



Conducted by
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“Could you please explain the statement made by Paul in Rom. 14:22, “Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth.” Does this mean that I can allow *anything* in my Christian life so long as I am happy about it?”

This is one of those perennial questions, the answers to which never seem to be passed on from generation to generation. What can I allow in my life and still please God, seems to be the criterion for Christian living in some people’s minds. The underlying principles governing this attitude of mind seem to be apparent in such things as sexual relationships — what can I get away with and still keep my partner happy; in work situations — what can I get away with and still keep my boss happy; in child/parent relationships — how far can I go and still keep my parents happy? It seems to me that such an attitude indicates a spirit of self-gratification taking precedence over other important Christian virtues.

However, the context will tell us how to proceed, and it is to that which we must now turn in order to arrive at the answer.

THE CONTEXT

The 14th chapter of the Roman letter shows Paul concerned about three very important aspects of Christian relationships. In the first place he abhors the disputations and contentions among brethren regarding the eating of meats and the observance of days; those who eat with an untroubled conscience he refers to as the 'strong'; others whose conscience troubles them he seems to refer to as the 'weak' (it would help if the reader read and considered 1 Cor. 10:23-33 at this point). Secondly, he seems to be concerned about the judgmental attitude among brethren, one toward the other. Thirdly, he acknowledges that in the almost embryonic days of the Church this contentious and judgmental spirit could easily destroy the faith of some, consequently he calls for peace and a greater restraint and responsibility from brethren who seem not to realise that their most serious endeavours should be concentrated on promoting love and unity within the Body of the Lord who, ostensibly, they have all committed themselves to. This, then, is just a broad interpretation of the context; we shall fill in some detail as we proceed.

WHAT DO I ALLOW ?

This, in line with my earlier remarks, can also be a vexed question among Christians, as well as people generally, and if we are not very careful can result in an almost farcical approach to practical Christianity. Obviously, the Christians to whom Paul was writing had different opinions as to what they should eat; some **allowed** meat in their diet (even though they might be aware that it had been offered to idols); others were conscious-stricken about this and didn't allow it in their diet. The former-referred to by Paul as the 'strong' — saw the food for what it was, just **meat**; the latter-referred to as the 'weak' — saw the eating of such meat as in some way condoning idolatry. The remarkable thing was that **they were both right**. The meat-eaters were eating in faith; the herb-eaters were also by faith refraining. Each party was 'fully persuaded' its actions would be acceptable to God. The trouble was, of course, that the 'strong' were going ahead without any consideration of the feelings of their 'weaker' conscientious-stricken brethren; they, on the other hand, would be quite convinced that the 'strong' should be prevented from, as they would see it, contravening God's spiritual law. But in Rom. 14:14 Paul makes the point that there is nothing wrong or impure concerning the food, "**I know, and I am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself**"; the problem wasn't the **nature** of the food itself, but the Christian's **perception** of it (it is interesting to note that by this statement Paul seems to put himself with the 'strong', as he does in the Letter to Corinth). But he has something extremely important to teach which will be considered a little later. As regards the observance of 'days', it is quite probable that newly-born Jewish Christians would still be celebrating the **seventh day**, the Sabbath, while Gentile Christians would be celebrating the first day of the week in memory of the Lord's resurrection. At this point Paul is appealing for liberty, although he is no libertine, as we realise when we study his letters.

I mentioned earlier that our views on this subject could be come somewhat farcical if we weren't careful; I say this not without some experience. I have known Christians whose consciences have been offended by the casual clothes that other Christians have worn, by the kind of music they have listened to, by their attendance at a concert or ball-game, by where they holiday and for how long, and so on. Others have looked askance at Christians who use the banking system, make wills, use investment services, insurance services, and perhaps buy shares in privatised public services. Yet other consciences might be offended by the purchase of expensive homes, cars, the range of sophisticated audio /visual equipment, tools, cameras, creature comforts, etc., while

many of God's creation are living (and dying) in abject poverty under the most appalling conditions. The list of such 'offences', if pursued to its logical conclusion, could be never ending. Perhaps the comment of Oliver Wendell Holmes is appropriate when he said, "The greatest act of faith is when man decides that he is not God".

But there is one more vital element of this question to consider, and it is perhaps the crux of the problem as to what a Christian should allow.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY

So far as the Christian is concerned, there is no escaping this. In v.22 Paul says, "**Hast thou faith? have to thyself before God.**" It is true that each individual Christian has the right to choose what he or she will **allow** in life, but it is absolutely essential for us to remember that such a choice is made **before God**, and is made with due regard to the rights of **other brethren**, if we are to interpret the teaching of Paul aright.

He then goes on, "**happy is he that condemneth not himself in that which he alloweth.**" This is how it works, as I see it. A Christian thinks about something which he either wants to say or do; he ponders it before God; he approves it to himself; he then goes out and says or does it, and is quite happy having no doubts at all that he has done the right thing. There are two snags, however, he may not have considered the effects of his actions on brethren who are not so strong as he is; and he may, in his desire to do what he wants to do, have put aside some other part of God's law which would forbid his intended action. To act to the limits of our personal responsibility demands that we know and understand God's requirements of us, and that we know and understand the strengths and weaknesses of our brethren.

In v. 23 Paul shows us the reverse side of the coin. If a Christian doubts an intended course of action, but does it regardless, then he condemns himself, because his action is not of faith and is therefore sin to him. A practical example of this would be a young Christian (or an older one, for that matter) with a group of non-Christians. They allow things which the Christian is doubtful about and has a conscience concerning; nevertheless, not wanting to lose face and standing in the group, he quells his conscience and does what is expected, not by God but by **them**. He condemns himself by so doing.

The supreme summation of this problem is given by Paul in 15:1-3. We are "**to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves**". Why? "**Because even Christ pleased not Himself; but, as it is written, the reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me.**"

So there you have it dear questioner. Whatever **you** approve must be approved by the Word in the first place (remember, the Jews thought their actions were approved by the law but Paul condemns them as sinners along with the Gentiles. See chapters 2 & 3). Whatever you do must be done before God (we do it unto the glory of God). We are 'our brother's keeper', so whatever we do must have due regard to **their** rights as Christians. This applies equally to the 'weak' as to the 'strong'. We must never, I repeat never, allow so many things into our Christian lives that the conscience becomes, as it were, 'seared with a hot iron', and becomes no longer the guardian of our actions. It is true that we have been rescued by Christ from the onerous bondage of Satan, and have willingly entered the bondage of Christ. It is a benign bondage, but nonetheless a bondage, where love is reciprocated to God, His Christ, and the brethren. Christianity is a joy, but also a serious business. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, but a comfort to be upheld by the everlasting arms. We cannot, and dare not do just what we want. Our true happiness comes from serving God, His Christ, our brethren, and by extension, the community at large.

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