

WHEN CHRISTIANS DIFFER

“doubtful things”

Key question

How are we to respond to sincere Christians who differ with us?

Key text

Romans 15:1-7

“¹ Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not {just} please ourselves. ² Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. ³ For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, *The reproaches of those who reproached Thee fell upon Me.* ⁴ For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ⁵ Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to **be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus**; ⁶ that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.”

Introduction

1. The key rule in dealing with doubtful things - “Major on majors, minor on minors.” “In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity.”
 2. What is fundamental to Christian belief? What should be tolerated among believers and under what circumstances?
 3. What is (or should be) proscribed and prescribed as fundamental Christian behavior?
- A. **Christian unity as expressed in Romans 15:1-7 respects diversity of style while calling us to harmony in relationships.**
1. **Christian unity is not unity of opinion, style, or perspective on secondary issues.**
 - a. There will be a diversity of motivations, ministries, and manifestations or results in the church.
 - b. There will be people at various stages of growth and understanding in the church.
 - c. Unity of opinion or perspective on every issue will require that:
 1. There be a **dictatorial leader** or **tradition** telling people what they must believe and do.
 2. There will be a **self-selection process that will exclude** all who differ in gift, temperament, level of maturity, cultural background, etc.
 2. **Christian unity is unity of relationship.**

- a. Christian unity is a common spirit that networks individuals with differing gifts, temperaments, levels of maturity and cultural backgrounds.
- b. It is a gracious commitment of love that transcends all differences.

B. When the Scripture is not clear or when Christians differ, we need to respond with maturity.

1. **THE MATURE BELIEVER** —

- a. - is free, but willing to lay aside his freedom for others' welfare. Unity and edification are a priority over personal privilege and selfish desire.
- b. - is open to change and growth, but has a developing security in his convictions and understanding.

2. **THE IMMATURE BELIEVER** —

- a. The **independent believer** — lacks love.
 1. He exercises freedom with little concern for its effect on others.
 2. He is confident, but selfish.
- b. The **overly sensitive believer** — lacks wisdom.
 1. He is paralyzed by fear of offending a brother or sister.
 2. He lacks confidence in his convictions or wisdom in ministering to others.

C. On debatable issues, cultivate your own convictions. Rom.14:5

1. We are to live our lives, not for ourselves, but for the Lord (14:6-8).
2. We will each be responsible for giving an account to God for our lives (14:12).
3. We are to enjoy and appreciate our freedom (14:6,22).
4. We must not be enslaved to the conscience of others (Col. 2:16-23).
5. **NOTE:** It is important to develop your own convictions through:
 - a. Adopting a proper life-focus
 1. Am I a living sacrifice? (Rom.12:1-2)
 2. Am I an inside-out disciple?
 3. Am I open to learning and growing through change?
 - b. Asking the right questions (I Cor.10-11)
 1. Is there anything inherently wrong with this activity? Is it lawful? (10:23)
 2. Is it profitable for anything? (10:23)
 3. Is it edifying to anyone? (10:23)
 4. Is it self-serving at the expense of someone else's benefit? (10:23; Rom.15:1-2)
 5. Is this something I can thank God for? (10:30; Rom.14:6)
 6. Is it something that will glorify God? (10:31)
 7. Is it worth imitating by others? (11:1)
 8. Is this following the example of Christ? (11:1; Rom.15:7-8)

D. Allow your brother the freedom to determine his own convictions — even when they differ from yours.

1. The principle of **acceptance** — unity and the edification of others is to take precedence over my rights.
2. The principle of **accountability** — subjection to the wisdom and weakness of others is necessary for my growth.

E. **Some essential distinctions.**

1. **Weaker Brother** — a Christian who, because of the weakness of his faith, knowledge, conscience, and will; can be influenced to sin against his conscience by the example of a differing stronger brother.
 - a. A young believer who is just beginning to experience his or her independence.
 - b. Recent converts from a morally lawless background.
 - c. Believers who are coming out of a legalistic background.
 - d. Believers from another culture.
2. **Stronger Brother** — a Christian who, because of his understanding of Christian freedom and the strength of his conviction, exercises his liberty with full peace of conscience without being improperly influenced by the differing opinions of others.
3. **Stumbling Block** — an action taken by a stronger brother which, though it would ordinarily qualify as a permissible act of freedom, influences a weaker brother to sin against his conscience.
4. **Pharisee** — a professing believer with strong convictions who, because of his own insecurity or pride, takes offense at those who resist his pressure to conform to his point of view.

