

The tyranny of the weaker brother

One of the great Pauline principles of Christian discipleship is that we are free in Christ Jesus—freed from sin by His grace, freed from legalistic bondage, and freed to reflect the model and teachings of Jesus. While Paul vigorously defends this freedom (Gal. 5:1), twice he adds a qualification: sometimes we must voluntarily restrict our freedom for the sake of others who are weaker in faith than we are (1 Cor. 8–10; Rom. 14).

The implications of these passages have a far-reaching effect on ministry. I do not know a pastor who has not been stymied in his or her attempts to make necessary changes in a church program, much less blaze a creative path, because “someone would be offended.” Sermons, relationships, plans, all fall prey to the sometimes tender, often angry, sensibilities of the “weaker brother.”

The result can be the church’s adjusting its activities to the capacity of its most dysfunctional member. I am acquainted with a church where a single man angrily objects to having church fellowship meals for reasons neither sound nor biblical. For 20 years, the congregation has not had a meal together in their church building. One man’s irrational

opinion has dictated the activities of everyone.

Is this what Paul had in mind?

Stumbling block

The Greek word *skandalon* refers to an object that causes someone to trip and lose one’s footing—something you might stumble over. Metaphorically (the only way this word is used in the New Testament) the verbal form is rendered “stumble,” “fall,” or (transitively) “offend.”

Some offenses, says Jesus, you must never cause. “‘If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea’” (Matt. 18:6).*

For other offenses, though, He makes no apology. When some followers were offended by the seemingly bizarre notion of eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking His blood (John 6:53–61), He did not say, “Oh, well, then forget it; it’s not *that* important,” but let them leave (v. 66) rather than retract or even (in this setting) clarify the teaching.

Paul, too, is intolerant of those offended by Christ. He recognizes that the Crucifixion was a *skandalon* to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23), but it will not stop him from preaching it. He

reserves the most brutal insult in all his letters for circumcision proponents by charging them with being offended by the Cross (Gal. 5:11, 12).

Like Jesus, Paul also uses the word to describe a situation in which one should avoid offending a vulnerable person. “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall [*skandalizein*] into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall [*skandalisō*]” (1 Cor. 8:13). “It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall” (Rom. 14:21).

These teachings may appear, at first glance, to be similar to Jesus’ blanket condemnation of offending “little ones,” suggesting we are always to give in to weaker believers. But just because a need has risen to admonish strong church members to be sensitive to new believers does not mean Paul wants a church controlled by weak Christians. If Paul had meant we should let the church grind to a halt at every objection, he would have been contradicting his own pastoral practice: a lifetime of pushing back against objections theological, cultural, and practical.

A weak conscience

As a Jew, Paul has never been part of the empire’s dominant

religious culture. Now, as a Christian Jew charged with the important task of grafting on the non-Jewish branch (Rom. 11:17), he tries to see through the eyes of Gentiles and realizes that the idols he knows objectively to be nothing at all may, in fact, be a subjective problem to his Gentile converts. A quick reading through 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 gives one the sense that he is thinking it through as he writes, and, given the transition the church is going through, that is understandable.

In ancient cities, places of worship and merchants surrounded the town square. Idols were on display. A butcher, grocer, or restaurateur might offer a prayer to his gods and dedicate all of his stock to them, perhaps hoping to improve his sales.

Except for Jews and Christians, most ancient peoples were polytheists. The transition from multiple regional or ethnic gods to a single universal One could be difficult. Like Hinduism today, ancient paganism

was not so much a conviction or conversion but a culture: the gods were the spiritual background to everyday life. The person Paul describes has just come into Christianity. He is still surrounded by temples and idols, and he realizes the indefinable, almost subconscious hold paganism has on him, and feels it necessary to make a defined separation.

This is the one of whom Paul writes, "For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?" (1 Cor. 8:10). If the conscience is the seat of a productive guilt, as we define the word today, then a weak conscience means that this person has not yet developed a strong moral compass. He is easily influenced. His moral muscle gives out, and he may collapse back into old habits.

Weak may also shade in meaning toward "tender," suggesting a person's moral sense is

overcompensating. This is hinted at in Romans 14, where Paul speaks of the person who really need not be so zealous about food and celebration days but whose qualms can be accommodated during his faith maturation.

Either way, there are some things we know about this weaker brother.

First, this problem is personal. Paul implies that the weaker brother does not yet see this clearly: it is neither the teachings of the church nor the actions of other Christians, but *his conscience* that threatens to trip him up. "But if anyone regards something as unclean, then *for him* it is unclean" (Rom. 14:14; emphasis added). What is at stake is *his* faith, not *the* faith.

Second, if others in the church oblige him, it is not because he is right, but because he is weak. What threatens him spiritually is not necessarily real: "An idol is nothing at all in the world," says Paul (1 Cor. 8:4). It follows that the weak brother

is not one who, ignoring the convictions of other Bible students in the church community, is allowed to impose his scruples on everyone. There are ecclesiastical processes for rethinking doctrine or establishing orthodoxy, but just demanding that everyone comply with one's convictions is not one of them.

Third, the weaker one is expected to become stronger. Paul encourages growth in faith (2 Thess. 1:3) and knowledge (Col. 1:10) toward a Christian maturity (Eph. 4:15). When an infant is learning to walk, you clear a path so his little feet will not stumble, and hold out your hands to catch him should he fall. You would not, for the rest of her life, clear every path and hold out your hands for her to walk into. You want him to learn to climb stairs, to hike over rough ground, to play games without tripping over his or someone else's feet.

So this isn't a blank check for church manipulation. The one who stomps his foot and threatens conflict unless people see things his way is not a "weaker brother." He has a spiritual problem, but it is not the one Paul addresses here.

