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How to Avoid Conflicts

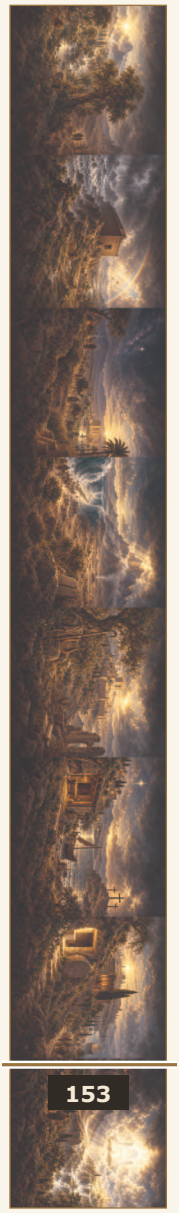
"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet,
and a light unto my path."

PSALM 119:105



JOHN WEAVER

WEAVER BIBLE COLLEGE



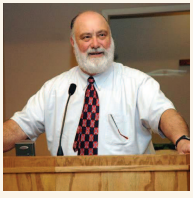
Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

ROMANS 14:19

Christian liberty must be exercised with love. John Weaver considers conscience, matters that Scripture leaves indifferent, and the danger of judging or despising fellow believers. These messages show why the good of another person matters more than winning an argument, and why peace must remain governed by truth rather than by compromise.

“The Bible said in Hebrews 10 that we're to provoke one another to love and to good works, not simply provoke each other.”

JOHN WEAVER



John Weaver

John Weaver's sermons form the teaching collection presented by Weaver Bible College. This volume gathers his teaching from that collection.

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New Testament Studies

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CHAPTER 1

How to Avoid Conflicts 1

I want to bring a brief series—at least three messages, perhaps four—on the subject of how to avoid conflicts between Christians. Today will be an introduction covering several important points. Next Sunday, Lord willing, I want to bring a message under this same title, showing the uselessness of arguing and having internal problems. I would encourage you to be faithful for each of these three Sundays.

Notice Romans chapter 14, verses 1 through 3: “Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things, another who is weak eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not, and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth, for God hath received him.”

Introduction: The Need to Avoid Conflicts

Conflicts are inevitable simply because we are sinners. However, we need not have them as frequently as we do, nor do they necessarily need to be as complex as they are. They would never be as complex as they are if we would simply follow the clear teachings of Scripture

upon the issue. The Apostle Paul gives us many principles by which we are to conduct our lives. You have to remember, circumstances change and feelings change, but principles never change. Principles do not have funerals. Principles do not die.

Doctrine as the Foundation for Practical Living

When you come to the book of Romans, you have to understand that it is basically divided into two sections. The first section, chapters 1 through 11, is doctrinal. The second section, chapters 12 through 16, is practical. I want you to understand and emphasize this point: the apostle lays out doctrine first, and then he lays out the practical application. What the Apostle Paul is trying to teach us is a very simple concept: practical Christian living is always based upon doctrine.

Let me say this another way. It is impossible to live biblically, to live holily and godly, without understanding doctrine and its applications. One reason there is so much loose living and so much ungodly conduct today, even among professing Christian people, is a lack of doctrinal teaching and doctrinal understanding, as well as application.

The Outcome of Pure Doctrine

Hold Romans 14, because we are coming right back there. But look in your Bibles to 1 Timothy chapter 1, beginning with verse 3. Paul writes to Timothy, “I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine.” Literally, he is saying that they teach not heterodoxy, but orthodoxy. In other words, there is one doctrine, and that is biblical doctrine.

Then he says in verse 4, “Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions rather than godly edifying which is in faith: so do.” Look at verse 5: “Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned.”

Paul tells Timothy in verse 3 that he was charging him to charge some that they teach no other doctrine. Why did he want only

biblical, true doctrine taught? When you come down to verse 5, he says, “Now the end of the commandment is.” What commandment? You have to go back to verse 3. The word “charge,” the Greek word paraggelia, is also translated “commandment.” Thus, he is commanding Timothy to command others that they teach only biblical doctrine.

When you understand that only biblical doctrine is to be taught, you come to verse 5, where he tells you the end, or result, of that commandment. The result of teaching pure doctrine is charity out of a pure heart, a good conscience, and faith unfeigned, or unhypocritical.

To understand the true outcome of biblical doctrine, turn that upside down: real, pure, biblical doctrine produces, first, an unhypocritical faith; secondly, a good conscience; and thirdly, love out of a pure heart. If you understand biblical doctrine and base your life upon it, you will inevitably live a holy, godly, obedient life.

I understand that many people in churches have made a profession of faith who are not possessors of faith. They are just there. They are lost—lost church members.

That's all there is to it. They have never, ever been converted. However, there are an awful lot of real, genuine Christians in many churches that have simply never been taught. They are absolutely, totally ignorant of biblical doctrine and how to apply it to their lives. You will never live a godly life without understanding doctrine. You will never live a godly life without applying that doctrine to your everyday life.

This is what the Apostle Paul is trying to teach us in Romans chapter 14. He's showing us the absolute importance of doctrine that is already laid out in chapters 1 through 11. He comes to verse 1 of chapter 14 and says, "Him that is weak in the faith receive you, but not to doubtful disputations." Do you realize what the Bible says concerning the wicked in Romans 3 and verse 19?

The Bible says the wicked does not know the way of peace. But, on the other hand, in 1 Corinthians 7 and verse 15, the Bible teaches us that God hath called us to peace. If God has called us to peace, we should be living in peace. Living in peace is accomplished by living

biblically. We have to work our way through Romans chapter 14 and observe and learn the truths that the Apostle Paul gives us, teaching us how to live peaceably with others. So, in verse 1 again, Paul says, "Him that is weak in the faith receive you, but not to doubtful disputations."

Varying Degrees of Faith

I only want to give you about three things today, but they are very important. First of all, as you look at verse 1, the very first thing that you are to learn is that there are degrees of faith. "Him that is weak in the faith receive you, but not to doubtful disputations." We have a tendency to think, well, saving faith is saving faith. And it is true: if one has saving faith, he is saved, period. But the Bible teaches that there are also degrees in faith. The problem that drew the Apostle Paul's attention in Romans chapter 14 arose because some were strong in faith and some were weak in faith, and contentions and conflicts were arising. These problems and conflicts did not arise over strong doctrinal issues like the person and work of Christ or the inspiration and veracity of Scripture. Rather, they arose over differences of understanding and differences of enlightenment.

If there is a weak faith, then obviously there has to be the opposite, a strong faith. If there is a weak faith and a strong faith, then obviously there must be varying degrees of faith between those two extremes. The Word of God teaches that there are indeed varying degrees of faith.

In Romans chapter 4, verses 19 through 21, the Bible gives both a negative and a positive concerning Abraham's faith: "And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness."

Note the negative in verse 19: "and being not weak in faith." Abraham was not a person with weak faith. Then there is the positive in verse 20: he was strong in faith. Thus, there is obviously a weak faith and a strong faith.

Looking back at Romans 14:1, God says, "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." Verse 2 says, "...for one believeth that he may eat all things," identifying the strong brother, while "...another who is weak eateth herbs." Obviously, there is a weak and there is a strong. Romans 15:1 says, "...we then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves." At this point, I am simply showing that there is indeed a difference between the weak and the strong.

First Corinthians chapter 8 also deals with this issue between the weak and the strong. We will probably look at that passage, at least in the third message, to show the source of some of these conflicts. If we understand that there are varying degrees of faith, then all men do not have the same light, nor do they have the same amount of light, nor do they have the same light or the same amount of light at the same time.

If we really understand that, then we don't necessarily expect everyone to understand exactly what we do, believe exactly the way we believe, act exactly the way we act, or even talk and think the way we talk and think. In other words, there are varying degrees of faith.

The Bible teaches these varying degrees of faith clearly. In 1 John chapter 2, the Apostle John divides believers into three groups: "I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake. I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one."

John divides believers into three categories: young children or babes, young men, and fathers. Everyone understands that little children differ from young men, and young men differ from the fathers. The understanding and attitude of a two-year-old child are different from those of a nineteen-year-old young man. The understanding and attitude of a fifty-year-old man are also different from those of a nineteen-year-old young man. One does not expect a little child to act, talk, or think like a teenager, and one does not

expect a teenager to walk, talk, and think like someone who is fifty or sixty years of age. It is absolutely impossible.

John is telling us that there are different degrees of understanding and different degrees of faith. It may be saving faith. You may have childish faith, the faith of a young man, or the faith of an old man. Childish faith is known simply for its simplicity.

You may have heard about the pastor—I forget which one it was—who prayed for rain because there was a drought. As he started out the door, his little daughter, five or six years of age, who had prayed with him, said, "Father, aren't you going to carry your umbrella?" That was her simple faith: We prayed for rain. You had better carry your umbrella. It is going to rain.

Here is the child in his simplicity, the young man in his energy and strength, and the father in his experience and wisdom. There are varying degrees of faith, varying degrees of attitudes and understandings. The children and the young men should always seek to be taught by the fathers.

When John divides these believers into children, young men, and fathers, the children are what we would call mere novices in Christianity, babes in Christ. They may understand some rudiments of doctrine and some basic fundamentals of the Bible, but they do not really understand the totality of everything. The young men are noted for their zeal and strength. They are eager to serve and have all kinds of zeal and energy, though the apostle also speaks of those who have a zeal without knowledge. The fathers are known for their faith and experience. They are the old heads, the old disciples.

Luke wrote in Acts 21:16, "There went with us also certain of the disciples of Caesarea, and brought with them one Mnason of Cyprus, an old disciple, with whom we should lodge." He was known as an old disciple, which means probably he was a father in the faith. And it is those old, mature, and fatherly disciples who are to teach us and to lead us.

So, the Apostle John makes these distinctions: babes, young men, and fathers.

Illustrations of Spiritual Maturity

Our Lord Himself teaches this in John 21, and He is talking to Peter. “So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.” He saith unto him, “Feed my lambs.” He saith to him again the second time, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” He saith unto him, “Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.” He saith unto him, “Feed my sheep.” He saith unto him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, “Lovest thou me?” And he said unto him, “Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.” Jesus saith unto him, “Feed my sheep.”

Jesus told Peter, first of all, if he loved Him, to feed His lambs. Then the next two times He said, “If you love me, feed my sheep.” Here is my question: Are lambs different from sheep? The answer is yes. They may be sheep, but they are baby sheep. One is a baby. The other is an adult and mature.

Let me ask you: Do you feed a baby lamb differently than you do an adult sheep? And the answer is yes, very clearly, yes. One never expects a lamb to act like a sheep because the lamb is a baby. There would be something seriously wrong if a sheep began to act like a lamb. You do not ever expect a sheep to act like a lamb. No, there is a difference. One is a child, and one is an adult. They are different levels of maturity.

Now, I want you to see how our Lord still emphasizes this. There are varying degrees. Life may be there; saving faith may be there; but there are still varying degrees. Look what our Lord says in Mark 4:28.

"For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear." Our Lord is giving us the different levels of maturity using grain or a garden. A number of you have already planted your gardens. If you put that seed in the ground and the Lord waters it with rain, after five, six, seven, or eight days, you see a little shoot coming up out of the ground. How many of you run out and harvest your garden at that point? Nobody. Even when that little shoot becomes a plant and you see the blooms or the

beginning of fruit on those vegetables, you do not harvest them. You wait until there is full corn in the ears. When you look at the plant, you can tell there are varying degrees, different stages.

If you and I can recognize varying degrees and stages in plant life, animal life, and human life—babes, young people, and fathers—why cannot we understand that there are varying and different degrees of maturity in Christian people? Not everyone has the same amount of understanding. Not everyone thinks alike. Why should we expect everyone to think as we think and understand as we understand? There are differences, spiritually speaking, but also culturally, emotionally, educationally, and even among personalities. A Northerner may be a genuine and sincere Christian, and we must receive such a one as a brother in Christ. However, there are real cultural differences between a Northerner and a Southerner, and between a Westerner, an Easterner, and a Southerner. We have to take all these differences into consideration, because they can create conflict.

All my life I have been raised with the idea that if you are not fifteen minutes early, you are late. Some of you march to the beat of a different drummer. The way I was raised is totally different from the way you were raised. All of this can be a source of conflict. One major area in which conflicts arise is what is known as Christian liberty, or things that are indifferent.

Receiving the Weak in Faith

The Apostle Paul said in Romans 14:1, “Him that is weak in the faith receive you, but not to doubtful disputations.” What are we to do with those who are weak in the faith? They are often times obnoxious, temperamental, foolish, and even childish in the things of faith. What in the world are we to do with them? After we recognize that there are varying degrees of faith, the second thing is this: receive them. “Him that is weak in the faith, receive you.” In other words, we are to receive them as weaker brothers. We are to receive them and treat them exactly like they are—as brothers, as fellow believers—but not to doubtful disputations.

The word receive is a very interesting word. It is proslambano in the Greek. Pros is a preposition which means to or toward. Lambano

is the verb which means I take. So it literally means to take to or toward oneself. It has the implication of taking one and receiving one into his home with kindness, friendship, and fellowship. It also has the implication of taking one into one's heart and receiving him into his heart.

The word implies a real fraternal love and affection, demonstrated by attitude and action. The Apostle is telling us that we must admit the weaker brethren into our society fellowship and receive them kindly, in love, and without a cold and harsh rebuke. It is very easy for you and I to receive people with whom we agree and whom we like, or who are notable in the cause of Christ.

There was a man named Epaphroditus who worked with the Apostle Paul, and he worked so hard that he actually made himself sick. Paul had to send him back to the Philippians, and wrote, “Receive him therefore in the Lord with gladness; and hold such in reputation.” It is easy to receive someone whom we like, someone with whom we agree, or someone who is notable. If the Apostle Paul were alive today, there is not one of us who would not gladly receive him into our homes. We would receive the Apostle Peter, Luke, or Mark, and even prominent preachers today, with gladness. Yet it is not quite so easy to receive someone who ticks you off all the time. You know what the Apostle Paul said to Philemon?

You remember Onesimus, the runaway slave. When the Apostle Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, he wrote, "Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels." In other words, treat him just as you would treat me. Receive him exactly as you would receive me. Paul said that Onesimus was his spiritual child; and if Philemon loved Paul, he would receive Onesimus in the same way that he would receive Paul.

Did you know that there was one man in the Bible who was so wicked, vile, and contemptible that one of his flagrant sins was failing to receive the brethren? In 3 John, John writes, "I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not." He would not even receive the Apostle John.

John continues, "Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church." Diotrephes loved to have the preeminence. Did you know that the word preeminence occurs only two times in the New Testament? The first occurrence is in Colossians chapter one, concerning Christ: "That in all things he might have the preeminence." But Diotrephes loved to have preeminence. In other words, he would usurp the position of Jesus Christ. He acted as if he were lord of the church, forbidding those in the church to receive the brethren. He would not receive the Apostle John, nor would he allow anyone else to receive the brethren.

What the Apostle Paul is telling us is this: We have to receive weak brethren and treat them as true believers. We cannot deny them fellowship or friendship simply because they are weaker brethren.

