

# **Challenges Christians Face**

## **Dealing with Debatable Matters – Part 3**

*1 Corinthians 6:12*

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## Dealing with Debatable Matters – Part 3

### Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of debatable matters. Let's continue to learn about this in a message I am calling, "Dealing with Debatable Matters – Part 3."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 6:12:

<sup>12</sup> **"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be enslaved by anything.** (1 Corinthians 6:12)

### Introduction

When the apostle Paul said that **"All things are lawful for me,"** what was **"all things"** referring to? **"All things"** refers to such things as *adiaphora*. The *adiaphora* refers to those "things or actions that in themselves are neither immoral nor moral, or neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture, and thus may be permitted for Christians."<sup>1</sup> So, Paul was saying that with regard to the *adiaphora* a Christian is free to do whatever he or she wants to do. In this regard, **"All things are lawful for me."**

This issue of *adiaphora* comes up several times in the rest of *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*. And so before I left for vacation I thought that it would be helpful for us to get a clear understanding of exactly what things are *adiaphora* and how to deal with debatable matters. I would like to conclude with our third study of "Dealing with Debatable Matters."

The apostle Paul dealt most clearly with the issue of debata-

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<sup>1</sup> George Thomas Kurian, *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary: The Authoritative Resource on the Christian World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001).

ble matters in his letter to the Romans, in Romans 14:1-15:13.

Some “debatable matters” in our day are the following:

- Giving and receiving of wedding rings (which was hotly contested by the Puritans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century)
- Wearing jewelry
- Use of make-up
- Consumption of alcohol
- Smoking
- Mode of baptism (immersion or sprinkling)
- Some aspects of Old Testament fulfillment of prophecy
- View of eschatology (especially the millennium)
- Attending movies
- Watching television
- Aspects of Sabbath observance (such as work, play, and worship)
- Eating food in the church building
- Letting children participate in Halloween
- School choices (public, private, or home)
- Mixed swimming
- Playing cards
- “Gambling” for recreation
- Buying insurance
- Dancing
- Wearing pants (for women)
- Using a Bible other than the *King James Version*
- Playing guitars in church
- Men wearing their hair over their ears
- Etc.

## Review

Well, with that as an introduction, let’s review Paul’s method in Romans 14:1-15:13 of dealing with debatable matters.

## **I. The Fundamental Principle (14:1)**

Paul lays down the fundamental principle of welcome (especially the welcome of the weak), which undergirds the whole discussion, in verse 1: “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.”

This fundamental principle is in two parts.

### *A. It Is Positive*

It is positive: “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him. . .” (14:1a).

The “weak in faith” are those who are immature, untaught, and (as Paul’s unfolding argument makes clear) actually mistaken. Nevertheless, they are to be welcomed into the fellowship.

### *B. It Is Qualified*

Having reflected on the principle of welcome, we need to note that it is qualified: “. . . but not to quarrel over opinions” (14:1b).

Paul is saying that we must receive the weak person with a warm and genuine welcome, “without debate over his misgivings or scruples,” or “not for the purpose of getting into quarrels about opinions.”

## **II. Three Negative Deductions (14:2-15:13)**

Having laid down the fundamental principle of welcome (especially welcome of the weak in faith), which undergirds the whole discussion, Paul now develops three negative deductions or consequences that follow from the fundamental principle.

### *A. Do Not Despise or Condemn the Weak Person (14:2-13a)*

The first negative deduction is this: Do not despise or con-

demn the weak person. This is fleshed out in Romans 14:2-13a. There are four reasons why the strong in faith should not despise or condemn the weak in faith.

1. Because God has welcomed him (14:2-3)

First, because God has welcomed him.

2. Because Christ died and rose to be his Lord (14:4-9)

Second, because Christ died and rose to be his Lord.

3. Because he is your brother (14:10a)

Third, because he is your brother.

4. Because we will all stand before God's judgment seat (14:10b-13a)

And fourth, because we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

*B. Do Not Offend or Destroy the Weak Person (14:13b-23)*

The second negative deduction is this: Do not offend or destroy the weak person. This is fleshed out in Romans 14:13b-23.

Paul goes on to lay two theological foundations for his exhortation, in addition to the four developed in Romans 14:1-13a.

The two theological foundations as to why the strong in faith should not offend or destroy the weak in faith are as follows:

1. Because he is your brother for whom Christ died (14:14-16)

First, because he is your brother for whom Christ died.

