

First-century culture wars (24 A; Romans 14:1-12)

The issues are different, but the temptation is the same.

by [Christine Chakoian](#)

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Righteousness is a tricky thing.

We who call ourselves Christian aspire to fulfill Christ's teaching—to do our best to be the body of Christ in the world. And it is phenomenally annoying when we encounter what I call “Christians who give Christ a bad name.”

Which isn't a new thing. The earliest Christians were torn apart by disagreements over what it meant to be faithful. Their differences were primarily over which laws of the first covenant were essential to follow and which engagements with the complex religious activities of the Roman Empire must be avoided. Disagreements included:

- Whether a Christian could marry a non-believer. (No, according to 2 Corinthians 6:14; on the other hand, don't get a divorce, per 1 Corinthians 7:12-13.)
- Whether a Christian man must be circumcised according to the Abrahamic covenant. (No, according to 1 Corinthians 7 and other Pauline letters, but others disagreed, per Acts 15.)
- Whether a Christian woman was free to speak in church. (No, according to 1 Corinthians 14:34, but in 11:5 women are instructed to wear a head covering when they pray or prophesy.)
- Whether a Christian could eat meat that had been offered to idols—so common a practice in the empire that by the time meat came to market, it would have

been dedicated to some god. (No, according to Acts 15:28-29, but sure, if you understand that idols are not real, per 1 Corinthians 8:1-6.)

Many Christians believed their faith was embedded in the first covenant, which Jesus came to fulfill. Whether they were born Jews and then became Christians or were converted into Christianity by followers of the Jewish law, they sought faithfully to fulfill God's law. Circumcision for men was not debatable. Sabbath was observed on the seventh day, not the eighth. Pork and shellfish were *verboden*, let alone meat that was offered to idols; hence, vegetarianism was the easiest route.

For those on differing sides, the debate was fierce, the judgment harsh. In this one area alone—eating food that had been offered to idols—the lines were drawn. Those who took the more conservative route were castigated as “weak” by those who ate permissively—and those who followed the law scrupulously heaped judgment on those who ate.

Our culture wars do live on, don't they? The issues are different, but the temptation is the same: for conservative Christians to judge those who follow a more inclusive, culturally adapted way as unclean and unfaithful, and for liberal Christians to judge those who follow a more strict, literalistic law as narrow-minded and unfaithful.

Paul's warning to the early Christians on either side is this: if you are going to engage with one another only to do battle, don't bother. You may loathe the decisions your fellow Christians are making, but you do not get to be the judge. The only judge that matters is the Lord, to whom we are all accountable.

Despising one another is not a mark of *any* form of Christianity. Instead, try asking what priorities the Lord has for our lives. For in the end, we are all accountable to God.