I can hear some objections: "You don't understand, Pastor, how childish they are, how judgmental they are, how ignorant they are. I don't have the time or patience to answer all their stupid questions or establish a friendship with them. They are always asking questions, always bothering me, hindering me, and stopping me from serving the Lord." That is an interesting concept. You are so busy serving the Lord that you do not have time to minister to His people.

You ought to ask Alice how many times I'm interrupted a day by a telephone call or by people coming out to see me and asking questions that I've answered a thousand times. You know what we've forgotten? We have forgotten that the way to serve the Lord is to serve His people, to minister to His people.

Hebrews 6:10 says, "For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister." Have you ever stopped to think that God has sent someone your way for you to teach them and for you to minister to them?

I'll tell you what I found. When I'm studying hard, I have a deadline, and I have to get something out, all of a sudden someone

comes up or I get a phone call. Some of my phone calls are well over five minutes, usually an hour, or an hour and a half minimum. I found that when I stop and minister to the saints the way I should, God always aids me, assists me, and helps me make up the time that I thought I would lose by ministering to those people. He allows things to come easier, more quickly, and with less difficulty.

Why? Because God is not going to be any man's debtor. If you minister to Him by ministering to His people, however weak they are, however ignorant they are, God is always going to make it up to you.

Receiving as Christ Received Us

I understand the time, patience, work, and labor involved in ministering to weak, ignorant saints. But look at Romans 15:7: "Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God."

Are you not glad that God had time to receive you in your ignorance, your obnoxiousness, your stubbornness, and your sin? You weren't born perfect, and you didn't come to God through Christ perfect. You had your problems, your hangups, and your idiosyncrasies. How are we to receive each other? Exactly the way Christ received us, to the honor and glory of God.

Christ patiently and consistently drew you to Himself, convicted you, and taught you, irrespective of your childish excuses and rebellion. In other words, He took time for you. Therefore, we must take time for the brethren. It is just that simple: “Him that is weak in the faith receive you,” and receive one another as Christ received us, to the glory of God.

There is another aspect of receiving each other. Matthew 10:41 says, "He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward."

How many of God's saints are righteous? All of them. Does it matter if they are weak? Does it matter if they are strong or in between? If we receive a righteous man in the name of a righteous man, we are going to receive a righteous man's reward. We are not

going to lose our reward if we take the time, are patient, and receive them the way that we should.

I do not have time to go over all the context of these right now, but look in Matthew 18 and verse 5. Our Lord said this: "And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me." He took a little child here to use as an illustration, but later on he is talking about God's children. He is talking about all of the saints. He said, "And whosoever shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me."

So if Christ knocked on your door and wanted to come in and spend an hour or two with you and ask a few questions, would you allow him to do that? Would you stop from your busy work schedule and allow him? Surely you would. Well, what if it is a weak saint who simply has to have some questions answered? Our Lord said that if you receive one of these little babes, you receive him.

Mark 9:37 puts it this way: "Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me." So our Lord says it like this: if you receive that weak child in his name, you are receiving him. You are not just receiving Christ; you are receiving him that sent Christ—that is, his Father.

When God sends the weaker brethren our way—often the ones who irritate us the most, and who cannot see or understand, which I am going to deal with next week—we are to receive them, be patient with them, teach them, and help them. We are to receive them even as Christ received us, for the glory of God the Father.

Let me tell you something, folks: it is hard and difficult to start all over. You ought to visit some of the churches that I have visited. Some would say, “Brother Weaver, we need you to come be our pastor.” You know what I think? “Oh, Lord have mercy. I do not have forty more years to bring you folks up to speed.” That is my thought.

It is just like Alice and I laugh. I am so glad I do not have to start out getting married and breaking somebody else in all over again. And she is the same way. You think of playing Jennifer. Look at everything they have to face and go through. I am so thankful I do not have to do all that. You reach a point in life when you do not

want to start over. It is difficult and hard. Yet, when you have a new babe in Christ, you have to start all over.

He is not going to understand a thing you say if you try to talk to him on a fatherly basis. For instance, when Clay's and Jennifer's child gets here, the first thing I want to do is hold that child in my arms and teach him about covenantal theology. I want to explain the differences between dichotomy and trichotomy, and infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism. Do you think he is going to understand that? No. If I hold that child, I will probably be saying, "Goo goo, ga ga," because that is all he can say. You cannot start out with a child talking like a mature adult; you have to come down and put it on their level, period. I will explain that.

Notice, if you would, Romans 14, verse 1. First of all, we understand that there are varying degrees of faith. It is saving faith, but it ranges from weak to strong, with everything in between.

Receiving Without Arguing

Secondly, we have to receive each other because Christ, for God's sake, has received us. Thirdly, verse one says, "Him that is weak in the faith receive you, but not to doubtful disputations." In other words, we must not argue, fight, or bicker. This is not talking about major Bible doctrines, but about disputations that arise over various things.

Without endorsing C. S. Lewis, consider his observation in Mere Christianity: Christians disagree not only about subjects, but about the importance of their disagreements. When two Christians of different denominations begin arguing, one may ask whether a point really matters, and the other replies, "Matter? Well, that's absolutely essential." It is amazing how we wish to determine for ourselves what is important, what is unimportant, what is a matter of fellowship, and what is not, instead of allowing God to do so.

Paul teaches that we are not to receive weaker brethren for the purpose of telling them off, straightening them out, or demanding that they grow up. That would be like walking up to a two-year-old child and saying, "Grow up, dummy." How can we expect him to go instantly from being two years old to being fifty? It is impossible. It

is like going to a lamb and saying, "By tomorrow I want you to be a sheep."

Growth does not work that way. I can go to my garden all day long—the garden that Alice planted—and say, "I want a watermelon tomorrow," but I cannot demand that the plants produce instantly. If we come to weaker brethren with a mightier-than-thou attitude, or with a "You'd better listen to me, buster" attitude, we will not help them. We will harm them, harden them, and drive them away in their ignorance.

Paul says that we receive them into our company to converse, have communion, deal with them, teach them, and help them. We treat them as brethren in Christ and as equals in Christ, with all possible endearments. We are not there to quarrel, argue, or be divisive; we are there to help and minister to them.

Albert Barnes wrote on verse one of Romans 14: “Do not admit him to your society for the purpose of debating the matter in an angry and harsh manner, of repelling him by denunciation, and thus by the natural reaction of such a course confirming him in his doubts. Or no, do not deal with him in such a manner as shall have a tendency to increase his scruples about meats, dates, etc. The leading idea here which all Christians should remember is that a harsh and angry denunciation of a man in relation to things not morally wrong, but where he may have honest scruples, will only tend to confirm him more and more in his doubts. To denounce and abuse him will be to confirm him. To receive him affectionately, to admit him to fellowship with us, to talk freely and kindly with him, to do him good, will have a far greater tendency to overcome his scruples.”

Questions now occur about modes of dress, measures, means of promoting revivals, rites, and ceremonies. If we wish to overcome the scruples of our brethren and induce them to think as we do, this is by far the wisest course. We must deal with them kindly and graciously. The Apostle Paul says, “Him that is weak in the faith receive you, but not for doubtful disputations.”

There are varying degrees in faith. God demands that we receive each brother in Christ, as long as he is a brother, regardless of where

he is in the faith. When we receive him, it is not to argue, bicker, fuss, or take a mightier-than-thou attitude and straighten him out. We will teach, but we cannot impatiently demand that he grow up instantaneously.

Applications for Peaceful Relationships

How long did it take you to get where you are in your Christian faith? You did not get there overnight. Wherever we are, we are there only by the grace of God. We must learn to receive each other and administer each other according to the stage at which one is in his Christian life. There are going to be some babes, some young men, and some fathers. Not a person in this room would go to a six-month-old baby and give him a T-bone steak for dinner.

First, he could not chew it. Secondly, if he could swallow it, he probably could not digest it. What you give that six-month-old baby is either milk or something very soft. You feed that child according to his age group. Likewise, you have to learn to minister to each Christian wherever he is in his Christian life—whether he is a babe, a young man, or a father.

If we wish to avoid conflicts and live peaceably with each other and with other saints, we have to learn to recognize the varying degrees of maturity, receive each other not to doubtful disputations, and minister to each other wherever we are in our Christian life. Here is the second application: learning to receive those with whom we are impatient and easily irritated should be a real challenge and enable us to grow in grace.

It is hard, difficult, and laborious work to start at the beginning and go over everything in detail. I recently had someone at my home, and we sat and discussed theology for hours until my voice was almost gone. I tried to help and teach, and there were several moments when I believe the light was beginning to break through. But did I see any fruit right then? The answer is no.

Let me tell you about a learning experience I had many years ago. I have taught from fourth grade all the way through college. I remember my first year teaching fourth grade. I had a fourth-grade history book that was about three-quarters of an inch thick at most. I

thought, “Oh no. I’ll be through this book in two months. Then what am I going to do for the rest of the year?”

That first week, I covered three chapters and gave my first quiz to those fourth graders. Many of them were very bright, but every one of them failed the quiz. I thought, it cannot be the students, because most of them were genuinely smart. It has to be the teacher. So I had to go back and start with chapter one. Then it dawned on me that I would have to teach chapter one for two weeks. It was something I could have comprehended and covered in fifteen minutes, but those fourth graders could not comprehend it in a week. All I am trying to show you is this.

There has to be an understanding that if you are going to teach someone, you have to be patient. They are not going to get it right away. You will have to go over the same material again and again until it sinks in. I will explain that more next week.

The third application is this: we will never reach other saints by thinking that we can force them, overpower them, intimidate them, or harass them into believing correctly. Each of us is still just sinner enough that if you try to force us, we are going to show you we will not do it. That is a fact. You try to make me do something, and you are going to have a hard time, especially if I do not want to. If you ask me, I will probably do it; but if you try to force me, no.

The same thing is true of believing. You may force someone to say, “All right, I yield,” just to get out of there, but that does not mean you have taught them anything or that they have truly embraced what you are trying to say. We are never going to get anywhere by quarreling, bickering, or arguing.

So he says, “Receive one another,” but not to doubtful disputations. Learn three things: First, there are varying degrees of faith. Second, we must receive every true believer, no matter where he is. Third, receiving them is not for arguments, quarrels, or bickering, but to minister to them and build them up in the most holy faith.

Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, we bow to you this day. We thank you for your love and mercy, and we pray that you will teach

us and help us to help others and bring them into the fullness of faith in Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray, amen.

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CHAPTER 2

How to Avoid Conflicts 2

The Uselessness and Worthlessness in Arguing

Introduction and Review

This is the second message on how to avoid conflicts between Christians. The Word of God says, "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things, another who is weak eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not, and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth, for God hath received him." Although this message is entitled, "How to Avoid Conflicts Between Christians," there is also a subtitle today, and that is, "The Uselessness and Worthlessness in Arguing."

We looked last week at Romans 14 and verse 1: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." One of the leading principles is that practical Christian living is a result of sound doctrinal teaching. You cannot live what you do not know, what you do not understand, and what you do not believe. Practice and application are always built upon doctrine, and it should be painfully evident to each of us that one of the main reasons there are

so many unbiblical attitudes and unbiblical actions among Christians is that there is a dearth of biblical doctrine being taught and being presented.

We also learn from verse one that there are degrees of faith. There is weak faith, strong faith, little faith, and great faith. Even our Lord looked at His disciples and said, "O ye of little faith." Then again, He said He had not seen so great a faith a little bit later on. So there are varying degrees of faith: weak and strong, with everything in between. In 1 John 2, John distinguishes at least three degrees. He talks about young children or babes, and young men and fathers.

Very obviously, we have to understand that not every believer is on the same level in understanding or in the application of doctrine. Since there are these varying degrees and varying levels of understanding, conflicts between weak and strong believers are inevitably going to arise. It is also critical for us to remember that a believer is still a believer. He may be a weak believer. He may be a strong believer.

Saving faith is indeed saving faith. It is our faith in Jesus Christ, in His person, and finished work that saves us, and not the degree of our faith. Therefore, we are called upon, in Romans chapter 14, to receive the weak brethren as they really are, that is, real brothers in Christ. We have to receive them in the bonds of friendship, fellowship, and ministry. We do not receive them to bicker, argue, and cause contentions. We receive them that we might minister to them, help them, and teach them. In fact, Scripture says we are not to receive them to doubtful disputations.

In other words, there should be no fighting and no arguing. It does absolutely no good to fuss and fight and harangue someone because of their beliefs or their lack thereof. We are talking about fellow believers, not the ungodly. I am not referring to someone who denies the deity of Christ, or the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, or the inspiration of scriptures. I am not talking about unbelievers. True, it does no good to argue with them either.

The Nature of Conflicts Over Indifferent Matters

However, with an unbeliever, if they continue to refuse the truth, we may reject them. Because the Bible says in Titus 3, verse 10, "He that is a heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject." A great amount of what is said toward believers could also be applied to unbelievers as well, but the subject here is believers. We are dealing with that which is known as indifferent—the adiaphora, or the indifferent things in the scripture. That is, where there is no clear teaching in the scripture, and each man's conscience has been taught differently. We are not talking about clear violations of scripture. If there is a clear violation of scripture, too many other passages command us to rebuke and reprove, to admonish, and to warn. What we are talking about are the hang-ups, idiosyncrasies, ignorance, past influence, and habits.

The two things that the Apostle Paul singled out in Romans chapter 14 are meats and dates. There may have been many other things in the Roman church that caused these conflicts as well, but Paul singled out these two. Likewise, today there may be many varying and different subjects that cause conflicts. However, usually you are going to find that the majority of conflicts, not only in New Testament times but even in our time, stem from a misunderstanding of the ceremonies and the feasts. Special days and those things still arise today. Consequently, since there is a difference of opinion on some of those things, there is going to be an occasion for conflicts.

Look very carefully at verses 2 and 3. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 14, verse 2, “For one believeth that he may eat all things, another who is weak eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not, and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth, for God hath received him.”

I am going to be commenting more on these verses next week than I am today. But note, just on the surface of these two verses, that it is the strong brother who enjoys the most of God’s creation, and the weak brother who enjoys the least of God’s creation. It is also important to note that the tendency of someone who is strong in the faith is to despise, condemn, and belittle someone who is weak in the faith. Someone strong in the faith is going to say, “Oh come on, grow

up." The tendency of the one who is weak in the faith is to judge the strong by saying, "I'll see how you can do that and call yourself a Christian."

Whenever you have two groups or two individuals together, and one has a natural tendency to condemn, criticize, and belittle, while the other has the natural tendency to judge and to be quick in that judgment, very obviously you are going to have conflicts. You are going to have disputations, arguments, and quarrels, and they will quickly arise because both the strong and the weak have opposing views and are quick to let you know what those views are.

And they would usually tell you in no uncertain terms, and that will always lead to conflicts. Conflicts arose in the time of the Apostle Paul, most of the time over these ceremonial laws. Some believed that because the meat had been offered to an idol, it had somehow become contaminated and was therefore unfit for consumption. Some believed this with such ferocity that, to make sure they did not eat any meat offered to idols, they became vegetarians.

