

The Weak and the Strong

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The term "Christian liberty" is one that has very rich and inclusive connotation. It designates the freedom with which Christ has made his people free. The Westminster Confession of Faith provides us with an admirable statement of what is comprised in this liberty. "The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the Gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and, in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also, in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto Him, not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind. All which were common also to believers under the law. But under the new testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish Church was subjected; and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of" (Chapter XX, Section I). Nothing less than this high privilege and blessing should be accorded the title "Christian liberty". To define Christian liberty in more restricted terms would do prejudice to the richness of the concept.

Coordinate with Christian liberty is liberty of conscience. Again the Westminster Confession provides us with a statement which is unsurpassed in its precision. "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship" (Chapter XX, Section II). A particular phase of liberty of conscience is the liberty which the believer enjoys in respect of the use of those things which are in and of themselves indifferent, that is to say, not wrong in themselves. Sometimes that liberty has been called Christian liberty. It is not without warrant from the Scripture itself that it should be called such (cf. I Cor. 8:9; 10:29, 30). This aspect of Christian liberty is by no means unimportant: it brings into sharp focus the lines by which Scripture defines the sphere within which the believer may exercise the liberty that belongs to him as the freeman and bondslave of Christ Jesus. Yet when this kind of liberty is designated "Christian liberty" it should be understood that it is only a restricted aspect of Christian liberty that is in view.

It might appear that the question of the Christian's use of things not wrong in themselves is a very simple one. To assert and maintain the intrinsic rightness or goodness of things in themselves might seem to be all that is necessary. But this is not the only thing to be considered. The question is complicated by the fact that when we are thinking of the actual use of things not wrong in themselves we are thinking of use by persons. The moment we think of persons, particularly of imperfect persons, we have to take into account the subjective condition of the persons concerned. Oftentimes this practically amounts to saying that we have to take into account the conscience of the individuals in question. The problem becomes crystallized quite specifically in the consideration that Scripture itself takes into account the distinction between the weak and the strong, between those who are weak in faith and those who are strong in faith, between those

whose consciences are weak and those whose consciences are strong. In a word, it is the problem of the weak and the strong.

There are in the New Testament two passages, in particular, which deal with this question. It may help to remove misunderstanding and misapplication of these passages if we examine them with a view to determining their central import. The passages concerned are Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8. It is with the former that we shall be chiefly concerned.

At the very outset Paul advises us that he is dealing in Romans 14 with the person who is weak in faith. And so we are required to ask the question: who is the weak person whom Paul has in mind when he says in verse 1, "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye"?

It would be very natural for us to suppose that they were Jewish Christians who still entertained scruples regarding the use of the unclean meats of the Mosaic law. This view can be given a good deal of support by appeal to verse 5 where the distinction of days alluded to can readily be understood of the Jewish festival days. It is very easy to understand such scrupulosity on the part of Jewish Christians who had not yet arrived at a full understanding of the implications of the Christian faith in reference to Old Testament ceremonial regulations. We meet with such scruples in other parts of the New Testament.

There are, however, difficulties that encompass this interpretation. The weak referred to in this chapter abstained from all flesh-meat (v.2) and from wine (v.21). The Mosaic law did not condemn the use of flesh-meat but only of certain kinds of flesh, and the Mosaic law did not prohibit the use of wine except for certain persons at certain times. We are not justified then in saying that the weak at Rome were simply Jewish Christians who still adhered to the Mosaic distinctions in reference to meats.

Another view that could plausibly be pleaded is that the weak were Gentile and Jewish Christians who abstained from all meat and wine lest they should be implicated in the eating of meat and the drinking of wine that had been offered to idols, and that the situation at Rome was similar to that at Corinth, a situation with which Paul deals in I Corinthians 8.

But there are objections to this view also. If this were the case we should expect Paul to specify, as he does in I Corinthians 8, that the meat concerned was meat offered to idols. This he does not do. Again, the weak in Rome appear to have abstained from all meat and wine, an abstinence that would not be necessary if the scruple respected merely meat and wine offered to idols. In a word, if the situations at Rome and Corinth were identical we should expect Paul to deal with the situation at Rome in terms more closely similar to those found in I Corinthians 8.