F. **Categories of Differing Brothers**

1. **Weaker Brother**
 - a. He differs from my opinion at times.
 - b. He is not fully convinced.
 - c. He is sincere.
 - d. He needs teaching and is open to it.
 - e. He is surprised at my use of freedom.
 - f. He does not think he can teach me.
 - g. He is influenced by my example.
 - h. I can cause him to stumble into sin.
 - i. He is caused to sin by my wrong use of freedom.
 - j. When I cause him to stumble, it is an “offense given.”
2. **Convinced Brother**
 - a. He differs from my opinion at times.
 - b. He is fully convinced.
 - c. He is convinced and humble.
 - d. He has been taught, but is open to correction.
 - e. He accepts me with my differing opinion. He is willing to discuss why he differs.
 - f. He is not improperly influenced by my example.
 - g. I cannot cause him to stumble into sin.

- h. He is not caused to sin by my use of freedom.
- i. Since he does not stumble, there is no offense at all.

3. **Pharisee**

- a. He differs from my opinion at times.
- b. He is fully convinced.
- c. He is convinced and proud. He has been taught, but is not open to correction.
- d. He judges or rejects me for my differing conviction.
- e. He seeks to make me conform to his viewpoint.
- f. He is not influenced by my example.
- g. His pride will cause him to stumble.
- h. He becomes upset by my use of freedom.
- i. When he stumbles over my freedom, it is an “offense taken.”

G. **Relating to Differing Brothers.**

1. **The Weaker Brother**

- a. I need never give him offense.
- b. I become a willing slave to his conscience.
- c. I must limit my freedom to avoid sinning against him.

2. **The Convinced Brother**

- a. I will not be able to give him offense.
- b. I am free to exercise my freedom.
- c. I need not limit my freedom on his account.

3. **The Pharisee**

- a. I will not be able to prevent his taking offense.
- b. I will not allow him to enslave me to his standards.
- c. I may choose to limit my freedom to keep him from getting upset with me.

H. **How to Care for Weaker Brothers. Rom.14:13-15:2.**

1. **Do Not . . .**

- a. Put a stumbling block in his way (14:13)
- b. Destroy with food ((14:15)
- c. Let your good thing become evil (14:16)
- d. Tear down God’s work (14:20)
- e. Give offense (14:20)
- f. Cause a brother to stumble (14:21)
- g. Just please yourself (15:1)

2. **Do . . .**

- a. Walk according to love (14:15)
- b. Serve Christ (14:18)
- c. Pursue peace (14:19)
- d. Build up one another (14:19)

- e. Bear the weaknesses of the weak (15:1)
 - f. Please your neighbor for his good (15:2)
 - g. Edify the Weaker Brother (15:2)
3. Discerning God's will in doubtful things (I Cor. 6:12)
- a. In relation to self —
 - 1) Conscience (Rom.14:22-23)
 - 2) Control (I Cor.6:12)
 - b. In relation to others —
 - 1) Selflessness (I Cor.10:24; Phil.2:3)
 - 2) Love (I Cor.8:13; Rom.14:15)
 - 3) Not to cause a brother to stumble (I Cor.8:13)
 - 4) Not to cause an unbeliever to stumble (I Cor.10:27)
 - 5) Union (Rom.15:5-6; I Cor.1:10; II Cor.13:11; I Pet.3:8; Col.3:14; Eph.4:3)

I. **How to relate to the Pharisee.**

1. **How did Jesus relate to the Pharisees?**

- a. Jesus did not go out of His way to avoid doing things that He knew would offend the Pharisees.
- b. The Pharisees always took the initiative in the various confrontations.
- c. When questioned or accused by the Pharisees during the early stages, Jesus simply answered their questions and explained the reasons for His actions.
- d. At the point where the Pharisees began to effectively dissuade people from following Him, Jesus began to rebuke them with greater force.
- e. He also, at that point, began to warn His followers about them, instructing the multitudes in a parabolic form about their teaching.
- f. The specific instructions that Jesus gave His disciples were: Beware, and leave them alone.
- g. When Jesus challenged the Pharisees personally, the target of His attack was the content of their doctrine (i.e., when they supplanted the commands of God with their own traditions. For example the phoniness of their practices (hypocrisy), and the destructive effect of their influence in the lives of others.