That is why he said, "one eateth only herbs." Here you have these two groups. As a sidelight, someone once gave me a T-shirt that said, "Vegetarian: another name for the village idiot who cannot hunt or fish." There are, of course, individuals who are vegetarians by choice. But here they did not simply choose vegetarianism; they believed the meat was contaminated because it might have been offered to an idol.

Once you begin reading Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, which we will consider more next week, you will see that the position held by the weaker brother may be wrong, unscriptural, and even absurd. Yet fussing, arguing, and harassment will never prevail in convincing that weak brother that his position is wrong and absurd.

Let me give you two observations that are vitally important in understanding the message today. First, the strong brethren should be willing to help and teach the weaker brethren. I am going to show you that from Scripture. Second, the weaker brethren should be willing to be helped and taught.

The Obligation to Teach and Be Teachable

The strong must be willing to teach, and the weak must be willing to be taught. The strong must be teachers, and the weak must be teachable. It is absolutely impossible to help or teach someone who has a know-it-all attitude or thinks he has already arrived at all truth. Unhappily, many young men in the faith, although novices, refuse to listen and be instructed because they believe that in their few short years they have arrived at perfect knowledge. It is an interesting thing that many young people go to college not to learn, but to teach the professors and instruct them.

The Puritans had a saying that revealed this situation very clearly: "Oh, how many would be wise if they did not already think themselves so." That is certainly the attitude of a lot of people. If someone is going to be taught, he has to have a teachable spirit. He has to be willing to listen, to learn, and to consider, not merely defend his position. All of us by nature want to defend what we believe, what we think, and what we have been taught.

I remember very clearly, as a young man, the first time some of my views were challenged. You are talking about blowing up. I did. I rebuked one of my professors. Of course, I found out later that he was right and I was wrong, and I had to go back and apologize to him. I am simply saying that this is the natural tendency of a young man. Do you not remember John classified them as having strength and zeal? Of course. But how many would be wise if they did not already think themselves so?

A recalcitrant student always makes teaching more difficult, more laborious, and more onerous. On the other hand, an impatient, angry, and difficult teacher likewise makes it almost impossible to learn. So what the Bible teaches is that there must be a willingness to teach, and there must be a willingness to be taught.

In 2 Timothy 2:1-2, the Apostle Paul writes to Timothy: "Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men who shall be able to teach others also." The things that Timothy had been taught—the same truths and doctrines—were to be committed to faithful men who would be able

to teach others also. Thus, both the teacher and the student must be willing: the teacher must be able to teach, and the hearer must be faithful and teachable.

Now, I want to make something exceedingly clear. In this passage, one is to be willing to teach, and the others must be teachable. Notice that the Apostle Paul did not tell Timothy to run everyone down and cram truth down their throat. No. He said, "the same commit thou to faithful men who shall be able to teach others also." In other words, if I am obligated to teach, you are obligated to listen. If I am obligated to teach, you are obligated to learn. You have to be faithful at learning, faithful in listening and hearing, and faithful in applying.

Our Lord never chased anyone down. The truth of the matter is this: if you have been saved by the grace of God, you really should have a desire to learn the Word of God and to be taught. I am willing to teach anyone who is willing to listen and who is willing to be faithful in attending the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, listening, and learning.

You cannot learn God's Word overnight. It is not like instant coffee: you just have it, and it is. No. Look back in your Bibles, to Romans chapter 15. It is the obligation, the duty, and, I will add, the privilege of the strong to teach the weak. Look in your Bibles at Romans 15, verses 1 through 3. God in His sovereignty has placed this duty and obligation upon the strong. I could ask it like this.

Bearing the Infirmities of the Weak

Who best is designed to communicate truth? Those who already know the truth, those who already understand the truth, and those to whom God has already given the truth. In Romans 15 and verse 1, the Apostle says, "We that are strong," classifying himself as a strong believer: "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good edification. For even Christ pleased not himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of them that reproach thee fell on me.'"

Notice that he says, "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak." The word "bear" means to take to oneself. It

means to sustain, to support, to bear, to carry, or to take up in order to carry. Therefore, the apostle tells us that those who are strong ought to carry the infirmities of the weak.

The word “infirmities” here refers to an error arising from a weakness of the mind. It does not mean that someone is stupid just because they do not know something. It does not mean that someone is mentally deficient, nor does it mean that someone is plain crazy. It simply means that someone is not thinking straight in some area. I can assure you that, if you tried to get me into an area other than theology, history, and philosophy, I would not be thinking straight in some of those areas. I would not be thinking straight in the field of engineering, in finished carpentry, or in a number of other fields. Therefore, I would have to be taught because I would have an infirmity in that particular area. It does not mean that someone is stupid; it means that he has a dull, inconsistent understanding in one specific area.

He says, “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak,” and “not to please ourselves.” What does the Apostle Paul mean? The strong are not to please themselves by going on their merry way, exercising their Christian liberties without regard for their weaker brethren. Rather, we are to please our brethren by edifying, educating, and enlightening them.

Which sometimes is a very painful and difficult task. But then he tells us why. He says in verse 2, "Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good edification, for even Christ pleased not himself." In other words, Christ did not come to live for himself. He came to do the Father's will. He came to give himself and his life a ransom for his people. He sacrificed himself. He lived a sacrificial life. In other words, he gave everything to purchase us.

And here's the apostle's argument: if Christ has given everything and sacrificed everything for us, cannot we sacrifice a little toward the weaker brethren? Remember what our Lord said in Luke 22 and verse 27: "For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat or him that serveth?" And then he asked, "Is not he that sitteth at meat?" Then he says, "But I am among you as one that serveth." So Christ did not come to be served, but to serve. He did not come to be ministered to, but to minister.

He is telling us here that we who are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak and not to please ourselves. Galatians 6 and verse 2 says, "Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." So the question has to be asked: how do we bear one another's burdens? In light of this message, the answer is by patiently teaching, educating, and encouraging our weaker brethren in the faith.

One of the greatest sources of conflict between Christians arises when one brother does not see an issue exactly the same way as another brother. When two Christians disagree, if they have not learned Christian discipline, self-control, and charity, inevitably they will get into a heated discussion. During that discussion, each one will try to prove his own point. When the other Christian does not see, understand, or comprehend the point being proved, he will usually end up getting angry and calling him stupid, a heretic, or some name like that. The next thing you know, there is a division and a loss of friendship.

The Futility of Arguing and Name-Calling

And everything goes downhill from there. One of my favorite cartoons that I saw years ago reveals this mentality. A pastor was walking down the hall of the church with a gentleman when they saw an open door. Inside, two men were rolling around on the floor fighting. Each had a black eye; their hair was pulled, their shirts were all out, and they were scratched and bleeding. The pastor calmly said, as the man looked in the room, “Oh, never mind them. They're just having their weekly discussion on the doctrine of election.” Well, you know, that's the way it goes a lot of times.

Do you realize the same could be said concerning eschatology? I've known pastors who were absolutely ready to fight if you did not believe exactly as they believed concerning the return of Christ. In fact, I have known pastors, and I have heard pastors, call other preachers heretics because they differed eschatologically speaking.

Now, let me quickly demonstrate the insanity of name-calling and fighting over eschatology. Do you realize there are four main views when it comes to eschatology? There is historic premillennialism, which simply says that Christ is going to return before the

millennium; it did not teach a rapture or anything like that. There is amillennialism, which came to pass in the fourth century under Augustine. There is postmillennialism, and then there is dispensational premillennialism. There are varying views within those four major views. Once you get into dispensational premillennialism, for instance, there are pre-trib raptures, mid-trib, post-trib, and all kinds of views.

But the point I am trying to make is this: if someone is a historic premill, an amill, a postmill, or a dispensational premill, each one believes that Jesus Christ is going to return to this earth literally, visibly, and bodily. The only thing they disagree on is when and how. So how can someone be called a heretic if he really believes that Jesus Christ is coming literally, visibly, and bodily? He simply disagrees with somebody as to when He is coming back and how He is coming back. And yet, eschatology is such a source of division.

It is true that eschatology is important. Your eschatology does indeed determine your worldview, and it does indeed determine your application of Scripture. Yet neither one of those four major positions denies the return of Christ. So why, then, are you going to argue with somebody, fuss and fight, and call somebody a heretic just because he does not believe that Christ is going to return exactly when you think He is, or how he thinks He is going to return, or how you think He is going to return?

Augustine, one of the early church fathers, had a dictum: “In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.” It would do well for modern-day Christians to understand that dictum and certainly apply charity to many situations.

Biblical Manner of Teaching: Patience and Meekness

It is absolutely true that we are required to teach and minister to each other. However, it must be done in a biblical manner and with biblical understanding. How do we minister to each other in a biblical manner and with biblical understanding? Look in your Bibles to Titus, chapter one and verse nine. Paul tells Titus, “Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and convince the gainsayers.” If we are going to convince anyone, if we are going to convict anyone, it

must be with sound doctrine. It cannot be, “Well, I think,” or “in my opinion,” or “the way I see it,” or “let me tell you what I’ve been taught.” No. We have to be able to use the Word of God and, with sound doctrine, present the position being taught. Now, it is not just sound doctrine.

We must have sound doctrine—that is true—but there is more than sound doctrine. In 2 Timothy 2:24-26, the Apostle Paul writes that “the servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who were taken captive by him at his will.”

The servant of the Lord must not strive. The word “strive” refers to a war of words—what we would call quarreling, arguing, wrangling, and fighting. Negatively, we are not to strive with each other in this sense. We are not to receive each other to doubtful disputations. Positively, we are to be able to teach, to be patient, to be meek, and to be humble in instructing those that oppose themselves.

If one opposes himself—that is, if he refuses to receive the truth, balks, or does not understand—is he likely to submit to the teaching immediately? No. That is why the one doing the teaching has to be patient and gentle. Once a person opposes himself, he is not going to see everything right away.

Suppose that someone is in error. What will it take for him to repent? “In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves, if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.” Who gives repentance? God. Can we demand that God give someone repentance right now? Can we dictate to God that He must do something according to our schedule and timetable? No. If God does not give a man repentance, he will never turn from his foolishness, error, or stupidity. That is why Scripture says we must patiently and meekly teach the truth. It is God who gives repentance, and if men are to recover themselves from the snare of the devil, it is only as God gives them repentance.

What we have failed to do is connect two absolute truths: the sovereignty of God in salvation and the sovereignty of God in illumination. The God who is absolutely sovereign in salvation is absolutely sovereign in illumination. God does not give everyone the same amount of truth, nor does He give everyone the same truth at the same time. Just as God is sovereign in disposing or giving grace, faith, and repentance, that same God is sovereign in giving illumination and enlightenment.

The truth is this: if God does not open our eyes, we will never see the truth. We will never understand the simplest doctrine. It is true that we have a responsibility to study, know, and learn the truth. But that responsibility does not mean that we have the ability in and of ourselves. There is a difference between responsibility and ability. We think somehow that we can make people see the truth. We cannot. It is true that we are to be qualified to use Scripture and teach sound doctrine, but we could teach sound doctrine all day long; if God does not open your eyes, you will never, ever see it.

The Sovereignty of God in Illumination

Consider the illustration in Luke 24, the story of the two disciples on the Emmaus road. After His resurrection, our Lord joined Himself to these disciples. They did not know who He was. He asked them, "Why are you so glum? What's wrong with you?" They answered, "Are you a stranger? Have you not heard? We thought this Jesus was the Messiah, and he's been crucified. And besides this, it's the third day."

Our Lord said, "O fools and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have written! Ought not Christ to have suffered and entered into glory?" Then, beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He explained to them all things concerning Himself.

In Luke 24:27, we read, “And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. And they drew nigh unto the village whither they went. And he made as though he would have gone further. But they constrained him, saying, ‘Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.’ And he went in to tarry with them.”

"And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it them." Watch verse 31: "And their eyes were opened, and they knew him, and he vanished out of their sight." They had walked with him for miles and did not know who he was. The Scripture says, "and their eyes were opened."

It is an aorist passive. An aorist means something that happens once and for all. It is passive, meaning the subject had nothing to do with it; it was done to the subject. God sovereignly opened their eyes, and then they knew who he was. Had God not opened their eyes, they would never have known who he was.

Our Lord had now revealed himself to the other disciples: "And they gave him a piece of broiled fish and a honeycomb, and he took it, and did eat before them. And he said unto them, 'These are the words which I have spoken unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the Psalms, concerning me.'"

Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures. What did he do? He opened their understanding. Why? That they might understand the Scriptures. They did not see, understand, or comprehend the truth on their own. Had he not sovereignly and powerfully opened their understanding, they would never have seen the truth. But our Lord opened their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures.

It is imperative that you and I understand the biblical doctrine of illumination. Illumination is the act and work of God the Spirit, whereby He opens our understanding, enlightens our minds, and enables us to understand previously revealed truth, which, of course, is the Bible. It is the act and work of God the Spirit whereby He opens our understanding, enlightens our minds, and enables us to understand truth that has been previously revealed.

There is no way that you and I can understand any of the Scripture apart from illumination. I have had people tell me for years, "I just can't understand the Bible." Of course you can't. Neither can I—not on our own, not apart from illumination. This business about, "Well, we just need newer versions, easier to understand," is hogwash. You do not need a newer version. You do

not need something that you think is easy to understand. What you need is to be illuminated by the Holy Spirit. I do not see how, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," is too difficult. How about, "You must be born again"? That is not too difficult. How about, "Except ye repent, ye shall likewise perish"? That is not difficult either.

The problem is not with the difficulty of the plain text of Scripture. The problem is the dullness of our minds. We do not understand, and unless God opens our eyes, we will never, ever see it. Period.

Consider two passages: Proverbs 2 and 2 Timothy chapter 2. Look in Proverbs chapter 2 and verse 6, and then we will go to 2 Timothy chapter 2 and verse 7. Proverbs 2:6 says, "For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of His mouth cometh knowledge and understanding." Where do wisdom, understanding, and knowledge come from? From God alone. If we understand anything, it is because He gave us understanding. Then look at 2 Timothy 2:7. Paul told Timothy, "Consider what I say, and the Lord give thee understanding in all things." Consider what I say, and the Lord give thee understanding in all things.

The duty, obligation, honor, and privilege of considering God's truth are ours. However, only God has the gift of understanding, and only God gives that gift and enables us to understand His truth. It does not matter whether we are babes in Christ, young men in Christ, or fathers in Christ. None of us can ever understand the Scripture apart from the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

I could be saved 250 years. That doesn't mean a thing. I still need the illumination of the Holy Spirit if I want to understand the Scripture. Those who have advanced in the faith have done so because they considered what God said, and God opened their eyes to the truth. Had God not opened our eyes, we would still be babes as well.

Principles of Receiving Truth

Paul told Timothy, "Consider what I say and the Lord give thee understanding in all things." Let me show you the principles that

Christ lays out in Mark 4 concerning the understanding and application of the Word of God. “If any man have ears to hear, let him hear. And he said unto them, ‘Take heed what you hear: with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you. And unto you that hear shall more be given. For he that hath, to him shall be given, and he that hath not, from him shall be taken, even that which he hath.’”