A third view is that the weakness of certain believers at Rome took its rise from an ascetic philosophy and tendency that led to abstinence from meat and wine. Godet thinks that the party took its position on the basis of the first eight chapters of Genesis, for it was only after the flood that animal flesh was instituted for man's use. And so these Christians took their inspiration from the original ordinance of God.

It is very likely, however, that Paul would not have dealt so gently with a party which based its practice, in these respects, upon a well-defined ascetic philosophy of life. In

other epistles Paul is very severe in his condemnation of such an outlook and attitude and denounces it as a doctrine of demons.

It has also been proposed that the attitudes and practices reflected in the weak at Rome were derived from the Essenes. For us there is one great difficulty in carrying out such an interpretation of the situation:

it is that we know so little about the Essenes, at least in any conclusive way.

It would appear to be impossible to determine with certainty what was the source of the weakness that manifested itself at Rome. It may well be that the weakness with which Paul had to deal was derived from various considerations. The situation may have been complex and differing kinds of weakness may have contributed to the total situation with which Paul deals. It may be that not all who showed weakness were characterized by the same kind of weakness. We often find this in our own situations, and it is not difficult to understand how a situation even more accentuated in its complexity could have arisen at Rome in the first century. It may well have been the case that Jewish prejudice against certain kinds of meats may have led Jewish converts to extremes of abstinence going far beyond the prohibitions of the Mosaic law. It may well have been that fear of involvement in meat or drinks offered to idols may have led Jewish and Gentile converts to abstinence from all such kinds of meat and drink. And we can readily imagine how various streams of prejudice could converge to create in the church at Rome a very disturbing and disrupting situation.

While we cannot be dogmatic as to the origin and precise character of the weakness dealt with by the apostle there are two things of which we can be quite certain. (1) There was at Rome a scrupulosity with respect to the use of certain meats and drinks. This scrupulosity the apostle characterizes as weakness of faith. It was a scrupulosity that strength of faith and depth of knowledge with respect to the Christian faith would have removed. It needs to be stressed that this was weakness, not strength; it was due to unbelieving doubt and not to faith. (2) It was a weakness that had its basis in religious conviction. The weak abstained from certain things because they considered that these things were wrong. This is just saying that their scruples had a religious root. Their abstinences were dictated by conscience towards God, by consciousness of devotion to the Lord. Nothing could be more obvious than this. "He who regards the day, regards it to the Lord. And he who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God. And he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks" (v.6).

These two observations, with respect to which there can be no question, should be borne in mind. If they are not properly weighed the interpretation and application of this passage are necessarily distorted.

The difficulty of determining the source and precise nature of the weakness present in the Roman church does not confront us in the passage concerned with the church at Corinth, I Corinthians 8. For in this passage the following conclusions are distinctly apparent.

(1) Paul is not dealing with the eating of certain kinds of food or the drinking of certain kinds of beverage. He is dealing with the question of eating meat that had been offered to idols, and not at all with the same kind of meat that had not been offered to idols. There is no evidence that the weak at Corinth would have scrupled to eat certain kinds of meat,

but simply meat, of whatever sort, that had been involved in the ritual of pagan idolatry. Hence the weakness of the weak in faith did not respect the use of certain kinds of meat and drink but only the use of meat and drink offered to idols.

(2) The meat and drink and the eating and drinking concerned are such as entail this technical religious involvement, meat and drink involved in the ritual of pagan worship. It is therefore unwarranted to apply the teaching of the apostle in this passage without taking into account this technical religious involvement. The sin in which the weak would be involved would not be the eating of meat against which, as such, they entertained a religious scruple, but the eating of meat offered to idols. And the reason why the weak would in such a case commit sin was not that they had eaten of a certain kind of meat against which they had scruples but that they had eaten of meat offered to idols when they were not yet able to divest themselves of some kind of religious regard for, or conscience of; the idol.

(3) The sin on the part of the strong was the inducement they offered to the weak to eat of such meat when they (the weak) had not yet attained to the knowledge and faith to understand that an idol was nothing in the world and that meat was not in the least contaminated or defiled by the mere circumstance that an idolater had devoted it to the worship of an idol.

We readily discern, therefore, that the scope of the teaching of 1 Corinthians 8 is more limited than that of Romans 14. In Romans 14 Paul is dealing with the case of those who abstained on religious grounds from certain kinds of food and drink; in I Corinthians 8 the question is not that of abstinence from certain kinds of food and drink, but simply that of abstinence from that which had been offered to an idol, quite irrespective of the kind of food or drink involved.

