determining where and how one is to have fellowship in Christ, be it without or with kosher meat.

If Paul has not himself changed since the incident in Antioch — that is, if we must understand the two conflicts together — then it is clear that Paul’s gospel in Antioch did not mean that one or the other attitude toward the Torah is right in every circumstance. It is not important whether one is free from the Law or obedient to the Law. Such things are *adiaphora* (cf. 1 Cor. 7:19). In Paul’s eyes they contradict the gospel only when they become obligations, as did the Torah observance by the Jewish Christians in Galatia or practically by Peter in Antioch, or as did the freedom from the Law on the part of the strong in Rome.