

# **Challenges Christians Face**

## **Dealing with Debatable Matters – Part 1**

*1 Corinthians 6:12*

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May 29, 2011

# Dealing with Debatable Matters – Part 1

## Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of debatable matters. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Dealing with Debatable Matters – Part 1."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 6:12:

<sup>12</sup> **"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be enslaved by anything.** (1 Corinthians 6:12)

## Introduction

When the apostle Paul said that **"All things are lawful for me,"** what was **"all things"** referring to? **"All things"** refers to such things as *adiaphora*. The *adiaphora* refers to those "things or actions that in themselves are neither immoral nor moral, or neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture, and thus may be permitted for Christians."<sup>1</sup> So, Paul was saying that with regard to the *adiaphora* a Christian is free to do whatever he or she wants to do. In this regard, **"All things are lawful for me."**

As I looked ahead in our studies in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* I realized that this issue of *adiaphora* comes up several times. And so I thought that it might be helpful for us to get a clear understanding of exactly what things are *adiaphora* and how to deal with debatable matters.

The apostle Paul dealt most clearly with the issue of debatable matters in his letter to the Romans. And so we look at Romans 14:1-15:13 in order to learn how to deal with debatable matters.

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<sup>1</sup> George Thomas Kurian, *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary: The Authoritative Resource on the Christian World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001).

Romans 12 and 13 laid emphasis on the primacy of love, whether loving our enemies (12:9, 14, 17ff) or loving our neighbors (13:8ff). Then, in Romans 14 Paul supplied a lengthy example of what it means in practice to “walk according to love” (14:15, literally). It concerns the relationship between two groups: the weak and the strong.

Note that Paul is not talking about weakness of character; it is weakness of *faith*: “As for the one who is weak *in faith*” (14:1a). We are to picture a Christian who is sensitive and scrupulous.

Paul is addressing the vital issue of *essential* and *non-essential* in this passage. Paul insists that, from a gospel perspective, questions of diet and days are *non-essentials*.

There is a similar need for discernment today. We must not elevate non-essentials, especially issues of custom and ceremony, to the level of the essential and make them tests of orthodoxy and conditions for fellowship.

Nor must we marginalize fundamental theological or moral questions as if they were only cultural and of no great importance. Paul distinguishes between these things, and so should we.

But what is a *non-essential* issue? Paul does not insist that everybody agree with him, as he did in the early chapters of his letter regarding the way of salvation. No, the Roman issues were *dialogismon* (14:1), “opinions” (*ESV*), “disputable matters” (*NIV*), on which it was not necessary for all Christians to agree.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers called such things *adiaphora*, “matters of indifference,” whether (as here) they were customs and ceremonies, or secondary beliefs that are not part of the gospel.

In either case they are matters on which Scripture does not clearly pronounce. In these and other issues, the problem is how to handle conscientious differences in matters on which Scripture is either silent or seemingly equivocal, in such a way as to prevent them from disrupting the Christian fellowship.

Let me suggest a list of items that may constitute “debatable matters” in our day:

- Giving and receiving of wedding rings (which was hotly

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- contested by the Puritans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century)
- Wearing jewelry
  - Use of make-up
  - Consumption of alcohol
  - Smoking
  - Mode of baptism (immersion or sprinkling)
  - Some aspects of Old Testament fulfillment of prophecy
  - View of eschatology (especially the millennium)
  - Attending movies
  - Watching television
  - Aspects of Sabbath observance (such as work, play, and worship)
  - Eating food in the church building
  - Letting children participate in Halloween
  - School choices (public, private, or home)
  - Mixed swimming
  - Playing cards
  - “Gambling” for recreation
  - Buying insurance
  - Dancing
  - Wearing pants (for women)
  - Using a Bible other than the *King James Version*
  - Playing guitars in church
  - Men wearing their hair over their ears
  - Etc.

### Lesson

Well, with that as an introduction, let’s look at Paul’s method in Romans 14:1-15:13 of dealing with debatable matters.

#### I. The Fundamental Principle (14:1)

Paul lays down the fundamental principle of welcome (espe-

cially the welcome of the weak), which undergirds the whole discussion, in verse 1: **“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.”**

This fundamental principle is in two parts.

*A. It Is Positive*

It is positive: **“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him. . .”** (14:1a).

There is no attempt to disguise or conceal what these brothers and sisters are. They are **weak in faith** (here meaning “conviction”), immature, untaught, and (as Paul’s unfolding argument makes clear) actually mistaken.

Yet, on that account they are not to be ignored, reproached, nor (at least at this stage) corrected, but rather to be received into the fellowship.