Disputable matters

Again, where a teaching is central to the Christian witness, neither Jesus nor Paul gave ground. So if believers are to accommodate the weak or conflicted person, it is only in matters that do not adversely affect the work of God or believers' salvation.

Paul's use of the phrase *disputable matters* in Romans 14:1 shows his recognition that, in the church, some elements of faith and practice will always be under discussion. We will never eliminate all differing points of view, and one person's conviction does not necessarily dictate a corporate one.

Many of us struggle with this, for our convictions tell us there is no matter of belief or behavior that should not be definitively pronounced upon; after all, I have studied and clearly decided it. Yet

part of spiritual maturation is realizing that not only is not every matter that comes up for discussion in the church of salvific importance, but some simply *cannot be and do not need to be* agreed upon. Paul acknowledges as much when he writes that for now, "we know in part" (1 Cor. 13:9). Disputable matters should not prevent the church from moving forward, whether or not they are agreed upon by all.

Paul's sensitivity to this may spring from his experience in Pharisaic Judaism, where community harmony depended upon agreement in thousands of specific behaviors. His postconversion position against legalism appears to play a part in the Jewish issues (celebration days, food, relationship to idolatry) that he weighs in Romans 14. While Paul appears to reject the basis of these (e.g., "I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself," v. 14), he still insists the church need not let such questions discourage new believers.

That will not necessarily end church conflict, for argumentative believers are adept at shifting the argument to whether the issue under discussion is disputable or indisputable. Undoubtedly, many things that churches argue about float between those poles. But to Paul, the poles are pretty clear. Differences having to do with ritual, ceremony, and food are clearly on one end. The primacy of Christ, His teachings, and power, are at the other. In his letters, Paul addresses dozens of problems, but he identifies a single unifying belief: the Lordship of Christ and living that relationship.

Please note, then, these two requirements. The weaker brother must be weak in faith, not simply opinionated or dictatorial. And we will not accommodate his weak conscience in anything that hobbles the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The weakest link

Paul does not hesitate to demand mature behavior of those

he expects to be mature. With weak Christians he is nurturing, though he may not agree that their scruples are God's. But when Peter ministers in Galatia, Paul expects him to uphold Christian freedom, going so far as to "oppose him to his face" (Gal. 2:11) for refusing to eat with the Gentile Christians in the presence of other Jewish Christians.

But what of the one who remains, willfully or unwittingly, weak?

Each Christmas I struggle with strings of Christmas lights that will not light up. Out of 100 bulbs, 99 are just fine. Only one is defective and, because of that one, none of the rest work.

If this were the model of Paul's ecclesiology, and this happens occasionally in congregations, we probably would not have a Christian church today. Paul never taught that the church should be controlled by its weakest link—exactly the opposite. The church is a temple built of interlocking components, rising up for God's glory (Eph. 2:21, 22). The church is a body of individual parts, some important and others minor (1 Cor. 12:12–30), but capable of completing tasks even when some parts do not contribute.

This is a vigorously parallel and organic ecclesiology. The weaker one, surrounded and supported by the strong, upholds the structure and moves it forward, preferably with him; but if not, then in spite of him. One weak mortar joint will not topple the temple, for there is redundancy built in. One cut finger does not put the whole body abed.

And, Paul tactfully adds, should some parts be "unpresentable" (1 Cor. 12:23), they are kept hidden out of modesty. Might he be thinking of those weak but troublesome church members who cause problems when they are allowed too much exposure?

The weak legalist


The "weaker brother" passages must be nuanced carefully if we are not to contradict the larger Pauline ecclesiology. Our English word

offend adds to the confusion, for one can be offended out of petulance, fear, obstinacy, or ignorance—qualities that *skandalon*'s usage proves are not valid excuses. Paul urges accommodation of the weak only in a certain situation: when someone is pushed unnecessarily beyond the stage of growth he has achieved, and then only in matters where all that is at stake is a small self-abridgment of one's own freedom until the weaker ones can mature.

To Paul, the stricter, more legalistic Christian is the weaker one. Of course, the weaker one will not necessarily recognize himself as such. He may equate strictness with strength. To the legalist, God's grace in Christ does not seem enough: God enjoins of him an artificial and forced compliance to an ever-lengthening list. This becomes most evident when he demands everyone conform to his convictions, for

then we see he is not just wrestling with his own conscience, but is trying to legislate a zone of control that would stabilize him in his own spiritual unsteadiness. Because that strategy rarely works, we see the weakest assurance of salvation and the greatest brokenness among the most legalistic of our members.

Some of our struggle with this in conservative churches results from our own confusion about strictness and legalism. When someone becomes incensed because of what is served at potluck or the musical instruments used in worship, do we (perhaps subconsciously) see him as having strong self-control and a willingness to go to ground for principle? In these situations we may lose sight of Christian freedom and find ourselves mucking about in what is disputable and of minor importance, and so prolong the adolescence of the weaker believer.

Churches are as often destroyed by a too-ready capitulation to the least-mature, weakest-conscience members as by errant doctrine, for churches consumed in offense taking implode in stressful relationships. Furthermore, the most abstemious Christian is not necessarily a strong, productive Christian. Giving too much attention to the weaker brother defines faith by what is *not* done rather than (as Jesus illustrates in Matt. 25:34–36) the good, just, and mercifulness that *is*. It's hard to see how Paul, who never tolerated a Judaizer's religion, would have intended that we should simply yield to those weaker brothers or sisters who demand their way rather than encouraging them to mature in their relationship with Christ. 

* All Scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are from the NIV.