It is all-important to observe, however, that in both cases the weakness of the weak had respect to abstinence from certain things on religious grounds. The weak abstained from certain articles of food or drink because they considered that devotion to the Lord required such abstinence. In both situations, that of Rome and that of Corinth, it was true that he who did not eat, to the Lord he did not eat, and gave God thanks. These believers, though weak and not yet fully aware of the implications of the Christian faith, recognized that the guiding principle of the believer's life was to be well-pleasing to the Lord, the Lord Christ. At Rome it was because they considered that eating and drinking of certain things constituted a breach of devotion to Christ that they abstained, and their religious conviction dictated total abstinence. At Corinth they considered that eating and drinking of certain things which had been associated with idolatrous worship constituted a break of devotion to Christ, and their religious conviction dictated total abstinence from such things.

It is here that a grave distortion of the teaching of these passages must be exposed. In dealing with this distortion it is well to deal with it in relation to Romans 14 particularly. As pointed out above, Romans 14 is broader in its scope than I Corinthians 8 and offers, therefore, more plausibility to this widespread distortion.

In our modern context this passage is often applied to the situation that arises from excess in the use of certain kinds of food or drink. It is particularly in connection with intemperance in the matter of fermented beverages that the application is made. The

argument runs along the following lines. The person addicted to excess or intemperance is called the "weaker brother", and the temperate are urged to abstain from the use of that thing in deference to the weakness of the intemperate. This argument may be applied to a great variety of usable things but it is in connection with fermented liquors that the argument has received widest currency and has been made to appear very plausible.

It must be said quite plainly that this is a distortion and perversion of Paul's teaching in the passage concerned. This should be apparent for the following reasons.

(1) Paul is not dealing with the question of excess in the use of certain meats and drinks. That kind of abuse does not once enter into the purview of this passage. The weak of Romans 14 are not those given to excess. They are the very opposite. They are those given to complete abstinence from certain kinds of food or drink. The "weak" who are addicted to excess do not abstain; they take too much.

(2) The "weakness" of those who go to excess is in an entirely different category from the weakness of those with whom Paul is dealing. In fact the "weakness" of the former is not really weakness in the sense of Romans 14. The "weakness" of excess is downright transgression of the law of God, it is moral iniquity. With those who are guilty of this sin Paul deals in entirely different fashion. Drunkards, for example, shall not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:10). And Paul enjoins upon the church that if any one called a brother is a drunkard, with such an one believers are not to keep company or even eat (1 Cor. 5:11). Drunkards are not to be regarded as brethren but as outside the kingdom of Christ and of God. How different is Paul's attitude to the weak of Romans 14! "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye" - take him without any restraint into the bosom of love and fellowship. The weak here are indeed weak in knowledge and faith but believers in the full communion of the saints. It does havoc to the basic principles of the Christian ethic and destroys the criteria by which the purity of the church is to be guarded and maintained to confuse the weak of Romans 14 with the so-called weakness of the person given to excess in any particular. Yet this is the very havoc which is wrought, at least implicitly, by those who are the peddlers of this distortion with which we are now dealing.

(3) Even when we consider the case of those who have been converted from a life of excess in some particular we do not have a situation that is similar to that of Romans 14. It does sometimes happen that a person who had been addicted to excess in his unconverted days still possesses a tendency to overstep the bounds of sobriety. This occurs sometimes with those who had been drunkards. It may well be that in some cases the cost of sobriety is total abstinence. The words of our Lord apply. It is better to enter into life with one eye than having two eyes to go into the hell of fire. True believers afflicted with such a temptation to excess must be dealt with very tenderly and sympathetically. Every proper measure ought to be used by their stronger brethren to support and fortify such against the weakness to which they are subjected. But again we must clearly distinguish between the weakness of those who have a tendency to overstep the bounds of sobriety and the weakness of those in Romans 14. The weakness of those plied with the temptation to excess is not the weakness of conscientious scruple. They need have no scruple against the use of these things; their case is rather that of a tendency to abuse what they have no scruple in using. There is no suggestion in Romans 14 that the

weakness contemplated is the weakness of tendency to excess on the part of those who have been converted.

