

The limits of our convictions (Romans 14:1-12)

Paul assures us that conviction does not equal authority.

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Christians have various ways of expressing a key idea: that there are some tenets of the faith that we must agree upon and others that are more fluidly understood. Somewhat counterintuitively, Paul's instruction on how we should manage our interactions around these differing beliefs is not to hold our convictions more lightly. Instead, we are told to hold fast to our beliefs and in effect to believe what we believe even more vehemently.

The line that feels most instructive in this week's passage comes in verse 5: "Let all be fully convinced in their own minds." Believe what you believe, believe it in full—but believe it for yourself. This is a verse that should resonate with these days of virtual echo chambers and algorithmic reinforcement. Not only can we believe what we believe, but often we can find a community of people who believe it too. There is part of me, then, that wishes Paul challenged this, that he offered some more convicting words for our times.

But Paul does offer something different here: the assurance that conviction does not equal authority. Paul says throughout this passage that we can't force our beliefs on others, that we have to find a way to believe what we believe with vehemence and yet recognize the right of others to believe what they believe. Strong convictions are encouraged, but lording those convictions over others is prohibited.

The limits of our certainty remind us of the limits of our authority. We may possess convictions, but we do not possess one another. Certainty, to the extent that we can be certain about anything in the faith, is not the problem. The issue is not whether we're convinced of something; the issue is what my conviction authorizes me to become.

Paul asks a sobering question in verse 4: "Who are you to pass judgment on slaves of another?" The question isn't about accuracy of belief or even depth of conviction. It's about identity and authority: Who are you? We may be correct about some things, but Paul reminds us that we are not nor will we ever be Lord.

We lack the authority to judge our kin in Christ because we can't pretend to understand all of God's intentions, nor other people's motives, nor what God is up to in their lives. Paul avoids all these assumptions and recognizes the singular authority of Christ.

The repetition is unmistakable: to the Lord, for the Lord, we are the Lord's. The church has many teachers, leaders, thinkers, servants of every kind. But one Lord. Paul suggests that the Christian should hold this truth to be self-evident, that Jesus is Lord.

But he's also teaching that we must hold our deep convictions with deep humility. The church thrives not when convictions disappear but when every conviction bows at the feet of the one Lord of it all. This passage reminds

us that the greatest limit on our certainty is not the possibility that we might be wrong. It is the certainty that Christ alone is Lord. Every conviction, however deeply held, must finally kneel before that greater truth.