

CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING IN DOUBTFUL THINGS **Romans 14:1-3**

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In Romans 14 we begin the study of doubtful things or questionable practices. This message should be studied along with the next three or four in this series to avoid confusion on this subject. A doubtful thing is an act that is not sinful in itself or specifically prohibited in Scripture, but that may become sinful for an individual if practiced. A doubtful thing deals with religious scruples, things the Bible does not speak for or against.

The most frequent question Christians ask me is, "What is wrong with such and such an activity?" More young people are driven from Christ because of an improper grasp of doubtful things than for any other reason.

It is interesting to note that in the New Testament, which covered the time of the first century church, there were only three areas of questionable practices: 1) observing religious days; 2) drinking wine; and 3) eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. You can readily see that in the last two thousand years the church has added many more taboos to the list. These man-made rules cover many things, all the way from smoking to wearing buttons.

Often doubtful things are a cultural problem. Different cultures have different taboos. One of the taboos of fundamentalists in the deep South is mixed bathing. My wife and I, being from California, make no issue over members of the opposite sex swimming in the same pool or at the same beach. But when we went to Texas, we heard that "mixed bathing" was not permitted in some circles. My wife blushed and said to me, "Honey, I'm opposed to mixed bathing too. Tell me, why would two people of the opposite sex want to take a bath together? I think that is indecent." When we found out that "mixed *bathing*" meant "mixed *swimming*," we had a good laugh. It never occurred to us that someone might believe mixed swimming to be wrong.

The Bible does not speak out against any of the so-called taboos. It may be possible to prove that some of the doubtful things may not be good for a Christian to practice, but it cannot be proven from any positive statement in the Bible. The area of doubtful things must ultimately be solved on the basis of biblical principles, for it is obvious that the Scripture is deliberately silent on these things. Had God wanted to command against these doubtful things, he would have done so. But obviously the writers of the Bible, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, were led to be deliberately silent about them. It is very important that we observe the silence of the Bible in these

matters and follow the same rule. We must not be presumptuous in judging someone else in these areas. These issues are for each Christian to settle for himself.

Where the Bible speaks we are to speak, and where the Bible is silent we are to be silent. The Bible does speak out loudly and clearly against some things, and these things are always wrong no matter when or where they occur (e.g. stealing, bearing false witness, drunkenness, gossip, jealousy, unrighteous anger, slander, bitterness, envy, hate, prejudice, premarital and extra-marital sex, failure to read God's Word, failure to pray, etc.). If we do these things, we are wrong, and the Bible as well as our conscience tells us that we are sinning.

Perhaps you are wondering, "When does a doubtful thing become sin?" It happens when a person is convicted by the Holy Spirit that it is sin for him, or when the act causes a weaker Christian brother to stumble in his Christian walk: "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak" (Rom. 14:21). For example, men of the National Convention of Rescue Missions are convinced that all forms of alcohol are wrong for them because their culture demands it.

BACKGROUND TO ROMANS 14

In the local church at Rome, there was a small group, probably Gentiles, who had come to the conclusion that there was something religiously wrong with eating meat and drinking wine. Perhaps they had moved into the area of asceticism, believing that the Christian life was a series of negatives such as "do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," etc. Or perhaps they were former pagans who could not dissociate eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols from idolatry itself (compare 1 Cor. 8-10). In any case, this group had become legalistic and was judging everyone who did not conform to its standards.

There were also in the assembly some who understood Christian liberty, but who were misusing this liberty and causing young believers to stumble in their Christian walks. The major appeal in Romans 14 is to the mature man to exercise his Christian liberty in love and to demonstrate restraint.

These two extremes in the church at Rome were threatening the peace and harmony of the assembly. So, Paul wrote this portion of Scripture to correct the situation.

AN APPEAL FOR UNDERSTANDING ON DOUBTFUL THINGS — Romans 14:1-3

“Him that is weak in [the] faith receive [welcome] ye, but not to doubtful disputations [disputes over opinions].” The appeal is to mature Christians at Rome, who were in the majority, to accept these weak Christians. Apparently Paul thought the weak Christians had taken an extreme position, but he also felt they should be loved and accepted because they were true believers. This really says these Christians were weak in faith, not in the Faith. It is not a question of weakness in fundamental doctrines, but of weak practice. They believed the gospel, but did not have practical faith in facing taboos or doubtful things; they were Christian legalists because they did not understand Christian liberty.

Those who are more mature in the Christian life are to welcome those who are of a more legalistic persuasion on doubtful things because the weaker Christians are still Christians, having received Christ as Lord and Savior. One’s viewpoints on doubtful things are never a basis for fellowship with a local church, although they may become an issue for leadership in the church. If men have been “born again” through faith in Christ, this entitles them to fellowship in a local church.