Although God gives understanding, God does not give it willy-nilly. He normally gives understanding as we meditate upon His Word. To the measure we give in meditating and considering God's truth, to that same measure God measures truth back to us. We're not going to study for 15 minutes and get four hours' worth of truth. We're not going to study an hour and get two days' worth of truth. If we study 15 minutes and God opens our eyes, we're going to get 15 minutes' worth of truth. If we study an hour and God opens our eyes, we're going to get an hour's worth of truth.

But the truth of the matter is this: we could study for the rest of our lives, and if God never opened our eyes, we would not understand the truth. “And he said unto them, ‘Take heed what you hear: with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you.’” Now watch: “and unto you that hear shall more be given.” The opposite is also true. To those who do not hear, no more will be given.

This principle alone should explain why most professing Christians are no more than babes in Christ. This principle alone should explain why the average church has so many problems. First, most Christians do not study or meditate upon the Word of God.

Secondly, they do not apply what they hear and know. They do not put it into practice. If you do not put it into practice, you really do not have it. That is why the Bible says in verse 25, “from him shall be taken even that which he hath.” You think you know truth, but you do not apply it. Shortly, you will totally forget it.

Our Lord said, “and to you that hear shall more be given.” Why would God give anyone more truth if they will not obey the truth He has already given them? God only gives us truth as we are able to hear it.

I used this illustration last week. You would not take a two-month-old baby and feed that baby a T-bone steak. Very obviously, he is not able to eat it, swallow it, or digest it. I have heard Christians say concerning truth they now hold dear, “Oh, would God I had heard this twenty years ago.” It would not have done you any good, because you may not have been able to hear or understand it twenty years ago.

Look at what the Scripture says in Mark 4:33: “...and with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it.” God is not going to give you truth until you are able to hear it. If you continue to reject what He has already given you, He is not going to give you any more. You will never be in a position to hear more truth until you obey what you already know.

You say, “Well, I would like to know more. I would really like to learn. How do I grow in grace and faith? How do I grow in understanding and enlightenment?” Look at verse 34: “But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples.” If you really want to understand, learn to get along with Jesus Christ, seek Him, talk with Him, and ask Him for understanding and enlightenment, and He will teach you.

Since God is sovereign in illumination, does not give everyone the same amount or degree of understanding at the same time, and since there are babes, young men, and fathers, we must recognize that if God does not open our eyes, we will never understand. What good does it do to become angry with someone for not understanding? Why should I argue, fuss, or become bent out of shape simply because someone does not see something? I may want you to see it; I may long for you to see it. But I cannot open your eyes or give you understanding. That is the gift of God. Therefore, it requires patience on my part and patience on your part.

You have to continue teaching the same thing over and over until God, in His grace, gives understanding. Look in your Bibles to Acts chapter 16, verse 14. Everyone should know about Lydia, the seller of purple from Thyatira. Notice what the Bible says concerning her. Acts 16:13-14: "And on the Sabbath, we went out of the city by a river side where prayer was wont to be made, and we sat down. And spake

unto the women which resorted thither. And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple of the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken by Paul."

Why did Lydia listen intently, seriously, and with understanding to the things spoken by the Apostle Paul? Because the Lord opened her heart. Unless God opens our heart, which is our understanding, we will never see truth.

Humility in Teaching Others

There is one more truth that has to be comprehended. What will keep us meek and humble as we try to help others? First, none of us came into this world with understanding. You were not born with understanding; you were taught everything that you now know. Secondly, it took time for you to learn what you now know and believe. You did not arrive where you are overnight. It took years of listening, learning, and submitting to the Word of God to reach your present understanding.

Thirdly, many of us in the beginning were obnoxious, recalcitrant, and reluctant to receive that which we now hold and believe to be absolute truth. We fought it. We ridiculed it. We laughed. We refused to believe it as it was taught. And now God has opened our eyes. Thankfully, whoever taught us never threw us away. Even more thankfully, God did not leave us to ourselves and our ignorance.

So let me ask you: where are you in your Christian faith, and why are you there? Consider the questions the Apostle Paul asked in 1 Corinthians 4:7: “For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it?”

Who made you to differ one from another? Why are you saved and others lost? Why do you have understanding and others are ignorant? Who made you to differ? And what do you have that was not given to you by the grace and mercy of God? If you have received it, why then are you boasting or acting as if you did not receive it?

In other words, Paul's argument is simply this: If God was gracious, merciful, and patient with us, and gave us His gift of

understanding—if everything we have is His gift—can we not be merciful, gracious, and patient with others until God opens their eyes as well? Everything that we are and everything that we have, God gave us. It is now incumbent upon us to teach others without arguing, bickering, bellyaching, or complaining, but patiently, gently, and kindly sharing the Word of God constantly, consistently, and continually until God opens their eyes.

Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, we bow to Thee. We thank You and praise You. Lord, we acknowledge that everything we are, we are by the grace of God. Paul said, "I am what I am by the grace of God." We have what we have by the grace of God, every little bit of understanding You gave us. We acknowledge that every good gift and every perfect gift cometh down from above, from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Teach us, Lord, to share that which we have known, patiently and humbly, for Thy honor and Thy glory. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

CHAPTER 3

How to Avoid Conflicts 3

Introduction and Review of Romans 14:1–3

"Him that is weak in the faith, receive you, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things, another who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not, and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth, for God hath received him."

For the last two weeks, I have dealt with this subject, how to avoid conflicts between Christians. Lord willing, there are probably going to be two more messages when I come back. In the first message, I tried to demonstrate that Christian living is a result of sound doctrine. It is impossible for you and me to have a practical, obedient Christian life without understanding doctrine. One reason there are so many Christians who do not live an obedient, godly life is that very little doctrine is being taught and preached.

I also pointed out that there are varying degrees of faith. Here Paul talks about a weak faith and a strong faith. Our Lord said, "O ye of little faith," and then He said, "I have not seen so great a faith, no, not in Israel." Just as there are little, great, strong, and weak degrees

of faith, there are varying degrees in between. In 1 John 2, John divided Christians into babes, young men, and fathers.

There are different positions of understanding in the Christian faith. A weak believer is still a believer. It is not the degree of your faith that saves you; it is faith in Jesus Christ that saves you. If one is a weak believer, yet believes in the finished work of Jesus Christ and trusts totally and completely in Him, he is still saved, no matter how weak he is in faith. Scripture says that we are to receive the weak in the faith—not to doubtful disputation, but into bonds of friendship, fellowship, and ministry.

The Uselessness of Arguing and Dependence on God for Illumination

There is to be no fussing and no fighting. Last week, in the second message, I dealt with a simple principle. If you were not here, I would encourage you to hear it. Why? It is absolutely impossible to argue someone into a position of faith. In other words, the uselessness and the worthlessness of fussing, fighting, and arguing. They will not help anyone understand truth. Someone who does not understand truth will not be helped by condemnation, suppression, or extreme criticism.

Scripture teaches that we are to patiently inculcate and teach the Word of God, yet at the same time we must depend totally and completely upon God to open the understanding. If God does not open one's eyes, I do not care how saved he is; he will never see or understand truth. That is true of a babe, a young man, or a father. Yet if you understand that the God who is sovereign in salvation is equally sovereign in illumination, it will enable you to be patient in working with people and helping others, because it is impossible for them to understand without God opening their eyes. So why should I get angry with you if you do not see what I see? Why should you get angry with me if I do not see what you see? If God does not open our eyes, neither one of us will ever understand the truth.

The Nature of Early Church Conflicts: Meats and Days

As you read Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8, and 1 Corinthians 10, it is interesting that what caused most conflicts between believers was

not doctrine. It was what we would call things that are indifferent. The conflicts arose over meats and days. Some viewed certain meats as contaminated; some viewed certain days as religiously significant; others did not. Most Christians today would probably think those conflicts were absolutely ridiculous and cannot see how they could arise. The reason is that most Christians are totally ignorant of Scripture and therefore cannot see where a conflict will arise. They cannot understand the conflicts in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 because we are thousands of years removed from the scene and the life and times of those early Christians.

Consequently, we have a tendency then to judge everything in light of our history, our situation, and our knowledge. We sit back and say, "Well, if I had been alive back then, I would not have done that." That is just your guesstimation. You may have done that back then, because you do not know. You are judging everything in light of your present situation.

What many people do not understand is that many of the conflicts that arose in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 are exactly the same conflicts going on today. I know a number of Christians who are confused over certain meats and certain days. They regard certain days as special, count them that way, and want everyone else to count them that way. I am simply saying that many of the same exact issues are going on today. I know Christians who celebrate feasts, and some of them will become very angry with you if you do not do that. Even if you do not know anyone having a conflict over meats and days, there are many other conflicts that are very prevalent between Christians to which the same resolutions the Apostle Paul gives would apply equally as well.

Distinction Between the Strong and the Weak

In Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, there is a distinction between the strong and the weak. The weak were Christians still shackled in their consciences to the old ceremonial observances concerning days and meats. The strong believers were those who saw, with their death in Christ, the end of all such bondage and enjoyed liberty in the Spirit.

The weak in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 were not immoral people. They were not fornicators, whoremongers, or drunkards. No.

These people were so conscience-stricken that many of them abstained from all meats just to make sure that they were not sinning against God.

Old Testament Background for Concern Over Meat

Why would any Christian have a concern over meat? The problem that existed in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 was meat that had been sacrificed to idols. You say, “That does not change the meat.” But remember Numbers 25. The Israelites got into an awful lot of trouble when they sat down and ate some meat with the Moabites, and that meat happened to have been sacrificed to idols.

In Numbers 25, verses 1–3, we read, "And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab, and they called the people unto the sacrifice of their gods. And the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods, and Israel joined himself unto Baal Peor, and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel." When you skip down to verse 9, you find that God killed twenty-four thousand. If I had been invited to a feast, was eating meat, and saw twenty-four thousand people die around me because of that meat, I think I would have been cautious about eating meat as well.

The meat, of course, was not necessarily contaminated, but they went to the idol. They ate, and it led to their fornication and wickedness, and God judged them.

Now, in Exodus 34, here is a warning that God gave in verses 15 and 16. God says in verse 14, "For thou shalt worship no other god, for the Lord whose name is Jealous is a jealous God, lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go a-whoring after their gods, and do sacrifice unto their gods, and one call thee, and thou eat of his sacrifice; and thou takest of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go a-whoring after their gods, and make thy sons go a-whoring after their gods." Our Lord is saying that you do not do these things because they will lead to other problems. This was the background with which many people in the New Testament understood the issue, and they were saying, "Well, I don't know."

You remember Daniel. In Daniel chapter 1, verses 8 through 16, the Bible says that Daniel purposed not to defile himself with the king's meat. It was not that the king was sending him pork or shellfish. In Bible times, practically every meat was dedicated to a false god. That was how they worshiped God. In the Old Testament, when you brought your sacrifice to God, the priest, of course, ate of that sacrifice, and oftentimes, depending on the type of sacrifice, you ate some of it as well. That was part of communion with God. The pagans did exactly the same thing. Daniel therefore said, "This meat has been dedicated to an idol, so I am not going to eat it. I might not know whether it is or not, so I am not going to eat it." Daniel simply ate pulse and water, or peas and water, which is good food, by the way.

The Jerusalem Council and the Issue of Pollutions of Idols

Josephus, in his life, states that there were certain Jewish priests at Rome. While they lived there, they lived entirely upon fruit, just to make sure that they did not eat anything that was unclean. So, when other nations came into the faith, problems and conflicts arose.

In Acts 15, we see the Council at Jerusalem. This conflict arose between believers converted from Judaism and others who were coming in from other nations. They did not know what to do, so they held a council. James, who was the leader, said, “Wherefore, my sentence is that we trouble not them which from among the Gentiles, or the nations, are turned to God, but that we write unto them that they abstain from pollutions of idols, from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.”

They were dealing with this problem, and James, as president of the council, gave his judgment or opinion, to which the others consented. The language here is the usual language in which a judge delivers his opinion. It does not necessarily imply that James assumed the authority to settle the case; rather, he gave his opinion as to how best to work out the problem at that particular time.

Albert Barnes said this concerning pollutions: “The word rendered pollutions means any kind of defilement. But here it is evidently used to note the flesh of those animals that were offered in

sacrifice to idols. That flesh, after being offered in sacrifice, was sold in the markets or served up at feasts. It became a very important question whether it was right for Christians to partake of it.

"The Jews would contend that it was, in fact, partaking of idolatry. The Gentile converts would allege that they did not eat it as sacrifice to idols, or lend their countenance in any way to the idolaters' worship where it had been. As idolatry was forbidden to the Jews in every form, and partaking even of the sacrifices idled in their feasts might seem to countenance idolatry, the Jews would be utterly opposed to it. For the sake of peace, James advised that they be recommended to abstain from this. To partake of that food might not be morally wrong, but it would give an occasion for scandal and offense; therefore, as a matter of expediency, it was advised that they should abstain from it."

James says "from pollutions of idols." What he has to refer to in Acts 15 and verse 19 is the meat that had been offered to idols. He is not talking about idolatry. Idolatry is not something indifferent. Idolatry is a sin, rebellion, and wickedness against God.

So here is the question: Does offering meat to an idol have any influence upon that meat? Does it contaminate that meat? Does it render that meat uneatable for a believer? Well, you may ask, "Wait a minute, Brother Weaver, what possible relevance could that question have for our society today?" Who is going to offer meat to a false idol and expect you to eat some of it?

I hope you know that the Jews have their kosher blessings upon certain meats. The Muslims have their blessings upon certain meats to their god Allah. I am not sure if you are aware of this, but Wiccan and Pagan cults also have their blessings upon certain meats.

When you go to the grocery store or the meat market and buy your meats, how do you know whether or not they have been blessed or dedicated to a false god? I am simply pointing out the fact that these issues are still alive today. Just because we may be ignorant of some of these practices does not mean that those practices do not exist. In fact, the next time you go to the grocery store, begin to notice. You will see a certain sign for that which has been blessed by the rabbis.

There is an Orthodox Jewish symbol. There is also a symbol for the Muslims, and I am sure there are probably other symbols as well, but they are stamped on the product. We have the same problem today. Would you eat something that you knew had been dedicated to Allah? Of course, the rabbis certainly do not believe that Jesus Christ is God.

Now, let us turn in our Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 8. I am not going to go into great detail in this chapter today, because the next two messages, when I deal with what it means to offend biblically, will cover 1 Corinthians chapter 8. But I want us to read it. I want you to see this, because it arose not only in the Roman church, but in the Corinthian church as well.

1 Corinthians 8: Knowledge, Liberty, and the Weaker Brother

Paul writes, "...touching things offered unto idols. We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth."

"Now, if any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. But if any man love God, the same is known of him. As concerning, therefore, the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and there is none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in Him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by Him. Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge. For some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat as a thing offered unto an idol, and their conscience being weak is defiled. But meat commendeth us not to God, for neither if we eat, are we the better; neither if we eat not, are we the worse."

Paul warns, "But take heed, lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak." If a believer with knowledge sat at meat in an idol's temple, the conscience of the weak believer might be emboldened to eat what had been offered to idols. Through that knowledge, the weak brother for whom Christ died might perish. When we sin against weak brethren, we wound their

weak conscience and sin against Christ. Therefore, Paul says, if meat makes his brother offend, he will eat no flesh while the world stands, lest he make his brother offend.