(4) We may envisage, however, another case that takes its origin from a past life of intemperance. It is the case of the man who has been converted from a life of excess in some particular, let us say, strong drink. It sometimes happens that such a person comes to entertain a scruple against the use of that thing because he thinks that what could have been the occasion of such debauchery is evil in itself. So on religious grounds he becomes a total abstainer. It goes without saying, of course, that he has made an erroneous judgment and has gravely failed to analyse properly the source of responsibility for his past wrongdoing. But the fact still remains that on religious grounds he regards the use of such a beverage as wrong. Such a person will have to be considered as belonging to the category of the weak in Romans 14. Consequently the exhortations of Paul would apply all along the line in such a case.

It is most important, however, to observe that the consideration of excess enters into this case only as explaining the origin of the scruple of the person concerned and not at all as providing the reason why the strong are urged to abstain from the use of the drink concerned. In other words, it is not the tendency to excess on the part of the weak brother concerned that is the reason for abstinence on the part of the strong - the person concerned has no tendency to excess. The reason for abstinence on the part of the strong is simply the religious scruple of this weak brother, a scruple that derives its origin, in part at least, from the revulsion he has from his past excess.

We can see, therefore, that the widespread disposition to apply the teaching of this passage without these necessary distinctions is a serious distortion. It is apparent that scruple against the use of certain things, scruple arising from religious conviction, is the principle upon which the proper interpretation turns. And to apply the teaching of the apostle to cases where there is no such religious involvement is to extend the teaching beyond its reference and intent. Paul is dealing exclusively with the scruple of weak believers, and it is with reference to such, and out of deference to such, that he gives the exhortations contained in this chapter.

There remains, however, another question of crucial importance in connection with the interpretation of Romans 14. Granting that the weakness spoken of is the weakness arising from religious scruple and not by any means the "weakness" of being addicted to excess, the question still before us is: what is the stumblingblock of which Paul speaks, particularly in verse 13? "Let us not therefore judge one another any more, but judge this rather, not to place a stumblingblock or an occasion of falling in the way of the brother." The question is really the interpretation of verses 13-16.

It would not be entirely impossible to regard verse 13, just quoted, as directed to both weak and strong. In this event the weak would be regarded as placing a stumblingblock in the way of the strong as well as the strong in the way of the weak. The stumblingblock erected by the weak would be the argument and inducement which they would place before the strong to encourage the latter to adopt the same position and practice as the weak themselves. Such a notion is by no means pointless or meaningless. There is much need that the weak be urged to refrain from the attempt to bring down the strong to the level of the uninformed and confused state of mind in which the weak themselves are. It

is the wicked thing which the weak are too prone to practise, and it is something that the apostle would very severely condemn.

But although such an interpretation as would regard verse 13 as directed to the weak as well as to the strong is not impossible and though the force of it is undoubtedly implicit in Paul's teaching in this passage as a whole, yet it is not at all likely that in verse 13 the weak are regarded as placing a stumblingblock in the way of the strong and exhorted accordingly. It would be very difficult to carry through such an interpretation in verses 14 and 15. Hence we shall proceed on the assumption that verse 13 is addressed to the strong and that they are exhorted not to place a stumblingblock before the weak. Since the strong are included in the address of verse 13 we are placed under the necessity of discovering what the stumblingblock, which the strong are conceived of as placing in the way of the weak, precisely is.

It is not necessary to enter into the discussion of the question as to the distinction between the two words Paul uses, stumblingblock and occasion of falling. Whatever differing shades of meaning there may be, they refer to an obstacle in the path that causes one to stumble and fall. The question is: what is this?

It might appear that what the strong are urged to refrain from is the annoyance which they occasion for the weak by the exercise of their liberty, the displeasure which the weak entertain when they observe the strong partake of certain things with reference to which they (the weak) have conscientious scruples. It must be admitted that the weak at Rome did engage in censorious judgment of the strong, and such censorious judgment must have been accompanied by deep displeasure that the strong were freely doing things which the weak considered they had no right to do. In a word, the conduct of the strong must have been offensive to the weak. It would be to impugn the sincerity and depth of their conviction to think otherwise. The question is: are the strong here exhorted to avoid that which gives such offence to their weak brethren?