The Greek word for **welcome** is *proslambano*. It means to welcome another into one’s fellowship and into one’s heart. It implies warmth and kindness of genuine love.

We need to bear this in mind when we consider that we are to welcome the weak (14:1) for “God has welcomed him” (14:3), and to welcome one another “as Christ has welcomed” us (15:7).

*B. It Is Qualified*

Having reflected on the principle of welcome, we need to note that it is qualified: **“. . . but not to quarrel over opinions”** (14:1b).

The Greek word for **quarrel** (*diakriseis*) can mean “discussions, debates, quarrels, or judgments.”

And the Greek word for **opinions** (*dialogismon*) can mean “opinions, scruples, or the anxious internal debates of conscience.”

Paul is saying, then, that we must receive the weak person with a warm and genuine welcome, “without debate over his misgivings or scruples,” or “not for the purpose of getting into quarrels

about opinions.”

In other words, we are not to turn the church into a debating chamber, whose chief characteristic is argument, still less into a law court in which weak persons are put in the dock, interrogated and arraigned.

The welcome we give them must include respect for their opinions.

## II. Three Negative Deductions (14:2-15:13)

Having laid down the fundamental principle of welcome (especially welcome of the weak), which undergirds the whole discussion, Paul now develops three negative deductions or consequences that follow from the fundamental principle.

### A. *Do Not Despise or Condemn the Weak Person (14:2-13a)*

The first negative deduction is this: Do not despise or condemn the weak person. This is fleshed out in Romans 14:2-13a.

#### 1. **Welcome him because God has welcomed him (14:2-3)**

First, welcome him because God has welcomed him.

Paul chooses the dietary question as his first illustration of how the weak and the strong in faith should behave towards one another.

**One person believes he may eat anything**, his freedom in Christ having liberated him from unnecessary scruples about food, **while the weak person eats only vegetables** (14:2).

This is probably not because he is a vegetarian on principle or for health reasons, but because the only foolproof way of ensuring that he never eats non-kosher meat is not to eat any meat at all.

How are these Christians to regard one another? **Let not the one who eats** (that is, the strong) **despise the one who abstains** (who is weak on account of his scruples), **and let not the one who**

**abstains** (the weak) **pass judgment on the one who eats** (that is, the strong, on account of his liberty).

It is not clear why the strong are forbidden to “**despise**” on the weak, and the weak to “**pass judgment**” on the strong.

Perhaps it is that, whereas the strong might be tempted to pity the weakness of the weak, the weak might regard the strong, who have abandoned Israel’s time-honored traditions, as having committed apostasy and therefore as deserving condemnation.

Whether this is correct or not, the reason both the despising and the passing judgment of a fellow Christian is wrong is that **God has welcomed him** (14:3). How dare we reject a person whom God has welcomed?

Indeed, the best way to determine what our attitude to other people should be is to determine what God’s attitude to them is.

This principle is better even than the golden rule. It is safe to treat others as we would like them to treat us, but it is safer still to treat them as God does.

The former is a ready-made guide based on our fallen self-centeredness, while the latter is a standard based on God’s perfection.

## 2. **Welcome him because Christ died and rose to be the Lord (14:4-9)**

Second, welcome him because Christ died and rose to be the Lord.

If it is inappropriate to reject somebody whom God has welcomed, it is at least as inappropriate to interfere in the relationship between a master and his *oiketes*, his household slave. **Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?** (14:4a).

In ordinary life such behavior would be regarded as outrageous and would be deeply resented.

Just so, we have no business to come between a fellow Christian and Christ, or to usurp Christ’s position in his life. **It is before his own master that he stands or falls.** For he is not responsible

to us, nor are we responsible for him. **And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand** (14:4b), giving him his approval, whether he has ours or not.

Paul now develops his second illustration of the relationship between the strong and the weak. It concerns the observance or nonobservance of special days, presumably Jewish festivals, whether feasts or fasts, and whether weekly, monthly, or annually.

He begins by describing the alternatives without comment. **One person** (the weak) **esteems one day as better than another, while another** (the strong) **esteems all days alike**. The strong does not distinguish between days any more than he does between foods.

To whichever group his readers might belong, Paul's first concern for them is this: **Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind** (14:5).

Paul is not encouraging mindless behavior. Nor is he friendly to unexamined traditions.

But assuming that each (weak and strong) has reflected on the issue and has reached a firm decision, he will then reckon his practice to be part of his Christian discipleship. **The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord** (14:6a).

And the same is true of the one who regards every day alike, although Paul does not mention him in verse 6.