Christians have been known to say, “We don’t want these people in our church because they are poor, or too legalistic, or a little worldly. They just aren’t our kind of people. We know they are Christians, but they are not like us.” Christians have no right to talk this way. It is the Lord who determines the makeup of his church, not the people of the church. All those who have trusted Christ as Lord and Savior are to be extended the right hand of fellowship. We must welcome them because they love Jesus Christ.

The strong or mature in the assembly are to accept the weak brothers who do not understand Christian liberty and the fullness of salvation in Christ, and they are to accept them without doubtful disputes or disputes over opinion. In other words, the mature are not to try to argue the weak brothers out of their position, but rather to accept them as they are. Of course, this is not to say that the mature ought not to teach and instruct the weak in doctrine, faith and practice, but rather that they ought not to fight over matters of opinion or refuse fellowship over matters of opinion.

“For one believeth that he may eat all things.” This is the mature believer who understands the grace of God in Christian living, who has a grasp of true Christian living and liberty in questionable practices:

“The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof” (1 Cor. 10:26).

“I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself” (Rom 14:14).

“All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not” (1 Cor. 10:23).

Therefore, the mature believer eats meat and it does not bother his conscience. The mature believer has the right to participate in questionable practices, but this does not mean that he exercises this freedom.

“Another, who is weak, eateth herbs.” The weak brother, though a true Christian, could not eat meat or drink wine because his own conscience would not permit it. He had not come to the realization and appreciation of Christian liberty or of the grace of God in sanctification. This did not necessarily make the weak brother wrong; it simply showed that his own conscience forbade him to participate in what he considered to be a questionable practice.

Christians may have opposite views on points of Christian conduct not commanded against in Scripture, yet still fellowship together in love and harmony. For example, two women may feel differently about the use of cosmetics. If one wears lipstick and the other does not, that is their business. They are not answerable to the pastor or to the church in such matters. They are answerable only to God.

“Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not.” There is a tendency on the part of those who are mature in the area of questionable practices to look down their noses at the weak, legalistic brothers and to call them narrow-minded. But mature believers are not to despise those who are weak in the practice of faith. To despise is a matter of pride. When the mature feel superior because of their greater understanding, it is sin!

“And let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth.” Those who are weak are not to judge or condemn those who have liberty to practice doubtful things. Those who are of a legalistic persuasion have a tendency to be critical of everything and anyone who does not match up to their man-made standards. This causes great division among true believers. These who are weak brothers feel themselves superior because they have given up something for the Lord. This is simply another form of pride. The weak brothers are not to judge strong believers.

It is right for Christians to judge one another in areas where the Bible speaks. When a Christian is engaged in an activity that is clearly wrong according to the Bible, it is the solemn responsibility of other Christians to go to that one and point out the fault; but in doubtful areas we are not to judge one another. Should a doubtful practice lead to outright evil, those who are guilty must be judged; but unless this happens, no Christian is to judge in the area of doubtful things.

“For God hath received him.” God has received the weak brother as well as the strong, so both should be able to get along as brothers in Christ in the area of doubtful things. If they cannot, then there is sin and a failure to exercise the principles in Romans 14. If evangelicals are ever to be united, we must apply these principles. Oh, that we would learn to exercise love!

I remember hearing a story of an evangelist, Billy Graham I believe, who went to England for an evangelistic campaign. When he got off the plane in London with his wife, the clergymen who were waiting for him were incensed because his wife used cosmetics and dressed attractively. The evangelist just could not understand their thinking. When he asked where they were going to have their first strategy session for the campaign, they said they were going down to the pub. Then it was the evangelist who was shocked. The different cultures had different taboos.

Some Christians believe in total abstinence from any form of alcoholic beverage. Others use such beverages as a matter of course. For example, it is not extraordinary for German evangelicals to drink beer. On the other hand, others who are equally conservative in doctrine, of which I am one, recoil in horror at the idea of tasting a drop of beer. Which group is wrong? Neither; this falls into the area of doubtful things. I am a teetotaler and my conscience will not permit me to drink any form of alcohol, but because I cannot find it in the Bible, I could never make this a hard and fast rule for all Christians. However, I think I can make a good case for total abstinence in my culture in light of the tremendous social problem alcohol has caused in America.

CONCLUSION

I have brought out these various examples of modern-day doubtful things to make a point. True Christians hold different opinions on these things, and we must apply what Paul has said and not despise or judge. We must love and understand one another, and have open hearts before our Lord Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you do not have Christ in your heart and have always thought of Christianity as a list of do's and don'ts, and have used this as an excuse not to receive Christ. The Bible never says one must give up something to become a Christian. It only says that you must trust Christ as your Lord and Saviour. If you do, you will receive eternal life and the forgiveness of sins. If you do not come to Christ, you will perish in your sins. It is not the taboos that are keeping you from Christ and heaven, it is your own sinful condition. Unless you turn and trust Christ, you shall perish in your sins, for he is the only way of salvation.