It need not be doubted that there is some point and force in such an interpretation. It goes without saying that Christian courtesy will often dictate abstinence from certain things out of deference to the wishes of others, especially of Christian brethren whom we love in the Lord. Considerateness is a virtue much to be coveted and practised. Considerateness for what is even petty and capricious on the part of others is oftentimes a virtue.

Furthermore, this interpretation might seem to gain a good deal of support from verse 15, "For if on account of food thy brother is grieved, no longer dost thou walk according to love." It might seem that the grief spoken of is the grief caused in the mind of the weak when he sees the strong partake of food which he (the weak) thinks is wrong. And it might appear to gather support from 15:1-3, "But we who are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each one of us please his neighbour for good unto edification. For even Christ did not please himself." So it might be said that the thought of Paul is, "Avoid what is displeasing to your fellowbeliever, defer to his scruples and wishes in these matters, lest you should give occasion for these disruptive censures and suspicions which disturb harmony and peace in the body of Christ". There are, however, compelling reasons for rejecting this interpretation. It will not satisfy the requirements of the context.

(1) Paul in this context is condemning the censorious judgment of the strong, on the part of the weak. "Let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God hath received him" (v.3). It would be very difficult to believe that Paul would proceed to ask the strong to defer to such censorious and unjust judgment, that he would exhort the strong to indulge it by removing every occasion for the exercise of it.

(2) The interpretation proposed will not do justice to the words Paul uses in verse 13 - stumblingblock and occasion of falling. These words refer to that which occasions a fall. If what is contemplated is simply the displeasure in the minds of the weak, how could such be construed as a fall? It is true enough that the unjust judgment that underlies the displeasure is sinful and ought to be removed, but it could not properly be said that it is the exercise of liberty on the part of the strong which causes this unjust judgment to be. The unjust judgment springs from an erroneous estimate of certain things and from failure to understand the implications of the Christian faith. And though the exercise of liberty by the strong is the occasion for bringing that unjust judgment to expression, yet this registering of judgment would hardly measure up to what is implied in the notion of a fall.

(3) Verse 14 explains what is meant by the stumbling and falling envisioned in this passage. "But to him that reckoneth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." This indicates that the fall in view in verse 13 is the partaking of something which the person partaking considers to be unclean. While it is an inviolable principle that nothing is unclean of itself and while Paul propounds that principle with the strongest emphasis when he says, "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus", nevertheless it does not at all follow that everything is clean to every one. It is still true that if one reckons something to be unclean to him it is unclean. And so for any person to do something which he considers wrong is a grievous fault and entails a fall. We are thus pointed in the direction in which we are to seek the meaning of the stumbling and falling referred to in verse 13.

(4) Verse 15, when duly examined, makes it clear that the grief mentioned is not the mere displeasure entertained by the weak when he witnesses the use of liberty on the part of the strong. It must be, rather, the vexation of conscience that befalls the weak when he exercises a liberty which he does not yet have the faith or strength to exercise. This is borne out particularly by the exhortation, "Do not destroy by thy food that one on account of whom Christ died." The word, "destroy" here is a strong word. It means destruction and ruin of soul, and the thought is that inherent in the kind of sin contemplated - the sin committed by the weak - is a soul-destroying tendency. This sin, Paul says, leads to destruction. Of course, Paul is not here viewing the sin from the standpoint of the purpose of God with reference to the believer. He is viewing the sin from the standpoint of its inherent character and consequence, from the standpoint of human responsibility and interests. Sin tends to destruction and the strong believer must consider this consequence for the weak rather than take refuge behind the predestinating purpose of God. To take refuge in Romans 8:28-30 in order to evade the practical issues at stake and to escape from responsibility is to turn the grace of God into lasciviousness and pervert the high mystery of predestination.

It is the sin of violating conviction and conscience, therefore, which is the destructive sin of which Paul speaks, and the grief is the vexation of conscience which befalls the person

guilty of this sin. It is the serious consequence for the whole body of Christ that Paul has in mind when he says, "Destroy not by thy food that one on account of whom Christ died." And the same thought with variation of language is expressed in verse 20, "On account of food do not break down the work of God."