2. Because the kingdom of God is more important than food (14:17-21)

And second, because the kingdom of God is more important than food.

### Lesson

Well, let's look at the third negative deduction in Paul's method dealing with debatable matters.

#### *C. Do Not Please Yourselfes (15:1-13)*

Paul comes to his third negative deduction from the positive principle to welcome the weaker brother. This is fleshed out in Romans 15:1-13.

Having urged the strong in faith neither to despise or condemn the weak in faith (14:2-13a), nor to offend or destroy him (14:13b-23), he now exhorts the strong in faith not to please themselves (15:1-13).

**We who are strong**, he begins (15:1). Thus for the first time he both identifies them by this name and at the same time identifies himself as one of them.

What then ought the **strong** to do? What is their Christian responsibility towards the **weak**?

First, **we who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings** (literally "weaknesses") **of the weak** (15:1a). **Strong** people are of course tempted to wield their strength to discard or crush the **weak**. Paul urges them instead **to bear with** them.

The Greek verb for "**bear**" (*bastazo*) can mean either to "endure" in the sense of "tolerate," or to "carry" and "support." The context suggests that the latter is correct here. One person's strength can compensate for another person's weakness.

Second, **we who are strong have an obligation. . . not to please ourselves** (15:1b). To be self-centered and self-seeking is

natural to our fallen human nature. But we ought not to use our strength to serve our own advantage.

As Paul has been arguing, Christians with a strong conscience must not trample on the consciences of the weak.

And third, **each of us** should **please his neighbor for his good, to build him up** (15:2). Neighbor-pleasing, which Scripture commands, must not be confused with “men-pleasing,” which Scripture condemns.

In this pejorative sense, to “please men,” usually in antithesis to pleasing God, means to flatter people in order to curry favor with them, to win their approval by some unprincipled compromise. It is always incompatible with integrity and sincerity.

Perhaps it is to avoid such a possible misunderstanding that Paul qualifies his appeal to please our neighbor with the clause **for his good, to build him up** (cf. 14:19). Instead of causing to stumble (14:13, 20, 21), tearing down (14:20) or damaging (14:15) our neighbor, we are **to build him up**.

Edification is a constructive alternative to demolition. And this upbuilding of the weak will doubtless include helping to educate and so strengthen their conscience.

Once again Paul adds a theological foundation to his appeal. This time it concerns Jesus Christ himself, who is now mentioned in almost every verse, and in particular his example.

Why should we please our neighbor and not ourselves?

### **1. Because Christ did not please himself (15:3-4)**

First, we should please our neighbor and not ourselves because Christ did not please himself (15:3-4).

Instead of pleasing himself, he gave himself in service to his Father and to people. Although he, “being in very nature God,” had the greatest right of all persons to please himself, yet “he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” for his own advantage, but first “emptied himself” (*RSV*) of his glory and then “humbled himself” to serve (Philippians 2:6-7).

Paul quotes Psalm 69:9. **As it is written: “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me”** (15:3). That is to say, as an example of his refusing to please himself, Christ so completely identified himself with the name, will, cause, and glory of the Father that insults intended for God fell upon him.

Christ’s fulfillment of Psalm 69:9 leads Paul into a brief digression about the nature and purpose of Old Testament Scripture. **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** (15:4). All I am going to say about this verse is that you can listen to Dr. Bryan Chapell’s fine exposition of it that he preached here in January 2010.

## 2. **Because Christ is the way to united worship (15:5-6)**

Second, we should please our neighbor and not ourselves because Christ is the way to united worship.

Verses 5-6 are in the form of a benediction. Paul’s prayer is that **the God of endurance and encouragement** (through Scripture) may **grant you to live in such harmony with one another**, or literally, “may give you to think the same thing among yourselves” (15:5a).

This can hardly be a plea that the Roman Christians may come to agree with each other about everything, since Paul has been at pains to urge the weak and the strong to accept each other in spite of their conscientious disagreement on debatable matters.

It must therefore be a prayer for their unity of mind in *essentials*. For he adds, **“in accord with Christ Jesus”** (15:5b).

This seems to indicate that Christian unity is unity *in Christ*, that the person of Jesus Christ himself is the focus of our unity, and that therefore the more we agree with him and about him, the more we will agree with one another.

But what is the purpose of this unity of mind? It is in order that (*hina*) we may engage in the common worship of God: **that**



**together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (15:6).**

### **3. Because Christ accepted us (15:7)**

Third, we should please our neighbor and not ourselves because Christ accepted us.

