

What is a weak Christian?

A Bible study leader in Bolivia wrote,

In our study group, we had a lively discussion about what a weaker believer is according to Romans 14, along with how to live out our freedom in Christ. Can you elaborate on this?

—Nicolas

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Dear Nicolas,

What Is a Weak Believer?

Based on the three examples Paul gives, a weak believer is one who applies to himself ethical norms not commanded by God and assumes doing so will make him more acceptable. The term for such people is *legalist*.

Since Paul's examples are unambiguous, the discussion in your group must have touched on some other point. I will venture a guess. In discussions about Christian liberties, I notice the word "offend" often takes the spotlight. What does it mean to offend a weaker brother?

It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak. V.21 (NKJV)

Legalism and the weak conscience

The issue involves definitions. The term "offend" normally means to cause another to feel disgusted. If this were Paul's intent in Romans 14, it would compel us to refrain from whatever another believer finds objectionable.

The meaning of Skandalizo

Fortunately for our Christian freedom, that is not the meaning in the original Greek. The word for "offend" is "skandalizo" and denotes "to entice another to sin." That is vastly different from provoking repugnance.

The word "offend," as used by Paul, signifies we should refrain from enticing another to violate his or her conscience. If a Christian believes wine is a sin, do not offer him any. If he thinks refraining from meat makes him more pleasing to God, serve him vegetables. If he supposes going to the park after church and kicking a football violates the Lord's day, do not invite him.

On the other hand, he should neither impose his criteria on others regarding wine or playing a game on the Lord's day. Paul makes this point with,

*Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, V.13
Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil (V.16, ESV).*

Christian liberty has limits

The coin trick illustration

I once performed a sleight-of-hand trick with a coin to amuse some children. A Christian lady who saw it was angry and offended. She alleged it was evil because she associated it with magic and rebuked me. My argument that a trick with a coin can hardly be associated with occult practices left her unconvinced. So I made it clear I would not do it in her presence again.

That was not good enough for her. She tried to compel me to agree never to do it again, period. That was where I drew the line. Her personal offense gave her no right to impose that on me.

If I had pressured her to perform that trick, I would have been enticing her to sin because she believed it was wrong. If I had yielded to her pressure, I would have sinned by allowing another to supersede Christ as Lord of my conscience.

The hunting controversy

A similar incident occurred in Guatemala, where my wife and I were studying Spanish. We were living on a missionary compound with other students. The director was an avid sportsman and I did some hunting with him.

One day, at a meal table, I mentioned the good time we had the previous Saturday. One of the girls was offended. She somehow evolved the notion that hunting was ungodly. How she managed to develop such a notion is a mystery to me since no law of God forbids it.

The director suggested I refrain from talking about hunting at the table. That was fine with me. However, she wanted us to stop hunting altogether. That is where we drew the line. She had no right to impose that.

If we had tried to put a shotgun in her hand and convinced her to shoot a wild turkey, I would have been enticing her to sin by violating her weak conscience. On the other hand, neither did I let her take my shotgun from me. This is what Paul meant by "scandalize" and "offend."

Does a weak conscience make a Christian weak overall?

Another point of confusion about Christian liberties revolves around the question, is it possible for a Christian to be strong in one way and weak in another? Does a weak conscience in one domain make a believer weak overall?

Occasionally I hear new converts labeled as weak. That may not be scripturally sound. I find no clear indication in scripture that the apostles necessarily perceived new believers as weak. New converts often appear more committed than older ones. So I am reluctant to make chronology a reference point in the definition of weak.

That alone may answer your question for clarification. If not, it is worthwhile to review Paul's examples. From these, we infer the definition of a weaker believer.

Paul's three examples of a weaker brother

Vegetarianism and matters of conscience

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. V.2

Vegetarianism is Paul's first example. Some are vegetarians for dietary or health reasons. Others imagine abstaining from meat makes them morally superior. These are vegetarians of conscience. Paul reveals they are mistaken and labels them *weak*.

*For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables.
V.2*

Paul clarified to Timothy that Old Testament dietary restrictions no longer apply. We are free to eat what we wish, giving thanks to God.

*For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 5 for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.
1 Tim 4:3*

Sabbath observance and Christian freedom

These believe it is inherently wrong to do any activity on the Sabbath. Some Christians believe Jesus changed the Sabbath day from Saturday to Sunday. They feel the general rules of Old Testament Sabbath observance apply to Christians.

Another branch regards the Sabbath as the godly principle of resting in Christ from one's own righteousness, not a day at all, as opposed to pursuing righteousness by the law.

The arguments for these positions are secondary to the theme Paul expresses in Romans 14. A lot depends on the person's attitude. He indicates that observance of days is intimately linked to the conscience.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. Rom 14:5

Alcoholic beverages and Christian liberty

Some regard alcoholic beverages as inherently sinful. Paul clarifies that this view is incorrect.

It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. V.21

Apparently the question of wine drinking was also a topic. Paul implies it is no more sinful to drink wine than to eat a beefsteak. Those who feel they would be sinning by drinking any amount of wine with their meal identify themselves as weaker brothers.

Paul ends his discourse by warning us not to flaunt our freedom around others. Keep it to ourselves. *The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. V.22*

Four principles for living out Christian liberty

Focus on the kingdom of God

The first way we live out our Christian freedom is with an accurate focus. A Christian intent on righteousness, peace, and joy is less likely to be concerned about food, drink, or Sabbaths.

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Rom 14:17

In a group of Christians at a Bible study, just before the meeting began, two men were discussing their favorite wines. They did this with apparent disregard for others attending. Fortunately, no weaker believers overheard.

These gentlemen were flaunting their freedom unwisely. Enjoying our freedom is legitimate. Risking the welfare of a weaker brother is not.

Do not flaunt your freedom

A second guideline, therefore, is to avoid flaunting your freedom.

The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. V.22

Think through ethical questions. Some Christians may be mentally lazy and adopt whatever norms their evangelical culture dictates on minor issues. Whatever the question we face regarding matters of conscience, the answer is always one of two things: either it is wrong or it is right. If we find ourselves in a gray area, unsure of which, that is when we are in danger of sinning. Paul said in V.23, *But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith.*

Think through matters of conscience

The third guideline for freedom in minor issues is to think it through.

Though we avoid wounding the consciences of weaker believers, neither do we grant them a right to impose their norms on us.

Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. Rom. 14:22

Do not allow others to impose unbiblical standards

A fourth guideline for freedom of conscience is not allowing others to force unbiblical norms on us.

So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. Rom 14:16

A tension exists between two principles: avoid wounding the weak conscience of others versus refusing to allow weaker believers to impose their criteria on us. That alone is a good reason to keep questions of conscience to ourselves.

Conclusion: Freedom without compromise

If a person eats meat or drinks wine or plays games with his kids on the Lord's day, thinking it is sinful, then it becomes sin for him. In minor issues not commanded by God, our personal conscience rules.

We are commanded by God to avoid enticing others to sin by tempting them to do something contrary to their consciences that we ourselves approve. Neither do we allow others to rob us of our freedom.

Believers who understand this principle are the stronger.

Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. Rom. 14:18

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