2. **How should we respond to a Pharisee?**

- a. Beware of becoming a Pharisee (Matt.16:12; Lk.12:1; Rom.14:3). Basically, a Pharisee is one who fails to distinguish between divine principle or command and personal application. He absolutizes the application — not just for himself, but for everyone else as well.
- b. When questioned by a Pharisee, graciously explain the reasons for your convictions (Col.4:6; II Tim.2:24-25; I Pet.3:14-16).
- c. Don't capitulate to his pressure to conform to his absolutes (Col.2:8, 16-23), especially on matters of gospel principle (Gal.2:3-5).
- d. Pursue peace (Rom.12:18; 14:19). Your goal is to build him up. If he rejects your efforts to establish harmony, leave him alone and commit him to God (Matt.15:12-14).

- e. Admonish everyone in the church to beware of the dangers of Pharisaism (Rom.15:14). Instruct and exhort the Pharisee openly before the congregation of believers.
- f. When the Pharisee begins to cause spiritual damage to others, the church, and/or the reputation of the Lord, confront him privately and seek to help him change his course (Matt.18:15; Gal.6:1; I Thess.5:14; II Thess.3:14-15).
- g. If private reproof does not restore the brother, then the steps that Christ spelled out for church discipline are called for (Matt. 18:15-20). The final step of excommunication is equivalent to Christ’s public rebuke of those who so vigorously opposed Him (Matt.23).

J. Summary of Romans 14

“¹ Now accept the one who is weak in faith, {but} not for {the purpose of} passing judgment on his opinions. ² One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables {only.} ³ Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him ⁴ Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. ⁵ One man regards one day above another, another regards every day {alike.} Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; ⁸ for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived {again}, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. ¹⁰ But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written, *"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall give praise to God."* ¹² So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God.”

- 1. Two issues are mentioned in this text.
 - a. relating to the culture (eating meat) and
 - b. respecting the Kingdom (the Sabbath).
- 2. Christians will apply their Christian liberty in different ways.

| The strong in faith | | The weak in faith |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|
| “lives for the Lord” | application | “dies for the Lord” |
| “view others with contempt” | attitude | “view others with contempt” |
| “pass judgment” | action | “pass judgment” |
| “will face the Bema of God” | accounting | “will face the Bema of God” |

- 3. We must respect a hierarchy within Christian concerns.

Fundamental doctrines of the faith

Basic moral teaching of the faith

Unity among believers

Secondary doctrines & ethics

Cultural expressions

Personal preferences

- 4. The judgment seat of Christ (Bema) for all believers.

| Damnation | Discipline | Disclosure |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Heaven or Hell in the next life | Correction for growth in this life | The revealing of each person's motives and fruit for rewards in the next life |
| Jn.3:18 | Heb.12:10 | I Cor.4:13 |

“¹³ Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this-- not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. ¹⁴ I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. ¹⁵ For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷ for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit ¹⁸ For he who in this {way} serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. ²⁰ Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or {to do anything} by which your brother stumbles. ²² The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. ²³ But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because {his eating is} not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.”