With verse 7 Paul returns to the beginning, to his original and positive appeal for acceptance and welcome.

Indeed, the long, closely reasoned, theological-practical argument about the strong and the weak (14:2-15:6) is sandwiched between the two cries, **welcome him** (14:1) and **welcome one another** (15:7a).

Both are addressed to the whole congregation, although the first urges the church to welcome the weaker brother, while the second urges all church members to welcome each other.

Both also have a theological base. The weak brother is to be welcomed for **God has welcomed him** (14:3), and the members are to welcome each other **as Christ has welcomed you** (15:7a).

Moreover, Christ's welcome of us was also **for the glory of God** (15:7b).

The entire credit for the welcome we have received goes to him who took the initiative through Christ to reconcile us to himself and to each other.

### **4. Because Christ has become a servant (15:8-13)**

And fourth, we should please our neighbor and not ourselves because Christ has become a servant.

With verse 8 Paul slips almost imperceptibly from the unity of the weak and the strong through Christ to the unity of Jews and Gentiles through the same Christ.

Further, in both cases the unity is with a view to worship, so that they may glorify God together (15:6, 9ff.).

So, Paul says in verses 8-9a: **For I tell you that Christ be-**

**came a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.**

This truth of the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles in the Christian community Paul now enforces with four Old Testament quotations.

In each case he uses the Septuagint (LXX) text, and he chooses one from the Law, one from the Prophets and two from the Writings, which are the three divisions of the Old Testament.

All four quotations refer both to the Gentiles and to the worship of God, although each contains a slightly different emphasis.

Paul concludes the long doctrinal-ethical section of his letter with another benediction (see verse 5 for the first). **May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing (15:13a).**

The reference to **joy** and **peace** recalls the apostle's definition of the kingdom of God (14:7).

Now he adds faith (**in believing**) as the means by which **joy** and **peace** grow within us, and he prays that his Roman readers will be filled with both. He also anticipates that this filling will result in an overflowing: **so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope (15:13b).**

The burden of Paul's earlier benediction (15:5) was unity with a view to worship; the burden of this one is "**hope.**"

He has already expressed his assurance that the Scriptures bring us hope (15:4). Now he expresses his prayer-wish that **the God of hope** may cause them to **abound in hope.**

## Conclusion

As we have tried to follow the intricacies of Paul's reasoning regarding relationships between the strong and the weak, it must sometimes have seemed very remote from our own situation.

Yet there are two particular principles which Paul develops, which, especially in combination, are applicable to all churches in all places at all times.

The first is *the principle of faith*. Everything must be done “from faith,” he writes (14:23). Again, “each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (14:5). We need therefore to educate our consciences by the Word of God, so that we become strong in faith, growing in settled convictions and so in Christian liberty.

Second, there is *the principle of love*. Everything must be done according to love (14:15). We need therefore to remember who our fellow Christians are, especially that they are our sisters and brothers for whom Christ died, so that we honor and not despise them; serve and not harm them; and especially respect their consciences.

One area in which this distinction between faith and love should operate is in the difference between essentials and non-essentials in Christian doctrine and practice.

Although it is not always easy to distinguish between them, a safe guide is that truths on which Scripture speaks with a clear voice are essentials, whereas whenever equally biblical Christians, equally anxious to understand and obey Scripture, reach different conclusions, these must be regarded as non-essentials.

In fundamentals, faith is primary, and we may not appeal to love as an excuse to deny essential faith.

In non-fundamentals, however, love is primary, and we may not appeal to zeal for the faith as an excuse for failures in love.

Faith instructs our own conscience; love respects the conscience of others.

Faith gives liberty; love limits its exercise.

No-one has put it better than Rupert Meldenius, a name which some believe was a *nom de plume* used by Richard Baxter:

*In essentials unity;  
In non-essentials liberty;  
In all things charity.*

May God help us to put this into practice. Amen.



# Mission Statement

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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**PRAAYER:**

Almighty God, thank you for your Word. Thank you for the Apostle Paul's clarity on this issue of debatable matters. Help us to welcome all true brothers in Christ with a warm and genuine welcome. And let us not despise or condemn, nor offend and destroy the person who is weak in faith, nor please ourselves.

Give us a love that respects the consciences of others, as well as a love that limits its exercise when necessary.

At the same time, enable us to grow in faith so that our consciences are instructed and we enjoy the true liberty that is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, as you leave here today, welcome one another as God has welcomed us into fellowship with him!