Now, Paul states undeniably that there is nothing wrong with meat offered unto an idol. The idol does not change the meat, contaminate it, alter its form, or have any influence upon it. It is simply plain meat. Verse 4 says, "As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one." There is only one God. An idol is nothing; it can do nothing.

But Paul says, "Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge." He is not saying that some Christians do not know there is one God and that an idol is nothing. He is saying that some believers think the idol has influence upon the meat, so that the meat becomes contaminated and should be rejected for consumption. Those who knew better were the strong believers; those who believed the meat had become contaminated were the weak believers.

If a man with knowledge—the strong believer—sat at meat in the idol's temple, would not the conscience of the weak believer, who thought the idol had influenced the meat, be emboldened to eat what had been offered to idols? Evidently, after the sacrifice in these pagan temples, a feast was made of whatever remained, and friends and neighbors were invited. Some Christians, not only in the Roman church but also in the Corinthian church, were exercising their Christian liberty by going into the idol's temple and sitting down to enjoy a free meal, or at least one that was very cheap.

They knew that the idol was nothing and had no influence upon the meat. They knew there was only one God. Moreover, as I will point out later, they were publicly buying this cut-rate meat and eating it at home.

Matthew Henry says of what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 8: "He tells them that the mere eating and drinking had nothing in them virtuous nor criminal—nothing that could make them better or worse, pleasing or displeasing to God. For instance, he said, 'Meat commendeth us not to God, for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we eat not are we the worse.' It looks as if some of the

Corinthians made a merit of their eating what had been offered to idols, and then in their temples too, because it plainly showed that they thought the idols nothing. But eating and drinking are in themselves actions indifferent. It matters little what we eat; what goes into the man of this sort neither purifies nor defiles. Flesh offered to idols may in itself be as proper for food as any other, and the very eating or forbearing to eat has no virtue in it. Note, it is a gross mistake to think that distinction of food will make any distinction between men in God's account."

Eating one food and forbearing another have nothing in themselves to recommend either the food or a person to God. Paul is describing the enlightened brother who goes into the temple and enjoys a good steak or a good piece of mutton. He is exercising his liberty, knowing that the idol has done nothing to contaminate the meat. However, the strong believer exercising his liberty had no concern, or at least did not consider, the effect of his actions upon his unenlightened, ignorant, weaker brother. These believers were not worshipping the idol. They had no regard for it; they knew there was only one God. They were simply getting a very good meal, either free or very cheap.

In 1 Corinthians 10:25, Paul writes, "Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no question for conscience' sake." The shambles was nothing more than a cut-rate meat market.

The Shambles and Christian Liberty in Eating

These pagans would offer animals in sacrifice to their god. Not all of the sacrifice was consumed; the pagan priests could not eat it all. So they opened a discount meat market next door to the temple, and Christians were buying this discounted meat. Paul says, "Whatever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no questions for conscience' sake." He is saying undeniably that this meat not only may be purchased, but may be eaten, even though it was offered in sacrifice to an idol. That idol had no influence upon the meat. It did not change its quality, contaminate it, or render it unfit for use. The idol was nothing.

Sin Resides in the Heart, Not in Material Things

Meat in and of itself is not sinful or evil, even if it has been offered unto idols. Anytime you locate evil in matter, or in something material, you have left biblical truth and gone into pagan philosophy—what is known as Greek dualism. Evil does not reside in matter. Evil resides in the human heart. Sin is not located in anything material; sin is located in the human heart.

Somebody at home will probably take exception with me, but here it is: alcohol is not sinful in and of itself. I am not telling you to go out and drink. I am sixty-six years old, and I have never had a beer in my entire life. But if alcohol is sinful in and of itself, you cannot even use medicine. Most medicine is alcohol based. Your homeopathic remedies are alcohol based. You cannot locate evil in matter. When you do, you go into pure paganism. Sin is in the heart.

Look at Romans 14:14: "I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself. But to him that esteemeth anything unclean, to him it is unclean." How could this be any clearer? "There is nothing unclean of itself." Sin does not reside in matter. Now turn to Matthew 15 and begin reading with verse 15.

"Then answered Peter, and said unto him, Declare unto us this parable. And Jesus said unto them, Are you also yet without understanding? Do not you yet understand that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth, goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart, and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man." Or even a piece of meat offered to an idol defileth not a man.

It is not that which goes in, but that which comes out, that defiles. You remember Proverbs 4:23, where God said, "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life." In light of that truth, we should understand that, simply because some things are lawful and we may have liberty, we must also understand that not everything is expedient. There are always ramifications to our conduct and actions. Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8, and 1 Corinthians

10 emphasize consideration for others, especially weaker brethren. Simply because we understand something does not mean that others understand it, and our actions are always scrutinized by others.

I remember years ago, when I first started preaching, I preached a message in Tallahassee, Florida. I had preached only a short time. After preaching that one message, I went deeper into Florida because my aunt and uncle owned a restaurant. I stopped to visit them and spent the night there. The next morning, I was eating breakfast at the restaurant when a man got up, came over, and said, "Your brother Weaver, I heard you preach last week in Tallahassee, Florida." It dawned on me: what a small world. How could the two of us be in that one place at the same time?

I am simply pointing out that our actions are always observable. That is why the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 14:7, "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself." When it comes to exercising our liberties in Christ, we must remember the truth of Romans 15:3.

“For even Christ pleased not himself, but the reproaches of them that reproach thee fell on me.” Do you realize that Christ sacrificed not only his life, but also his pleasures—everything—for each believer? We cannot always please ourselves. In fact, the Christian life is not about pleasing ourselves. First and foremost, it is about pleasing Christ. It is about ministering to others and, in that sense, pleasing them for their good unto edification. That is what he is talking about in Romans 15. As verse 2 says, “Let us not please ourselves, but let us please our neighbor for his good to edification.”

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul writes: “But I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils and not to God. And I would not that you should have fellowship with devils. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils. You cannot be partakers of the Lord's table and table of devils. Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

Principles for Exercising Liberty Without Causing Offense

“All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient. All things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth, or good. Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no question for conscience' sake. For the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof. If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and you be disposed to go, whatsoever is set before you eat, asking no question for conscience' sake. But if any man say unto you, ‘This is offered in sacrifice unto idols,’ eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience' sake, for the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof. Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other. For why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?”

Paul continues: “For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that which I give thanks? Whether therefore you eat or drink or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God, even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they might be saved.”

Paul acknowledges that those who sacrifice without faith in Christ sacrifice to devils and not to the one true and living God. Stop and think: all the sacrifices made by the Hindus, Brahmins, and Chinese are sacrifices to demons. They are not sacrificing to God. You say, “But they are so sincere.”

Their sincerity does not matter. The only way that you can get to God the Father is through Jesus Christ. He said, "No man cometh unto the Father but by me." If you sacrifice to anything else other than the one true and living God through Jesus Christ our Lord, it is to demons or devils. That is what Paul is saying.

Secondly, simply because something is lawful does not mean that it is wise or expedient to do it. It may be lawful for me to climb a fence and attempt to cross a field where there is a huge, hot-tempered, 3,000-pound bull, but it may not be wise. It may be lawful for me to walk up to somebody like Chuck Liddell, the mixed martial artist, and give him a piece of my mind, but it certainly

would not be wise or expedient, because I might get beaten into concrete.

Just because we have liberty to do certain things—and I am going to explain this in the next two messages—does not mean that we should always exercise that liberty. There are other considerations as well.

Thirdly, the Apostle Paul is emphasizing in 1 Corinthians 10 that we are to seek the welfare of others and not simply consider ourselves. That is why he said, "Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth." He is not saying, "I want Dr. Bowen's money." He is saying, "I want to help Dr. Bowen. I want to promote him, encourage him, and edify him." In other words, I am not seeking merely to build up myself or to have my pleasure; I want him built up.

Fourthly, Paul is telling us that we may eat meat sacrificed to idols in our homes or even at feasts, for we know that there is only one God, and the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. Everything in this earth belongs to God. It does not belong to some dumb idol; it belongs to God. Therefore, I may eat it in worship to Him. I do not have to eat it in reference to that idol.

Fifthly, Paul points out that if someone announces that the meat is dedicated to an idol, we are not to eat it. Is not that interesting?

Here is a good illustration. You work for a large corporation, let's say, and they are having their annual Christmas dinner. You are disposed to go; you have to go. The CEO stands up and says something like this: “Well, this year, we're doing this in honor of Saturnalia, and we're worshiping the star Saturn.” What? Paul says, “Don't eat it.” Why? You know there is only one God. You know Saturn is not a god. Paul says you do not eat it for conscience' sake—not your conscience, but for the conscience of the man who said it and for the conscience of those around you. Why? Because you want the opportunity to tell them, “I'm not eating it because there is only one God, and it is not Saturn. It's the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm not going to eat this because you're saying we're honoring Him. No, I will honor my God by not eating it.”

If it is set before you and nobody says anything, eat it and do not ask any questions. But if somebody says something, then you say, “No, I'm not going to do it.” Whether we eat or drink, we do all for God's honor and God's glory. In doing so, we seek not to offend or wound the consciences of others.

Applications for Avoiding Conflicts

If we are going to learn to avoid conflicts, we must learn not to please ourselves. Every one of us, when we were younger, hated to be told what to do, especially when we did not want to do it. We wanted to do something else. We would say, “When I get grown, I'm going to do what I want to do.” When we got grown, we found out that we could not do what we wanted to do.

We cannot always do that which we want to do; we cannot always please ourselves. Galatians 6:2 says, “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” If I see Joe having a problem, and I would really like to go fishing, I am to forego my fishing to help Joe. Just take Joe fishing, and that will solve the problem; then I could be helping him while fishing. But remember, the Bible says that Christ pleased not himself. We are to please “our neighbor unto his good for edification.”

When it comes to exercising our Christian liberty, we cannot say, “I’m going to do it. I don’t care who’s standing by, who is around me, or who complains. I’m going to do what I want to do.” No. That is an unbiblical attitude. You have to consider others.

Secondly, abstaining from a few pleasures is not going to hurt us. If we must temporarily give up time or pleasure, what does that really matter? Paul said in 1 Corinthians 8:8, “But meat commendeth us not to God, neither are we the better if we eat it, or we the worse if we eat it not.” I have found that when I give up my pleasure and time to minister to God’s people and help them, God always rewards me, giving me greater pleasure at something else and greater time. You cannot out-give God.

Romans 14:20 says, “For meat destroy not the work of God.” We could say, “For pleasure destroy not the work of God. For your

liberty destroy not the work of God." Which is more important: the work of God, or your temporary pleasure?

The third application is this: the essence of the kingdom of God is not that which is external, but that which is internal. Paul said in Romans 14:17–18, "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men."

I would rather please God than have a full stomach any day, and I would rather please Him than have my own pleasure. He says, "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink." In other words, it is nothing external, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.

Look back in Romans 14, beginning with verse 10, for another incentive to avoid censures and condemnations: "But why dost thou judge thy brother? Or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, Every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give an account of himself to God." Our attitudes, actions, and conduct will all be held accountable before our Lord—not as to whether we are saved, for that has already been taken care of, but how we served Him and whether our lives were pleasing unto Him.

Since you are in Romans 14, look at verse 19. Here is the last application: our goal should be peace. "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another." Please understand this: Paul is not saying peace at any price, or peace at the sacrifice of principle or righteousness. He is saying that we need to seek peace without unnecessarily causing contentions and conflicts. There are some things we can do to avoid them. I do not always have to say what I am thinking. I can bite my tongue occasionally. I am not Italian—I am teasing.

Suppose I am talking to someone and have only five minutes before I must leave, and that person brings up eschatology with a view totally different from mine. How can I explain or teach it in five minutes?

You know what I'll do? I'll sit there and listen to what he has to say. I'll let it go in one ear and out the other and say, "Well, the Lord bless you. I'll see you later." Why would I get into an argument with him at that particular point? What good would it do? I don't have to look at him and say, "Dummy, what's wrong with you? Grow up. Study some." No.

Look at Romans 12:18: "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men." What does that mean? Paul is not saying peace at any price. Paul understands that there are some people with whom you cannot live peaceably. But, as much as lieth in you, do not create or cause unnecessary conflicts. If you have opportunity to teach, teach. But we should do those things which make for peace.

Conclusion and Preview of Next Messages

What I want to show you in the next two weeks is this: If Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8, and 1 Corinthians 10 were read and studied, and the principles developed concerning how to avoid conflicts, how not to cause someone to stumble, and how not to offend, then those principles would be followed. There would be fewer conflicts in our lives, in our homes, and in our churches.

I will be absolutely honest with you. I know some people who love to fight. They love to argue and bicker. In fact, they are not happy unless they are creating some trouble. I am sure you know people like that as well. Those are some of the people to whom the Apostle Paul refers when he says, "As much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men." There are some you cannot. He knows that.

As Scripture says, we should follow those things which make for peace and not unnecessarily cause conflicts. The same issues that the Apostle Paul dealt with are still with us today, and other issues, whether related to these or not, would still require the same resolutions taught in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians chapter 8. So we need to learn them.

Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, we bow to Thee this day. We thank You for Your love, Your mercy, and Your goodness. Lord, we do pray that You would teach us and open our eyes, that You would

give us understanding. Help us, Lord, to be a blessing to each other, to help each other, to edify one another, and to encourage each other in the faith. Give us grace that we may serve Thee acceptably with reverence and godly fear. In Thy name we pray, Amen.

This program was produced by Dominion Ministry. For more information about Pastor Weaver's sermons, contact Dominion Ministry by mail at 7400 Abercorn Street, Suite 705, PMB 175, Savannah, Georgia, 31406, call 912-424-7000, or visit www.dominionministry.com.

CHAPTER 4

How to Avoid Conflicts 4

SCRIPTURE READING - Romans 14:1-4; 1 Corinthians 8:1-7 (KJV)

Introduction and Review

We have been dealing with the subject of how to avoid conflicts between Christians, and we have preached three messages. Today is the fourth. I will bring the fifth and final message, Lord willing, next Sunday. The message today is actually going to be cut in half simply because I cannot cover all of it in one session. You will have to be here to hear the rest of it. But I am going to answer one important question, because we are going to be dealing with biblical offense and what it means to offend someone.

Romans chapter 14, beginning with verse 1, says: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or

> falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand."
>
> Now look in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. The Apostle Paul says, "Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. But if any man love God, the same is known of him. As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him. Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled."

“But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse. But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; and through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.”

In the very first message in Romans chapter 14, I pointed out that practical Christian living is based upon doctrine. One reason there are so many loose livers and ungodly people among professing Christians today is that so little doctrine is taught. Therefore, they do not know the truth or how to apply it.

We also learned that there are degrees of faith: little faith, great faith, weak faith, strong faith, and all degrees in between. In 1 John

2, John distinguished believers by calling some babes or little children, others young men, and others fathers in the faith.