(5) Verses 20-23 supply confirmation that the fall contemplated in this case is the fall involved in action contrary to conscience and conviction. In verse 23 the weak are undoubtedly in mind and the damnatory action is that of eating in doubt and without faith. "But he who doubts is condemned if he eat, because it is not of faith. And everything that is not of faith is sin." It is such sin Paul must have in mind in verse 20 and 21 where he speaks again of stumblingblock and stumbling.

We shall have to conclude, therefore, that the stumblingblock which the strong in faith are exhorted not to place in the way of the weak is the emboldenment which the use of liberty on the part of the strong affords to the weak to do what is contrary to the conviction and conscience of the latter. And the stumbling and falling implied refer to the doing on the part of the weak of what is contrary to their conviction. The weak are induced to do what they are not yet able to do in faith and with a good conscience. Thus they wound their weak conscience and sin against Christ. This is a grievous evil for the weak. But the evil also reacts upon the strong themselves. For in the body of Christ, if one member suffers all the other members suffer with it. The plea that is urged upon the strong is, therefore: "It is good neither to eat flesh nor to drink wine nor anything by which thy brother stumbles" (v.21); "If on account of food thy brother is grieved, no longer dost thou walk according to love. Destroy not by thy food that one on whose behalf Christ died" (v. 15); "On account of food destroy not the work of God" (v.20). The self-pleasing that is to be shunned and the pleasing of one's neighbour that is commended in verses 1 and 2 of Chapter 15 have in view the avoidance, on the part of those strong in faith, of that which will become the occasion of soul-destroying violation of conviction and of that distress of conscience attendant upon such violation which inevitably result when the weak do what is contrary to their conscientious scruples.

By way of expansion and application of what has been elicited from these passages we may set forth the following principles and observations.

(1) It is a Biblical principle that there is nothing unclean of itself. The sanction by which Paul confirms this principle is most impressive. He says, "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean of itself" (Rom. 14:14). A great deal of the so-called temperance propaganda of today and yesterday is based on the principle that there are certain things, edible, potable, or usable, that are intrinsically evil or have inherent in them some degrading or demoralizing element. It is alleged that the way of temperance is total abstinence from such things. This is directly contrary to Scripture teaching and we may be certain that any such conviction or propaganda based on such conviction is not after Christ. It is not in the Lord Jesus that such a conviction is entertained. It is by inspiration of the Spirit that Paul says, "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean of itself." And his word to Timothy is that "every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused if it be received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified through the word of God and prayer" (I Tim. 4:4, 5). Paul warns us that it is a sign of apostasy from the faith and embrace of the doctrines of demons to command to abstain from foods which God has created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe

and know the truth. Certain types of temperance propaganda have adopted total abstinence as their motto and have urged that the witness of those who believe and know the truth is to be borne by total abstinence. The contradiction is blatant. Temperance propagandists say certain things are to be refused and scrupulously avoided. Paul says nothing is to be refused. Temperance propagandists say the Christian witness is prejudiced when believers partake of certain things. Paul says that it is by those who believe and know the truth they are to be received with thanksgiving and that it was for that purpose God created them. Temperance propagandists imply that God's blessing cannot be invoked on the use of certain things. Paul says that it is by prayer they are sanctified. Temperance propagandists say the Word of God forbids the use of certain things. Paul says it is by the Word of God they are sanctified.

Consequently every temperance movement of whatever sort that is based upon the supposition or contention that any material thing is evil or contains within itself a tendency to evil and that therefore the use of it incites to sin is an assault upon the integrity of the Creator, and an attempt to remove the basis of responsibility for wrong from our hearts and wills to the ordinance of God. All such temperance propaganda is based upon a principle that undermines the very foundations of sobriety and of true temperance. The Biblical conception of temperance is that of moderation and self-control. Against such temperance there is no law.

(2) While it is true that there is nothing unclean of itself; it does not follow that all have the knowledge and faith and strength to use all things. In this matter of conduct we have not only to consider the intrinsic rightness of these usable things but also the subjective condition or state of mind of the person using them. There is not in every person the requisite knowledge or faith. Until understanding and faith have attained to the level of what is actually true, it is morally perilous for the person concerned to exercise the right and liberty which belong to that person in Christ Jesus. The way of edification is not that conduct should overstep the limits of knowledge and faith or to violate the dictates of conscience, but for conscience to observe the dictates of understanding and faith. "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." The believer must always act out of consciousness of devotion to Christ and when he cannot do that in a certain particular he must refrain from the action concerned. We must remember that although nothing is unclean of itself; yet to him that reckoneth it to be unclean to him it is unclean. To use other terms, we must remember that though things are indifferent in themselves the person is never in a situation that is indifferent. Things are indifferent but persons never.