5. My personal preference must not dictate public policy.

6. My personal freedom must not become a public right.

7. Spiritual maturity is measured not only by being liberated from the Law but also by being bound by love.

8. Parallel texts I Corinthians 10:27-32

²⁷ If one of the unbelievers invites you, and you wish to go, eat anything that is set before you, without asking questions for conscience' sake. ²⁸ But if anyone should say to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat {it,} for the sake of the one who informed {you,} and for conscience' sake; ²⁹ I mean not your own conscience, but the other {man's}; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? ³⁰ If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? ³¹ Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³² Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; ³³ just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the {profit} of the many, that they may be saved. (see also 8:13)

9. Biblical illustrations

Matthew 15

¹² Then the disciples come and said to Him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?” (defending His violation of the traditions of the elders – hand washing) ¹³ But He answered and said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be rooted up. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”

Matthew 17

(After telling His disciples that they were exempt from the temple tax) ²⁷ But lest we give them offense, go to the sea, and throw in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a stater, Take that and give it to them to you and Me.”

Matthew 18

⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believed in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea, ⁷ Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!

Acts 16

³ Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

Galatians 2

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned, ¹² For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision, ¹³ And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

K. The limits of unity.**1. Situations that require church discipline**

a. DOCTRINAL

1. "One who preaches a false gospel" Gal.1:6-9
2. "One who goes beyond the gospel" II Jn.7-11
3. "Blasphemy" (speaking with gross disrespect of God) I Tim.1:19-20 (2:17; 4:14)

b. BEHAVIORAL

1. "Free-loader" II Thess.3:6,11,14-15
2. "Open immorality" I Cor.5:11
3. "Divisiveness" Rom.16:17

2. Jesus teaching — Matt.18:15-17

3. **NOTE:** This is normally the responsibility of the elders in a fellowship. I Cor.6:1-6; 2:15; 5:3,12; I Tim.1:20

- a. Step #1 Personal reproof in private.
- b. Step #2 Include one or two more in bringing private reproof.
- c. Step #3 Expose the issue to the entire church.
- d. Step #4 Let the person be regarded as an unbeliever.

4. **The proper motive**

- a. Love for the offenders — Heb.12:8-13
- b. Love for the church — I Cor.5:1-13

5. **Unauthorized judgment by believers against one another is forbidden** Luke 6:37

- a. We will be held accountable to our own standard of judgment. Matt.7:1-2
- b. We are not to judge the motives of others. I Cor.4:5; Jas.4:11
- c. We are to be especially patient with young believers. Rom.14:1

- d. We are not to pass judgment on others in areas of doubtful conduct.
Rom.14:3,4,10,13; I Cor.8-10

6. Wisdom calls us to respect critical distinctions.

- a. The **seeker** and the “**closed minded**”
- b. The **believer** and the **unbeliever**
- c. The **mature** Christian and the **weak** in faith
- d. The **core** issues and the **minor** issues
- e. The **church** and the **state**
- f. The **community** and the **individual**
- g. The **personal** and those who may not be like us

L. When is it wise to leave a congregation?

1. Proper reasons

- a. Heresy (fundamentals of the faith disrespected, etc.)
- b. Gross distortion of purpose. (Social club, political action group, cult practices, etc.)
- c. Gross misconduct of leadership that is not corrected. (immorality, dishonesty, manipulation, pride, etc.)
- d. Church discipline. (excommunication)

2. Possible reasons

- a. Distrust of leaders. Leader’s violation of ethical standards.
- b. Special needs not addressed. (the hearing impaired, personal gifts, vision, children’s ministry, etc.)
- c. A change of purpose or vision that excludes valid ministry. (evangelism, teaching, etc.)
- d. Change in geographic local.

3. Poor reasons

- a. Broken relationships with other members.
- b. Hurt by leaders or other members.
- c. Disagreement with leaders on secondary issues.
- d. Differences of style or taste.

M. Final exhortations:

1. Major on majors and minor on minors.
2. Strive to respect, receive, and love Christians who do not share your convictions on secondary issues.
3. Don’t judge and exclude them.
4. Jesus laid aside His glory to take on our guilt and shame.
 - a. Christians are called to do the same.
 - b. We are to value relationships even at the cost of our rights.
5. **To the strong in faith**

- a. Are you willing to constrain your liberty out of love?
- b. **NOTE:** A distinction should be made between:
 - 1. The liberated — those who have liberty in Christ.
 - 2. The liberal — those who reflect lawless license.