Not everyone is on the same level doctrinally. Not everyone understands the same doctrine or knows how to make application. Hence, conflicts will arise. It is critical to understand that a weak believer is still a believer. God does not tell us that only strong faith saves; faith in Christ saves. No matter how weak one is in the faith, he is still to be counted as a believer. Scripture tells us to receive such people into friendship and fellowship for God's honor and glory. Yet we are not to be critical, condemning, or suppressing. We are to receive them, but not to doubtful disputations.

In the second message, by way of review, I pointed out how it is absolutely impossible to argue someone into the faith or to argue them into changing their positions. The Scriptures teach us that weak believers cannot be helped by criticism and condemnation. We are to teach the Word of God, instruct them in the faith, and do so patiently, willingly, regularly, and consistently. Yet we have to understand that it is God, and God alone, who gives illumination, enlightenment, and understanding.

The point I want to emphasize is this: I do not care how excellent a teacher someone is, how patient that individual is, or how great his outline is. It is only God who gives understanding. It is not in our power to make someone understand. When we get angry and upset and use such language as, “What’s wrong with you, dummy? Can’t you see plain truth?” it does absolutely no good, because no one, whether saved or unsaved, can see any truth unless God opens their eyes.

That is why, in Acts 16, we read how the Lord opened Lydia’s heart, with the result that she attended to the things spoken by Paul. In the third message, I showed you how conflicts were arising, not only in Romans 14, but also in 1 Corinthians chapter 8, over meats, festival days, and meats sacrificed to idols. In Romans 14, the apostle tells us that the strong believers were condemning the weak believers because of their ignorance and foolishness. Yet the weak believers were judging the strong believers because they did not believe that someone could eat meat sacrificed to an idol and still be a real, genuine Christian.

Remember also that in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians chapter 8, we are dealing with things which are indifferent. By that I mean things that are not sinful in and of themselves—things that are not clear, distinct violations of the Word of God. Eating meat is not sinful; meat is not sinful in and of itself. Any time you begin to place sin in anything material or anything made of matter, you have gone into Greek paganism, Greek dualism. Sin, according to the Bible, resides in the human heart. It does not reside in anything material.

We have to understand that there are ramifications for everything we do. Scripture tells us that no man liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. What people observe us and see us do will always have ramifications. Therefore, He tells us in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians chapter 8 that we are always to consider the weaker brethren.

The Question of Offense

What does it mean to offend? Or, more specifically, what does it mean to offend someone biblically? We could reverse the question and ask, How are we not to offend someone? Each of us has heard statements such as, "I'm offended at that," "Be careful that you do not offend him," or "If you offend him, he will probably leave." We have not only heard those statements; in all probability, we have made them ourselves. But what does it mean to offend someone biblically?

There are two Greek words used throughout the New Testament that are translated as offend. The first is skandalon, from which we get our English word scandal. The second is proskomma. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, uses these words exactly as the New Testament does. The word used most often is skandalon.

How do you scandalize someone? Let me tell you what a skandalon was in Bible times and how it came to mean an offense, a snare, or a stumbling block. When animals were trapped, a stick was placed on the trap with bait on it. When the animal hit the stick, it fell, and the trap fell upon the animal. That stick holding the bait was called a skandalon. When the animal was entrapped or snared, he was scandalized. Thus the word came to mean entrapping someone

or something deceitfully, putting a stumbling block in someone's way, being an offense, and causing that person to fall.

The problem that arose in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans chapter 14 was over meats and festival days. In fact, some Christians were upset because others were eating meat that had been sold in the shambles. As I told you, the shambles was nothing more than a discount meat market. Meat that was not given to the idol in sacrifice was put into the shambles, where people went and bought and ate it. Moreover, they were going into the idol's temple and eating meat as well. So a conflict arose between the strong and the weak.

Christian Liberty and Things Indifferent

Let me begin by showing you what is involved. First of all, Christian liberty is involved, and the issue surrounds things that are indifferent. Look in 1 Corinthians 8 and verse 9. The Apostle Paul says, "But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak." Here he is talking about liberty. The word liberty literally means power or right. It is exactly the same word used in John 1:11-12. Referring to Christ, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power"—or authority, and right—"to become the sons of God." Therefore, when we are talking about meat and festival days, we are talking about things that are indifferent.

Let me emphasize that we are not talking about things that are sinful. Things that are sinful in and of themselves are not things that are indifferent. In 1 John 3:4, the Bible says, "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law." A violation of God's law is not something that is indifferent. A violation of God's law is sin and rebellion. So what are things that are indifferent? They are things which are not condemned in the Word of God, and they are things in which the consciences of believers do not uniformly hold as identical. In other words, there is no uniform faith.

The illustration is meats and festival days. Something that is indifferent is not sinful. Listen carefully: it may not be wise; it may not be expedient; but it is not sinful. Now let me give you an

illustration. Here is what I am trying to emphasize. I have told you before, I have never had a beer in my entire life. And I have it.

I do not want one and I do not need one, but suppose, for some reason, someone handed me a beer and I decided to taste it. Is the beer sinful in and of itself? No. Would I become a sinner if I drank the beer? The answer is no. Alcohol is not sinful in and of itself. But suppose I took that beer and drank it when five or six hundred people were watching me, and many of them had real problems with that. Could a conflict arise? Oh, yes.

Here is what the Apostle Paul is saying: “You take heed, lest by any means this liberty of yours will become a stumbling block to them that are weak.”

The Scripture makes it clear that you and I have been freed from traditionalism, ceremonialism, pragmatism, and subjectivism. Do you understand that our consciences are to be bound only to the Word of God? We have been freed from the practices, traditions, and inventions of men. So when someone says, “You must observe this tradition. You must do this exercise, and you must do it in the way prescribed, or else you will be a sinner and under the judgment of God.”

The only thing that can bind our consciences is the Word of God—not the traditions of men, the teachings of the Pharisees, the teachings of the Sadducees, or the teaching of anyone or anything else. That is why Galatians 5:1 says, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." Galatians 5:13 is equally clear: "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another."

Things that are indifferent are not sinful in and of themselves. They may become a source of conflict because some people do not have correct biblical knowledge, while others want to take their traditions and inventions, bind them on the consciences of other people, and make them do exactly as they do. When we speak of Christian liberty, we are speaking of things that are indifferent and not sinful in themselves. Meat is not sinful. Not observing a certain day is not sinful, and observing a certain day is not necessarily sinful

in and of itself. But when you try to make such a practice and pattern a demand for everyone, there will be real problems.

The Weak Are Offended

It is the weak Christians who are offended and stumble; it is not the strong, but the weak. First Corinthians 8:7 says, "Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol." Their conscience being weak is defiled. Verse 9 says, "But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak." Verse 11 adds, "And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died." Verse 12 says, "But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ."

To stumble and go contrary to one's conscience is a sign of weakness. Proverbs 24:10 says, "If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small."

“If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small.” The Apostle Paul is talking about individuals having a weak conscience. Do you know what a conscience is? How do you know whether you have a weak conscience or a strong conscience? The Greek word for conscience is suneidesis. Sun is a preposition meaning with. Eidesis means to know. Your conscience is that which you know with. Our English word conscience has the same meaning: con means with, and science means to know. Your conscience, then, is your mind, your understanding, that which you know with.

When you go contrary to that which you know, or to that which you believe to be true, it is a sign of weakness. You are giving up and giving in to that which you believe and think to be true. Romans 14:5 says, “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” You ought to know what you believe, whether or not you believe a day is special. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

Romans 14:22 says, “Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God.” If you have faith in a special day, keep it to yourself and have it

before God. “Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. And he that doubteth is damned”—or condemned—“if he eat,” that is, those meats, “because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.” It is not necessarily a sin for a weak individual to think, “This steak is not any good because it was offered to an idol.” But it is a sin if he turns around and eats it while believing that, because he is not eating in faith. Whatever we do, we are to do in faith. It is the weak believers who are offended, not the strong believers.

It is neither safe nor right to go against your conscience unless you are re-instructing and retraining your conscience in a more biblical understanding.

Now, let me tell you what will happen. Here is the way that you have been raised and taught all of your life. All of a sudden, you realize that the way you have been raised and taught is wrong, and you are going to retrain your conscience in that which is right. The very first time you go contrary to the way you have been raised and taught, your conscience will scream bloody murder.

You will have to say to it, “Shut up. I’m re-instructing you. You will listen to the Word of God. You will bow to the Word of God.”

You and I, having been raised in a quote-unquote Christian civilization, would have some of these conflicts because not all of us were raised biblically. But can you imagine what it would be like for someone raised in idolatry all their lives suddenly to go contrary to the way they had been raised? Of course, their conscience is going to strain. So, it is neither safe nor right to go against your conscience unless you are restructuring your conscience and bringing it into greater obedience to the Word of God.

Ignorance as the Cause of Stumbling

We are talking about offending in this context. Christian liberty is involved, as are things that are indifferent. We also understand that it is the weak who are offended. So, when someone says as a believer, “I’m offended at that,” what they are saying is, “I’m a weak Christian.” Literally, that is what they are admitting and confessing.

Thirdly, those who are weak, offended, and stumble do so because of ignorance.

In 1 Corinthians 8:4, Paul addresses "the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols." He says, "we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one." Though there are those "that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth," and "gods many, and lords many," there is, to believers, "but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him."

However, Paul adds, "there is not in every man that knowledge," and explains that some, "with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled." As I pointed out in lesson number three, the Apostle is not speaking of heathen people in verse 7 when he says, "Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge." He is speaking of Christians.

Neither is he saying that some Christians do not know that God is the only one true living God. He is not saying that at all. He is saying that there were—or at least had been—Christians in the Corinthian church who knew that an idol was nothing and that there was but one God, yet somehow thought that the idol had such influence over the meat that the meat was rendered unclean. Therefore, they believed it was defiled and could not, and should not, be eaten. This was clearly a lack of knowledge.

Paul identifies himself with the strong believers. Going back to verse 4, he says, "we know that an idol is nothing in the world," and, "to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him." "To us" means to those who are strong and who know. He speaks for those who know that an idol is nothing and that there is only one sovereign God.

God has absolute control over everything. That is why, in Romans 11:36, the Apostle Paul said, "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen." Everything is of God, through God, and ultimately to God's honor and glory. So

what the Apostle Paul is saying is this: If someone stumbles, falls, and is offended, it is because of ignorance.

Do you not remember how our Lord spoke of this even in the Old Testament? In Hosea 4:6, he said, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." It is the weak, then, who stumble; it is the weak who fall; it is the weak who are offended.

The Biblical Definition of Offense

Now, what does it mean to offend someone? How do I offend you, biblically speaking? How do you offend me, biblically speaking? You can only offend a weak brother.

Look at verse 10. The apostle says, "For if any man see thee which hast knowledge"—that is the strong person—"if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered unto idols?"

The word translated "emboldened" is the same word used elsewhere in the New Testament and translated as "edified." What do you do when you edify someone? You build him up or strengthen him. This is about the only place in the New Testament where this word is used in a bad sense. The Greek word actually refers to the erection of a house or a building.

Look at verse 10 again: "For if any man see thee which has knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened"—edified, strengthened—"to do those things which are offered unto idols." The weak brother sees the strong brother exercising his liberty, and therefore he is emboldened, encouraged to lay a foundation and erect a building without having the knowledge of the strong brother. Years ago, I helped a man who was a brick mason. He was an excellent brick mason, and I helped him for only a couple of days.

I thought, you know, this is a piece of cake. I can do this. So I was going to build myself a barbecue pit. I already had a foundation, so I mixed the mortar and started. I had my first wall of bricks up, let the mortar set, and called my friend the brick mason over to look at what I had done.

I had the level on it. I had that wall plumbed. I mean, I had it just right. It was only three feet high, something like that. I never will forget what he did. He put his hand on his chin, walked around, and looked. Finally, he said, "Hmm." Then he took his foot and kicked, and the whole thing just crumbled.

Because the mortar was not mixed properly, I found out it wasn't a piece of cake. So I tried to erect a building without having his knowledge, and mine crumbled and fell. That's exactly what the Apostle Paul is talking about now.

Look at verse 10, and then look at verse 7, and let me explain it. He said, "For if any man see thee which has knowledge sit at meat in an idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols."

Now go back to verse 7: "Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled."

The way to understand the first word, "conscience," in verse 7 is as a custom practiced or habit. For there is not in every man that knowledge, for some with custom, practice, or habit of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol, and their conscience—that which they know with—being weak, is defiled.

In other words, here were people who were in the habit of worshipping this idol prior to their conversion. They were in the habit of eating that meat with religious significance, believing that it was somehow given to this idol and therefore that idol had some type of influence on it.

The Apostle Paul says that a strong brother may come to a feast in an idol's temple and enjoy a good steak. When that weak brother sees him doing it, he is emboldened and encouraged to go there, set up his house, and do the same thing. But he does not have the knowledge that the strong brother had, and therefore his building collapses.

Biblical offense only occurs when you encourage someone—a weak brother—to exercise the same liberty that you are exercising without having your knowledge and understanding. One does not sin

by exercising his liberty. He only sins when he encourages a weak brother to do what he is doing without having that knowledge. What I want to show you the rest of the time today is that we have perverted the biblical doctrine of offense and made it mean something entirely different from what Scripture teaches.

Misinterpretations of Offense

Let me give you some illustrations. All of us have heard this, and many of us have said it: “Don't say that. It offends me.” Translated, that means, “Shut up. I don't want to hear it.” They are not encouraging us to do the same thing they are doing without having their knowledge. No, we simply do not want to hear it.

A woman once told me, “I find your beard offensive.” I laughed in her face and said, “Dear lady, my beard could not possibly offend you because you could not do what I am doing, even if you had my knowledge.” What did she mean when she said that? She meant, “Shave it off. I don't like it. Please me.”

Then there is this: “Be careful not to offend him.” Let me translate that for you: “Don't make him mad, or he might cuss you out.” Or, “He's offended. He's not coming back to church.” What that really means is that he does not like the way things are being done, and if he cannot have his way, he is not coming back. You do not offend someone by upsetting him. You do not offend someone by making him mad or angry. You do not offend someone by doing something that he does not like. No, no, no.

You see, the problem is that we have lost our theology of rebuke because we have misunderstood and misinterpreted the word offense. When we read Luke 17:1–2, we automatically interpret the word "offend" to mean to upset, to make mad, to make angry, or to do something that someone does not approve.

"Then said he unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones."

When we read a passage like that, we automatically interpret the word "offend" in this way. It has no such meaning. Christ upset and

angered the Pharisees many times, yet He did not offend them in the biblical sense of the word. The truth is, using the word in another sense, Christ is an offense to many. They stumble over His deity. They stumble over His resurrection. They stumble over His Lordship. They stumble over His sovereignty. Jesus Christ is a divinely ordained offense to those who refuse to submit to the Father and rebel against the truth. God ordained that those who refused to bow to Him through Jesus Christ will stumble and fall.

Isaiah 8:13–14 says, "Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem." What is the truth of God to people who refuse to believe? It is a snare. It is a gin. It is a stumbling block. The truth of God is not received as a sanctuary by those who refuse to believe; it becomes a snare, a gin, and a stumbling block.

Romans 9:33 says, "As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed." What is Jesus Christ to this world? He is a stumbling stone. He is a rock of offence. He is the divinely ordained offense over which those who reject the truth stumble and fall.

