

A faith without food rules (Romans 14:1-12)

Maybe we need to be pushed in different ways than the Romans did.

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I started eating meat again a few years ago, after a decade as a strict vegetarian. I don't miss the bad cafeteria hummus, the afterthought restaurant entrees, or the guilt of being a difficult dinner guest. I do miss the sense of purposeful structure provided by such a clearly drawn dietary line. I had to eat, and to eat I had to find some food that wasn't made from dead animals. My vegetarianism was never far from my mind.

Yet this food rule was ultimately unsatisfying, and not just because meat is tasty. It was a strictly personal rule, self-imposed and fairly arbitrary—it had little to do with membership in anything bigger than me. The people around me respected my diet; sometimes they were even impressed by it. But vegetarianism wasn't any kind of norm for my community. Eventually I grew suspicious of the continual performance of personal virtue that my diet represented. Meanwhile, I longed for the shared virtue of ordered life together.

Which is why I often wish Protestants had food rules. (See "[A Christian diet](#)," April 6, 2010). Not a prohibition on meat in particular, just some way to mark our identity through an ethics of eating—through this primary human act in the realm of the sacred ordinary.

Other religious traditions have such rules, of course. Paul's vision of *adiaphora* in Romans 14 quickly assumes a pretty sweeping scope. But it begins with a specific issue: the conflict between observant Jews, who would avoid meat if it wasn't prepared properly, and Gentiles. "Eat in honor of the Lord," says Paul, or conversely, "abstain in honor of the Lord." Either way really, as long as all "give thanks to God" and are "fully convinced in their own minds."

Paul's characterization of meat avoiders as "the weak" is wrapped up in the rather fraught issue of his larger treatment of Jewishness in Romans. Centuries later, St. Benedict wrote something more straightforward and literal about meat and weakness. From chapter 39 of the Rule: "Except the sick who are very weak, let all abstain entirely from eating the flesh of four-footed animals."

But this food rule was for the monastery, not the church generally, and in any case a lot of monasteries don't really follow it anymore. Instead, the dominant position, at least in the western church, is Augustine's view that all food is permissible—and Paul's contention that you can bring equal honor to God by observing a rule or ignoring it.

"Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?" asks Paul. This is a relevant word for those of us with an interest in food ethics; we can be more than a little self-righteous. Still, I can't help but think that our highly individualistic, make-your-own-spirituality context means we need to be pushed in some different ways than the Romans needed. Like other people, Christians gather around tables; unlike them, we also gather around one table in particular that's at the center of our faith. Doesn't it matter what and how we eat together at those tables?

So fine, Paul, even Christians who "believe in eating anything" can "eat in honor of the Lord." But what does this look like in practice, and how does it form our group identity as followers of Jesus?