Instead, he reverts to the question of eating and in doing so adds an important double principle, which is related to thanksgiving. **The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God** (14:6b).

Whether one is an eater or an abstainer, the same two principles apply.

If we are able to receive something from God with thanksgiving, as his gift to us, then we can offer it back, as our service to him.

The two movements, from him to us and from us to him, belong together and are vital aspects of our Christian discipleship.



Both are valuable and practical tests. “Can I thank God for this? Can I do this unto the Lord?”

This introduction of the Lord into our lives applies to every situation. **For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself (14:7).** On the contrary, **for if** (that is, “while”) **we live, we live to the Lord, and if** (that is, when) **we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s (14:8).**

Life and death seem to be taken as constituting together the sum total of our human being. While we continue to live on earth and when through death we begin the life of heaven, everything we have and are belongs to the Lord Jesus and must therefore be lived to his honor and glory.

Why is this? Here is Paul’s answer: **For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living (14:9).**

It is wonderful that the apostle lifts the very mundane question of our mutual relationships in the Christian community to the high theological level of the death, resurrection and consequent universal lordship of Jesus. Because he is our Lord, we must live for him.

Because he is also the Lord of our fellow Christians, we must respect their relationship to him and mind our own business. For he died and rose to be their Lord too.

### **3. Welcome him because he is your brother (14:10a)**

Third, welcome him because he is your brother.

After writing about the strong and the weak, the observers and the abstainers, the living and the dead, all in rather general and impersonal terms, Paul suddenly poses two straight questions in which he sets over against each other “you” and “your brother.” **Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? (14:10a).**

Judging and despising fellow Christians (the same two verbs

are used as in verse 3) are both now shown up to be totally anomalous attitudes.

Why? Not only because God has welcomed them, because Christ has died and risen to be our common Lord, but also because they and we are related to one another in the strongest possible way, by family ties.

Whether we are thinking of the weak, with all their tedious doubts and fears, or of the strong, with all their brash assurances and freedoms, they are our brothers and sisters. When we remember this, our attitude to them becomes at once less critical and impatient, more generous and tender.

#### **4. Welcome him because we will all stand before God's judgment seat (14:10b-13a)**

And fourth, welcome him because we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

There is an obvious link between our not judging our brother (14:10a) and our having to **stand before the judgment seat of God** (14:10b). We should not judge, because we are going to be judged.

There seems to be an allusion to the word of Jesus: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (cf. Matthew 7:1). What kind of "judging" was Jesus referring to, however? He was not forbidding criticism, or telling us to suspend our critical faculties. If we did that, we would not be able to obey one of his next instructions, namely to "watch out for false prophets" (cf. 7:15).

No, what is prohibited to the followers of Jesus is not criticism but censoriousness, "judging" in the sense of "passing judgment on" or despising. And the reason given is that we ourselves will one day appear before the Judge.

In other words, we have no warrant to climb on to the bench, place our fellow human beings in the dock, and start pronouncing judgment and passing sentence, because God alone is judge and we are not, as we will be forcibly reminded when the roles are re-

versed.

In order to confirm this, Paul quotes from Isaiah 45:23: **“As I live, says the Lord** (an introductory formula which occurs before several other prophetic oracles, though not in this text), **“Every knee shall bow to me; and every tongue shall confess to God”** (14:11). The emphasis is on the universality of God’s jurisdiction, in that **every knee** and **every tongue** will pay homage to him.

**So then**, Paul continues, in the light of this Scripture, **each of us** individually, not all of us in a mass, **will give an account of himself**, not of other people, but **to God** (14:12). **Therefore**, because God is the Judge and we are among the judged, **let us not pass judgment on one another any longer** (14:13a), for then we shall avoid the extreme folly of trying to usurp God’s prerogative and anticipate judgment day.

Four theological truths, then, undergird Paul’s admonition to welcome the weak, and neither despise nor condemn them. They concern God, Christ, them and ourselves.

First, God has accepted them (14:3).

Second, Christ died and rose to be the Lord, both theirs and ours (14:9).

Third, they are our sisters and brothers, so that we are members of the same family (14:10a).

And fourth, all of us will stand before God’s judgment seat (14:10b).

Any one of these truths should be enough to sanctify our relationships; the four together leave us without excuse. And there are still two more to come!

## Conclusion

May God give us wisdom as we deal with debatable matters.  
Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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**PRAAYER:**

Almighty God, we thank you for your Word. The Apostle Paul has taught us that we have tremendous responsibilities in light of your mercies to us. Help us to welcome one another as you have welcomed us into fellowship with you.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, as you leave here today, welcome one another as God has welcomed us into fellowship with him!