Paul writes, “And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? then is the offence of the cross ceased.” Have you ever wondered why most people do not really want to hear the gospel? It offends them. In that sense of the word, they stumble over it. It is a stumbling stone.

First Peter 2:6–8 says, “Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.” Christ is a stumbling block and an offense to the wicked.

Yet He is not encouraging men to do that which he is doing without having his knowledge. People may simply get mad or angry at the preaching of the gospel, and that is true. But when you look at the word offense in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14, to biblically offend, you can only offend a weaker brother. You do that by emboldening him or encouraging him to do what you are doing without having your knowledge.

The word offend does not mean to make mad, angry, or upset. In Galatians 2, Paul confronted Peter and said, "I said unto him before them all." He dressed Peter up one side and down the other. Paul may have upset Peter, hurt his feelings, or made him mad, but he did not offend him—not in the biblical sense. In the context of Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, you can only offend a weaker brother, and only when you encourage him to do what you are doing without having your knowledge.

The First Application

I want to make a couple of applications. Remember that I am not anywhere near through with this message; I am going to try to tie everything together so that you can see what it really means to offend. Therefore, you will not be able or willing or desirous to offend a weak brother hereafter. Understand, of course, that offending does not mean to make someone mad.

Applications

The first application should be duly emphasized: those who are strong in the faith, those who have the most knowledge, are the ones who enjoy the most of God's creation. Put another way, those who are strong in the faith understand how to use God's creation without abusing it.

Look in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 3. Every one of us stays so busy that sometimes we do not have time to wake up and smell the roses—or the coffee, whatever you want to use. Alice can tell you that for a multitude of years, when we traveled, all we did was go there, preach, come back, go there, preach, and come back—busy, busy, busy—until I began to read some of these passages. I decided, while I was there, that this is God's world, God's

creation, and I should enjoy it. God put it here for me, just as He put it here for you.

Look at what the Bible says, beginning at 1 Corinthians 3:21: “Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's.” How much has God given us in Jesus Christ? Everything.

Look at 1 Corinthians 7:31: “And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away.” There is a proper way to use and enjoy God's creation. We are to use it without abusing it. Now turn to 1 Timothy chapter 6, verse 17. The first part of this verse may not apply to most of us because we are not rich, but the last part does.

We're rich in a lot of ways, but not necessarily always in worldly goods. Look what he says in 1 Timothy chapter 6, verse 17: "Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God," who "giveth us richly all things to enjoy." How much has God given us to enjoy? All things. All things are ours. We are to learn to use this world without abusing it.

Since it is the strong believers who have the most knowledge, according to Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians chapter 8, and since they understand Christian liberty, it is the strong who enjoy most of God's creation. They understand that God has given us richly all things to enjoy.

However, it is also our responsibility to patiently consider, educate, and teach the weaker brethren. We're not to despise them, belittle them, or browbeat them. We're to help them as we enjoy God's liberty and God's creation.

You have to understand that it is the weaker brethren who do not understand, and it is the weaker brethren who judge. The tendency of the strong is to condemn. Therefore, we have to fight against the tendency to condemn those who are ignorant. Yes, I'm using that word biblically. They are ignorant of the truth of God, the Word of

God, the doctrine of God, and the application of God. We must not condemn them, but help them and teach them.

It's easy to condemn and easy to judge. It is far more difficult to search out the truth, seek the truth, and seek the Lord to give us understanding, illumination, and enlightenment. One takes time and requires a great deal of labor and work; the other is very easy to do. We have to fight the tendency of the flesh to condemn and judge, and learn to study and seek the Lord for wisdom and understanding.

Biblically speaking, according to Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, you can only offend a weaker brother. To offend him, biblically, means to encourage him, to embolden him, to do exactly the same thing that you are doing without having your knowledge. I will explain that further next week.

Let's pray. Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, we ask for your grace, your mercy, and your kindness to us. We pray, Father, that you would indeed teach us, build us up in the most holy faith, and make us strong in the faith as Abraham was.

That You would enable us to enjoy Your creation and everything that You've given us. For You've given us richly all things to enjoy. All are ours. This world, things present and things to come, all are ours. And we belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God. And we give Thee the praise and the honor and the glory through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen. Amen.

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CHAPTER 5

How to Avoid Conflicts 5

SCRIPTURE READING - Romans 14:1-3; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (KJV)

Romans 14:1-3: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him."

So we're seeing the comparison here between the weak and the strong.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13: "Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. But if any man love God, the same is known of him. As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord

> Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him. Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.
>
> But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse. But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; and through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend."

Review of Previous Messages

Let me review and bring everything into focus. This is message number five on how to avoid conflicts between Christians, or on biblical offense—what it means to offend.

First, we began in Romans 14 and saw that there are degrees of faith. Paul speaks of the weak and the strong, and our Lord Himself spoke of those who had little faith and those who had strong faith. Obviously, if there are the weak and the strong, there are degrees in between as well. Thus, there are varying degrees of maturity among Christians. John the Apostle divided Christians into babes, or young children, young men, and fathers. Consequently, because some are weak and some are strong, there will inevitably be conflict. Therefore, the apostle told us in Romans chapter 14, verse 1, to receive those who were weak in the faith, and, when we receive them, not to doubtful disputations.

That means there was to be no arguing, fussing, or fighting. In the second message, I showed you the uselessness of such conduct. You are never going to argue someone into the faith, and you are never going to argue someone out of his position. You may teach him and patiently try to educate him, but fussing and fighting will never

work, because it is God who must grant understanding. If God does not grant understanding or open the eyes, no one is going to see it anyway. There is no reason to get mad, angry, or upset, and no reason to argue.

In the third message, we discovered that one of the problems existing not only in the Roman church but also in the Corinthian church was disagreement over meats that had been sacrificed. It was also over special days. Some said, “You had to observe this day, and you had to observe this day in this way.” The Apostle Paul says, no, come on now. It is a source of conflict. Some esteem one day alike, while others do not esteem every day alike. Therefore, he said, let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

I also pointed out that meat is not defiled because of an idol. An idol has absolutely no influence over meats. Whenever you locate evil or sin in anything material, you have entered into Greek dualism, or Greek paganism. The Greeks divided everything between spirit and matter, separating those things and saying that matter was inherently evil. Therefore, the spirit was far better.

That is what leads to asceticism. It led to the monasteries and to self-flagellations, where people would whip themselves and beat their flesh, trying to drive the evil out of it. That is pure paganism. God says that sin and evil are located in the heart; they are not in anything material. Wood is not evil in and of itself. Alcohol is not evil in and of itself. Meat is not evil in and of itself. Evil is in the heart.

In explaining what it really means to offend someone biblically, remember that, in this context, only a brother can be offended, especially a weaker brother. There is, in the very nature of God's salvation, an offense to the gospel. The Apostle Paul said in Galatians 5:11, "And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution?" Then he said, "Then is the offence of the cross ceased."

There is a natural offense to Jesus Christ and to grace. The gospel of Jesus Christ does not appeal to the flesh or to the intellect. In 1 Corinthians 1:18, the Apostle Paul says, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness." "But unto us which are saved it is the power of God."

"For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" For "after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God." The world's wisdom is totally contrary to God; by wisdom, the world knew not God. "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom, "but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness."

So there is an offense to the gospel. I gave you a number of passages last week from the Old Testament and the New Testament where the Bible tells us plainly that Jesus Christ is a stumbling block to those who will not believe. One of those passages is found in 1 Peter 2, where the Word of God says concerning Christ, "a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed." Very obviously, there is an offense to the Gospel.

The natural man, the natural mind does not want to hear of salvation by grace through faith. If we were preaching and teaching salvation by works or salvation by any other means, the flesh would receive it very willingly, but not when everything is the work of God.

Let me review what we covered last week to bring you up to speed. First, I pointed out that Christian liberty is involved; therefore, the issue surrounds things that are indifferent. By things that are indifferent, I am not talking about things that are sinful and wicked in and of themselves. If something is sinful, it is not indifferent; it is a violation of God's law. First John 3:4 tells us clearly that "whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law."

But eating meat is not a sin, even eating meat that had been blessed through an idol. It is not sin. Why? An idol is nothing. It has no influence over the meat and does not change its substance or essence, not at all. So the issue involves things that are indifferent.

Secondly, I pointed out that it is the weak Christians who stumble and are offended. Look in 1 Corinthians 8. It is only the weak. Verse

7 says, "Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled." Verse 9 says, "Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak." Verse 11 says, "And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish." Verse 12 says, "But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience."

It is the weak who stumble and are offended. If someone is biblically offended and tells you that biblically, they are acknowledging and confessing that they are weak—weak in faith, not strong in faith. So it is weak Christians who are offended and stumble.

Thirdly, those who are weak, offended, and stumbling are so because of their ignorance. I did not say that; God did. Look in 1 Corinthians 8, verse 4: “As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.”

The ignorant and weak are weak because of their ignorance. They do not understand the sovereignty of God or the providence of God. He goes on to say in verse 7, “Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.” They are ignorant in that they think this idol, this dumb piece of wood or whatever it is, somehow affects the meat so that it is defiled. No. The Bible tells us that it has no influence at all upon that meat. Those who think that it does, the Apostle Paul says, are ignorant.

Fourthly, biblically speaking, to offend someone means to encourage and embolden him to do what you are doing without having your knowledge. Look in verse 10: “For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the

conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols?"

You can only biblically offend a weak brother, and you offend him by encouraging and emboldening him to do what you are doing without having your knowledge and understanding. One does not sin by exercising his liberty in Christ. The only way to sin in this context is by encouraging and emboldening a weaker brother to do what you are doing without having your knowledge. We have taken the biblical doctrine of offense, perverted it, and turned it around to mean making somebody mad, upsetting someone, or hurting their feelings, when it has absolutely nothing to do with that.

You will remember that I told you last week the Apostle Paul undoubtedly upset the Apostle Peter in Galatians chapter 2 when he shook his finger in his face and rebuked him before everyone. Although he upset him and may have angered him, he never offended the Apostle Peter, because to offend in this context means to encourage someone to do what you are doing without having your knowledge.

An Offense Only Occurs When the Weaker Brother Acts Against His Conscience

Point 5: Offense Requires the Weaker Brother to Act Against Conscience

An offense only occurs when the weaker brother acts without knowledge against his conscience. Look at verse 10 again: "For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols?"

The Greek construction in verse 10 is known as ean with the subjunctive, and that implies a third-class condition, or a possible situation. The Apostle Paul is drawing a picture of an enlightened or strong brother exercising his liberty by eating a feast in the idol's temple. The strong brother is enjoying that liberty, and yet the weak brother is watching and is encouraged to do the same thing. A little later, in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, Paul will point out to the strong brother that it is not necessarily very wise or expedient for him to do

what he is doing. Yet at the same time, he is simply drawing a picture here.

In pagan temples, after the sacrifice was over, they would have a feast of much of the meat that was left over and invite family and friends. Many Christians were not going to the idol sacrifice; they were going to the feast after the sacrifice, sitting down, and enjoying the free meal. A good piece of steak is what it amounted to. These Christians treated this meat as if it were just meat, something they had bought or raised. They knew and understood that an idol was absolutely nothing and had no influence over that meat. It did not change the essence of the meat. They were not worshiping or honoring the idol; they were simply sitting down and eating food.

Here is Paul's argument. The word “emboldened” literally means to edify, but it means more than that. It means to erect a building or to set up a foundation. So here is what was happening. The Apostle Paul is saying, “Here you are publicly eating this meat, enjoying it in the feast.” The strong brother was exercising his liberty publicly, and the weak brother's conscience was being built up or established in the direction of doing the same thing. That is the possible situation Paul is presenting in verse 10.

Here is the weaker brother. He sees you doing something and thinks, “If he can do it, I can do it as well.” He does not have your knowledge, so he lays his foundation and builds his house, so to speak. He sets up housekeeping there and does exactly what you are doing. Then, as he does so, his conscience smites him because he does not have your knowledge, and he is offended.

Listen to me carefully: if the weak brother does not act, or is not emboldened to act, he has not stumbled, and no offense has been committed.

Let me show you this. Here I am sitting in the idol’s temple, having a good steak that is free. Henry comes along and says, “Oh, look at that. There is my pastor up there. I wish he would not do that. I do not like that. He may do it, but I am not going to do it.” Henry walks on down the street. Have I offended him? No.

This is what you have to understand: someone may not like what you are doing, as long as it is not sin. They may disagree with what

you are doing. But unless that weaker brother actually goes contrary to his conscience, he has not been offended.

Let me draw you an illustration. Suppose Alice and I are planning a picnic at the beach. Is it sinful to go to the beach? Is it a violation of God's law? Is there a commandment that says, "Thou shalt not go to the beach"? The answer is no.

You say, "But you do not understand, Pastor. You can sin at the beach." That is true, but you can also sin in the privacy of your own home or out in the woods. You can sin anywhere. The beach itself is not necessarily sinful.

I am using an illustration. I hope everyone knows—and if you know me, you know this about me—that I have lost nothing at the beach. I enjoy seeing the sunrise and sunset over the ocean, and I enjoy watching little birds run up and down the shoreline. But I have no desire to go there, sunbathe, or swim. In fact, I enjoy going to the beach about once every ten to twenty years. I have lost nothing at the beach.

I am not encouraging anybody to go to the beach, nor am I telling you to stay away from it. I am simply saying that it is not my cup of tea. I enjoy looking at the water, seeing the sunrise and sunset, and watching those little birds, but other than that, I am not getting in that water.

For a number of reasons. For one, it is dirty. Number two, medical waste is thrown in there. Number three, I do not like sharks. But here is my illustration.

Alice and I are planning a picnic at the beach. We have everything ready and are putting it in the car when you drive up. I say, "Man, you have gotten here just at the right time. We are planning a picnic at the beach, and we want you to come with us and enjoy it." You say, "I do not go to the beach."

"What? What is wrong with going to the beach?"

"There are too many scantily clad people there, and I have a difficult time keeping my mind pure. In fact, I do not go to the beach. I do not even think you should go to the beach, and I do not want to go."

You may get upset at the prospect. You may even ask, “How is it that you could even think of going to the beach?” I explain, “We are going to a secluded spot. There is hardly anyone there—just us.” Still, there is hesitation: “No, I do not think I want to go to the beach.” So I look at Alice and say, “All right. Let us take our picnic to the park. Would you go to the park with us?”

“Oh, yes. I would be glad to go to the park.”

Now, have you been offended? No. Did you like the prospect that Alice and I would go to the beach? No. Did you agree? No. Did it upset you? Maybe. But did it offend you? The answer is no, because I have not encouraged or emboldened you to go contrary to your conscience.

Now let me flesh this out. You drive up, and I say, “Man, you have gotten here just in time. We are going to the beach. We have this picnic. Let us go.” You say, “I do not want to go to the beach. I do not go to the beach. I have trouble at the beach. There are too many temptations at the beach.” I look at you and say, “Do not be childish. Come on, let us go to the beach.”