The relevance and significance of Romans 14:7 need to be appreciated in this connection. "For no one of us lives to himself; and no one dies to himself." As too often supposed in the easy quotation of this text this does not mean that a man is not sufficient to himself in the social and economic orders. It is not a protest against selfish or self-assertive independence in the order of society. Truly enough such selfishness and the failure to recognize the solidarity that exists in our human relationships are wrong. In this chapter as a whole such an attitude is condemned and the obligations of mutual considerateness are inculcated. But in this verse what Paul asserts is that a man lives to the Lord and dies to the Lord. That is made conclusively plain by verse 8. "For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. Whether therefore we live or die, we are the Lord's." Verses 7 and 8 enunciate the guiding principle and aim of the believer's life - to

be well-pleasing unto the Lord, the Lord Christ. The Lordship of Christ is never suspended. The believer is never in a situation that is neutral or indifferent and so he must ever live in the recognition of Christ's lordship and act in the intelligent and fully-persuaded consciousness of devotion to him.

(3) Those who, through lack of knowledge and weakness of faith, have not attained to the mature understanding that nothing is unclean of itself and that every creature of God is good and nothing to be refused must not be allowed to erect their own ignorance and weakness as the standard of morality and piety. Too frequently the weak have presumed to regard as faith what in reality is doubt. And, sadly enough, those strong in faith and mature in knowledge have succumbed to the presumptuous claims and pretensions of the weak. How tragic! Those strong in faith and mature in their understanding must not despise or set at nought the weak. But they must never allow the weak to drag them down to the lower level on which the faith and understanding of the weak operate. If the strong allow this to happen then they not only bring themselves into bondage but they also allow the truth of God to be compromised and the integrity of the Creator to be maligned.

(4) The weak must ever be reminded that their censorious judgment with respect to the exercise of liberty on the part of the strong is a sin which the Scripture condemns. "Let not him that eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him." "Who art thou that judgest the servant of another? To his own Lord he stands or falls. Yea, he shall be made to stand; for the Lord is able to make him stand" (Rom. 14:3, 4). The censorious judgment in which the weak are so liable to indulge is just as unequivocally condemned as is the contempt to which the strong are too prone. And with such condemnation there is the condemnation of the self-righteousness that so frequently accompanies such censoriousness.

(5) The strong must exercise all due forbearance towards the weak. "Let not him that eats set at nought him who eats not. The way by which advancement in understanding and faith is to be secured is not by contempt or ostracism but by fellowship, esteem, forbearance, considerateness, instruction; not by provoking vexatious questionings and disputings but by edification in the bosom of Christian love and fellowship. The strong must not indulge the weak in their mistaken judgments, yet they must exercise all due considerateness for the weakness of their faith and seek to make them stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made them free. Such considerateness will induce them to refrain from the use of certain rights and liberties when it appears that the exercise of such liberties would constrain the weak to do that which they are not yet able to do with a clear conscience.

(6) The progress of knowledge, of faith, of edification, and of fellowship within the body of Christ is not to be secured by legislation that prohibits the strong from the exercise of their God-given privileges and liberties, whether this legislation be civil or ecclesiastical. Legislation can never be based upon the conscience of the weak or motivated by consideration for the conscience of the weak. If we once allow such considerations to dictate law enactment or enforcement, then we have removed the ground of law from the sphere of right and wrong to the sphere of erring human judgment. God has given us a norm of right and wrong, and by that norm laws are to be made and enforced. When we in the interests of apparent expediency erect laws or barriers which God has not erected, then we presume to act the role of law-givers. There is one lawgiver. When we observe the hard and fast lines of distinction which God has established for us and refuse to

legislate on those matters that in themselves are not wrong, then we promote the interests of Christian ethics. When we violate these lines of distinction we confuse and perplex the whole question of ethics and jeopardize the cause of truth and righteousness. We dare not attempt to be holier than God's law, and we dare not impose upon the Christian's conscience what does not have the authority of divine institution.

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