6. To the weak in faith

- a. Are you willing to limit your constraints to yourself?
- b. **NOTE:** A distinction should be made between:
 - 1. The limited — those who are conservative in their preferences.
 - 2. The legalist — those who are controlling in their style.

N. Fermented wine and the use of alcohol by Christians

1. **The meaning of “wine” in the New Testament.** It must be generally recognized that although fermentation was a process that required time it was a process that started early and without refrigeration would continue. In ancient cultures fermentation was a way of preserving a drink. It also served a number of medicinal purposes. The same word for wine is used in both a positive and negative context. There are a number of reasons it is very difficult to insist that the New Testament wine was unfermented grape juice.
 - a. There was no way to prevent fermentation in ancient times. *“Unfermented grape juice is a very difficult thing to keep without the aid of modern antiseptic precautions, and its preservation in the warm and not overly clean conditions of ancient Palestine is impossible.”* (p.3086 of International Standard Bible Encyclopedia)
 - b. The Last Supper was several months after the grape harvest meaning that the wine used must have been fermented.
 - c. Wine, not grape juice, has medicinal value – I Tim.5:23; Lk.10:34
 - d. Wine, not grape juice, “makes merry.” – Ps.104:14-15
 - e. At the wedding of Cana (Jn.2:1-11) the “best wine” created by Jesus was saved till last. Grape juice could not be called the best wine.
 - f. Jewish history is consistent in its recognition of wine as fermented drink. Note that it was often mixed with water to make it weaker or with spices to make it stronger. *“In the Talmud, which contains the oral traditions of Judaism from about 200 BC to AD 200, there are several tractates in which the mixture of water and wine is discussed. One tractate (Shabbath 77a) states that wine that does not carry three parts water is not wine. The normal mixture is said to consist of two parts water to one part wine. In a most important reference (Pesahim 108b) it is stated that the four cups every Jew was to drink during the Passover ritual were to be mixed in a ratio of three parts water to one part wine. From this we can conclude with a fair degree of certainty that the fruit of the vine used at the institution of the Lord's Supper was a mixture of three parts water to one part wine. In another Jewish reference from around 60 BC, we read, "It is harmful to drink wine alone, or again, to drink water alone, while wine mixed with water is sweet and delicious and enhances one's enjoyment" (II Maccabees 15:39).”* Robert Stein Christianity Today June 20: 1975
2. **Advice concerning the use of wine** in the New Testament.
 - a. The drunkenness is scorned throughout the Old and New Testaments. **Rom.13:13; Eph.5:18** “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit.” (See also I Cor.6:9-10; Prov.23:20-21; Isa.5:11,22)
 - b. Drinking wine is prohibited in certain contexts:
 1. Priests while they served in the Temple. Lev.10:9-11
 2. Nazarites were not to drink. Num.6:3
 3. Kings and Princes were not to drink. Prov.31:4-5
 - c. Moderation (including the use of wine) is the normal advice.
 1. An elder is not to be “addicted to wine.” **I Tim.3:3; Titus 1:7**
 2. A deacon is not to be “addicted to much wine” **I Tim.3:8**
 - d. The use of wine is put in a positive light or even encouraged in some contexts.

1. **Luke 10:34** The Good Samaritan “came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them;”
 2. **I Tim.5:23** “No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.”
 3. **John 2:1-11** “Every man serves the good wine first, and when the people have drunk freely, then he serves the poorer wine; but you have kept the good wine until now.” Vs.10
3. **Deferring to the conscience of others.** As Christians we should give consideration to the possibility of being a “stumbling block” for others in what we do. Romans 14 makes this clear. (see apptoteach.org theology file #308)
- “¹³ Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this-- not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way. ¹⁴ I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. ¹⁵ For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷ for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit ¹⁸ For he who in this {way} serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. ²⁰ Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or {to do anything} by which your brother stumbles. ²² The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. ²³ But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because {his eating is} not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.”
4. **Legalism.** While there are principles that should guide our behavior in keeping with differing social contexts, it is not wise to legislate a particular behavior in every context. Love calls for a certain amount of freedom and discretion in conduct. I Corinthians 10:23-33 clarifies this issue. He starts in vs.23 with “All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify.”