I said, “You’re out of your mind. Don’t be childish.” I urged you, chided you, pulled you, and basically forced you to go when you did not want to go. You got to the beach, and your conscience smote you. You saw things you did not want to see, and you said to yourself, “I knew I should not have come. I knew it would be a time of temptation. I knew I would fall into that temptation. I knew I should not have come.” You were miserable, discouraged, depressed, and upset.

Here is my question: Did I offend you? Yes, I did. Did I sin against you? Yes, I did, because I made you do something contrary to your conscience, contrary to what you knew.

Now, let us consider this truth from another perspective. You drive up, and I say, “We are ready to go to the beach. We have a wonderful picnic planned. Come on, let us go.” You say, “Oh, no. I do not go to the beach.” Why? “To be honest, I have trouble keeping my mind pure. I have trouble with this, and I have trouble with that.”

I say, “Look, step into my office a minute and let me show you some things.” I open my Bible and show you how God has given us

richly all things to enjoy. I point out how the ocean and the beach are God's creation; they are ours. I not only show you that, but I show you how to renew your mind, how to control your thoughts so that you will not fall into temptation. I show you from the Bible how to gird up the loins of your mind and walk holy before the Lord. I demonstrate to you that it is just as possible to be holy on the beach as it is to be holy in your own home or in a park. I show you that from the Bible.

You say, "Yes, I see that. I understand that." After I show you that, and after you listen to and receive all that truth from God's Word, you agree to go. When you go, you arrive, enjoy yourself, and have a good time. You keep your heart and mind, and you do not fall into sin. Now, here is my question: Have I offended you? No. Why?

Because now you are doing the same thing that I am doing, but you have my knowledge. So you were not offended or scandalized. It is important for us to understand, in the context of Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, that to offend a weaker brother is to encourage and embolden him to do what you are doing without having your knowledge.

Offending a weak brother is a sin against him and a sin against Christ. In 1 Corinthians 8:12, Paul says, "But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ." It is a sin to offend or scandalize a brother in Christ, whatever his position is in the faith. Whether he is a baby, a young man, or a father, when you sin against the weak brother, you wound his weak conscience and sin against Christ.

Point 6: Offending a Weak Brother Is Sin Against Him and Christ

The word sin here has the impact of injuring, offending, or leading someone into sin. How do you sin against the weak brother? You violate God's law that requires you to love your brethren and seek their welfare. When you violate that law, you sin against them.

Sin is properly against God, but it is also against man. When an injustice is done, it requires restitution. Yet there are some things over which you cannot make restitution. If I steal from Terry or from

Ed, I can make restitution. Suppose I ran up to Carrie and planted a great big kiss right on her lips. Afterwards I said, "Oh, I shouldn't have done that." Can I un-kiss her? No. How can I make that right? All I can do is apologize and say I am sorry, but I cannot undo what I have done.

Therefore, when we are talking about restitution, there are some things over which it is almost impossible to make restitution. It requires repentance and forgiveness, but you cannot make restitution for some of that stuff.

Sin is primarily against God. In Psalm 51, when David was confessing his sin, he said, "Against thee, and against thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight."

Now he is talking about his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah. And he said, "Against thee, and against thee only, have I done this evil, have sinned against thee and done this evil in thy sight." Well, did he not sin against Bathsheba? Yes, he did. Did he not sin against Uriah? Yes, he did. Did he not sin against his own family? Yes, he did. Did he not sin against the families of Uriah and Bathsheba? Yes, he did. His sin may have been primarily against God, but it certainly affected everyone else as well.

So the point is this: Christians are obligated not only to do right toward God, but also to do right toward our fellow man. That is why Galatians 6:10 says, "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." Although I have a responsibility to do good to all men, I have a special duty to do good to those who are of the household of faith. So when you sin against the weak brethren, you wound their weak conscience.

The word wound here literally means to smite, beat, or injure. How do you injure a weak brother? You must understand that his conscience is ill-informed; he is ignorant. When you embolden and encourage him to act contrary to what he knows, you burden him with a sense of guilt, sorrow, and anguish. Our Lord says it is a sin.

How do we sin against Christ when we sin against weak brethren? First, we sin against Christ because He has commanded us to love

one another. In loving others, we are to seek their good and well-being. Secondly, weak brethren are just as intimately united to Jesus Christ as stronger brethren. When we harm them, we sin against Christ. He is their Head, just as He is our Head. They are His body, just as we are His body; and when we harm them, we harm Him.

Do you remember what our Lord said in Matthew 25:40? “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

Third, you sin against Christ because Jesus Christ is Lord of the conscience, not man. I have no right to dictate to you when, how, or where your conscience shall be enlightened and illuminated. That is the Lord’s prerogative, not mine. Illumination, understanding, and enlightenment are His gifts.

Consider the context of Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, where the subject is eating a piece of meat. To place a piece of meat ahead of a brother who has been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ is an open insult to Him. When you say, “I’d rather have a good piece of steak than consider the conscience of a weaker brother,” you insult Jesus Christ, who purchased that man with His own blood. What an insult it must be to Christ when one demonstrates by his actions that he would rather have a piece of meat or some other frivolity than help someone who is a true Christian. It denies and denigrates the sacrifice and blood of Jesus Christ shed for believers. It is a sin to wound the weak conscience of a weak brother, and when we do, we sin against Christ in these three ways.

Point 7: Christian Charity Demands We Do Not Offend the Weaker Brother

Now, here's point number seven. I want you to follow with me. The word of God and Christian charity demand that we do not offend the weaker brother. The word of God and Christian charity demand that we do not offend the weaker brother. Look in 1 Corinthians 8 in verse 13. Look what the Apostle Paul said. "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend." What did Paul say?

I don't have to have a steak. I don't have to have a full meal.

Now, I want you to hold 1 Corinthians 8, but turn right back, if you would, to Romans chapter 14, and look at verses 13 through 17. He's dealing with the same issue, Romans 14. Beginning there, verse 13. Look what he says. "Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way." He said, just make sure that you don't cause anybody to stumble or fall. Now watch. Look what he said in verse 14.

"I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of: for the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." Now, in verse 16, when the Apostle Paul says, "let not your good be evil spoken of," the good there refers to Christian liberty. Let not your good Christian liberty be evil spoken of. Do not abuse it. Do not misuse it. Do not malign it.

I want you to hold Romans 14, but turn over your Bibles to the book of Galatians chapter 5. Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, look in Galatians chapter 5. I could quote this, but I want you to see it, Galatians 5 in verses 13 and 14. Paul says very plainly what he is implying in Romans 14 when he said in verse 16, "let not your good then be evil spoken of." Look in Galatians 5 verse 13.

"For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." What did he say? You've been called unto liberty. Only use not your liberty for an occasion of the flesh, but by love serve one another. I want to make something exceedingly clear. OK, I want you to listen to me.

This is very important: we must at all times consider the weaker brethren. But considering the weaker brethren is not surrendering to them, nor pandering to them in their weakness. It does not mean surrendering the truth or Christian liberty. There is a principle in

Scripture that is very clear: Christian liberty. We may never forsake that principle. However, although we may never forsake the principle of Christian liberty, at times we may forego the exercise of that liberty.

Three Legitimate Reasons to Forego the Exercise of Liberty

Although we may never forsake the principle of liberty, that does not mean that at times we cannot forego its exercise. There are at least three reasons given in Scripture whereby we may lawfully and legitimately forego the exercise of our liberty. We are not giving up the principle; we simply do not exercise it in these instances. First of all, we may forego the exercise of our liberty for the furtherance of the gospel.

Consider 1 Corinthians 9 and see how the Apostle Paul forewent the exercise of his Christian liberty. Paul was not married—at least, he certainly was not married at this point. Some say that he had to have been married because he was a member of the Sanhedrin, since that was a requirement. If he had been married, his wife died.

At this particular point in his life, he was unmarried. In 1 Corinthians 9:3, Paul says, “Mine answer to them that do examine me is this, Have we not power to eat and to drink? Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas?”—or Peter. Now consider what the Apostle is arguing. Is it a sin to marry? No, it is not. Did Paul have a right to marry? Yes, he did. Was Paul married at this point? No, he was not. He forewent the exercise of that liberty. He said, in effect, “I have the liberty to lead around a sister or wife, as Peter does and as some of the other brethren do.” They were married.

They carried their wives with them, but Paul did not marry for the purpose of the gospel. Look at what he said in 1 Corinthians 7:32: "But I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: but he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife."

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul gives three reasons to marry and three reasons not to marry. Married people have advantages over single people, and single people have some advantages over married people. Clay used to do what he wanted to do. He could go where he wanted, what he pleased, and how he did it. He cannot do that now. He has a wife to consider and soon a child to consider.

Paul said, "I have a perfect right to marry. I have a perfect right to drag my wife around like everybody else." But it caused him more trouble than it was worth, for the gospel's sake. How would you have loved to be Paul's wife and gotten thrown in jail with him? He was thrown in prison, beaten, stoned with stones, and beaten with a whip. He had an absolute right to marry, but he remained unmarried for the furtherance of the gospel.

Here is the principle: You cannot forsake the principle of Christian liberty, but you can forego the exercise of Christian liberty for the furtherance of the gospel. Secondly, we may forego the exercise of our liberty for the sake of personal holiness. Whatever we have liberty to do, personal holiness must come first. I may have personal liberty to go to the beach.

I am certainly not going to go in July and August, when it is most crowded and you see the most scantily clad people there. In other words, I can forego the exercise of my liberty for personal holiness. I have liberty to watch movies, but my personal holiness comes ahead of any movie. If a movie is full of filthy and foul language and teaches adultery and fornication, I am not watching it. Personal holiness comes first. If a movie is too vile, wicked, and filthy for you to watch downtown at the movie theater, it is still too vile, wicked, and filthy for you to watch on your television when it comes on TV. Scripture says this. David said in Psalm 101:3, "I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes." Here is the principle of liberty: you may forego the exercise of that liberty for the furtherance of the gospel or for personal holiness.

Personal holiness comes first. Hebrews 12:14 says, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." There are plenty of things that I can do without, but one thing I cannot do without is holiness. Without holiness, no man shall see the Lord.

Thirdly, we may forego the exercise of our liberty for the sake of the weaker brethren. Paul certainly understood that an idol had no influence upon meat. He understood that the meat was not contaminated by the idol. Would Paul eat meat that had been sacrificed to an idol? Absolutely. Would Paul eat that meat with a bunch of weaker brethren watching him? Absolutely not. Paul said, "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth." In other words, I am not giving up my liberty, but I am willing to forego that liberty for the sake of the weaker brethren.

The principle is this: We have liberty in Christ, but we may forego the exercise of it for the furtherance of the gospel, for personal holiness, and for consideration of the weaker brethren, because we do not want to sin against Jesus Christ.

Application: Recovering the Theology of Rebuke

Now, let me make a couple of applications today. The first one is this, and I have mentioned this to you earlier: because of a misunderstanding of the biblical doctrine of offense, we have lost the theology of rebuke. People tend to think that to offend someone means to upset them, hurt their feelings, or make them mad. That is not true.

I want you to turn in your Bibles to the book of Acts, chapter 20. I want to show you some verses, and I am going to point out one word in each verse. Look in Acts chapter 20 and verse 31. The apostle here happens to be speaking to a bunch of preachers, but that is immaterial. I want you to look at the word. Acts 20:31 says, “Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.” Underline the word warn: “I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.”

Look in your Bibles to the book of Romans, chapter 15 and verse 14. Watch carefully. Romans 15:14 says, “And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.” Underline the word admonish. Warn, admonish.

Turn right over to the book of Colossians, chapter 1. Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians. Look, if you would please, at verse 28. Colossians 1:28. Look what the Apostle Paul says.

"Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." Underline the word warning. So it has been warn, admonish, warning.

Now look in Hebrews chapter 3, verse 13: "But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." Exhort. Look in Hebrews 10, verses 24 and 25: "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."

The interesting thing is that the words warn, admonish, and warning are all the same Greek word, noutheteo, which literally means to cause to stand in one's mind. You warn and admonish by causing something to stand in the mind. How do you do that? According to Hebrews 3 and Hebrews 10, by exhortation and provocation. We're to provoke one another to good works.

Obviously, if you rebuke, warn, reprove, or admonish someone, sooner or later someone is going to get upset. They'll get mad. They'll get their feelings hurt. What have you offended them? No. You can only offend a brother by encouraging to do what you're doing without having your knowledge.

The Bible said in Hebrews 10 that we're to provoke one another to love and to good works, not simply provoke each other. That's what some do. We've lost our theology of rebuke because we've taken the word offend and made it mean to make somebody mad or upset them. If I got really upset with Clay, shook my finger in his face, and told him, "Son, you're not treating your wife correctly," and really nailed his hide to the wall, would he be upset? Probably. Would he get mad at me? Probably. Have I offended him? No. To offend a brother means to encourage him to do what you're doing without having your knowledge.

If we understand the biblical doctrine of Christian liberty, it will set us free from the traditions of men. Galatians 5:1 says, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." I am not obligated to submit to every dictate of man or to do what men think needs to be done. My conscience is bound to the Word of God. I cannot demand that you do this or that exactly the way I understand it. If you do not, you are not wicked or wrong.

Application: Freedom from Traditions of Men

There is nothing wrong with traditions as long as they are biblical, or everyone understands that they are not binding upon anyone. The problem is that sooner or later somebody wants to bind your conscience to that tradition and say, "You have to do it, and you have to do it like this." But you do not.

Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Our conscience is bound only to the Word of God. You show it to me in Scripture, and I am bound. If it is not in Scripture, I am not bound. It is just that simple. If you want to do it, fine; you may do it. But do not get mad at me if I do not do it.

We cannot and must not press our ideas, opinions, and desires where there is no biblical warrant to do so. Romans 14:19 says, "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another. For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence." Why would we desire our way, ideas, and opinions to the point that we are willing to destroy the work of God in the lives of others, in their homes, and in their churches? It would be the height of wickedness to do so.

Application: Exercising Liberty with Wisdom and Compassion

The last application is this: when exercising our Christian liberties under Christ, we must always consider weaker brethren and use wisdom, compassion, and consideration. We are not to be spiritual bulls in the proverbial china shop, demanding our way or else

tearing the place apart. Do you realize that the strong as well as the weak may destroy the work of God? The strong may destroy it by condemnation and impatience, and the weak may destroy it by judging and demanding.

Here are principles that have been laid out by the Apostle Paul. If we follow these principles, we may not avoid every conflict between believers, but we certainly will avoid most conflicts. Most conflicts arise when someone basically demands that everyone do what they tell them in the way that they tell them. And I love what Arthur W. Pink said years ago. I've never forgotten it. I quote this often. Arthur W. Pink said, and I quote, "One of the reasons we do not like the Pope is because we want to be the Pope ourselves." And that's a fact. You only offend someone by encouraging him to do what you're doing without having your knowledge. And you can only offend a weaker brother, biblically speaking.

Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, we bow to Thee. We ask that You teach us. Build us up in the most holy faith. Give us wisdom. Give us discernment. May we always hold on to the principle of Christian liberty. Never forsake that principle. But understand, Father, we may forego the exercise of that principle for the furtherance of the gospel, for personal holiness, and for consideration of the weaker brethren. Give us grace, Lord, that we may serve Thee acceptably with reverence and godly fear. In Thy name we pray, Amen.

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