

Accommodation and conscience in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14-15

A reading of these passages:

- Paul describes a divided fellowship of “stronger” and “weaker” faiths
- They are divided on behavior Scripture permits but which offends the conscience of “weaker” (14:1) believers
 - In 1 Cor 8 the issue is eating meat sacrificed to idols (read 8:5-13)
 - In Romans the weaker Christians are likely (but not conclusively) Jewish Christians desiring to follow kosher (14:20, 2) laws and observe Jewish holidays (14:6; note idols aren’t mentioned in Rom 14)
- The weaker believers are *not* claiming they must abstain from meat (1 Cor) or stay kosher (Romans) to be saved
 - This is inferred; if they *were* Judaizers or were adding anything to the gospel such as abstinence, Paul would certainly call them out as he did in Galatians (Gal 1:6-9)
- Paul is envisioning behavior which may truly be wrong for one person, such as an ex-pagan who should avoid idol-meat because it could lead to pagan activities and superstitions.
 - A modern parallel might be someone who avoids R-rated movies not because the Bible forbids them but because they might lead him or her to sin
- The freedom of the stronger believers risks causing the weaker to stumble (13) or worse (1 Cor 8:7, 12; Rom 14:13-20), even shipwrecking their faith (1 Tim 1:19) since they might do something which they feel is wrong (for them) and violates their consciences (1 Cor 8:10)
- Paul wants each side to follow their conscience and be convinced in their own minds they are doing right (14:5)
 - In the words of C. S. Lewis, “Disobedience to conscience makes conscience blind.”¹
 - “Paul wants Christians to heed their conscience when it comes to matters where there is freedom for Christians to behave differently as in the case of sacrificial foods, even when the conscience uses faulty norms. Paul’s intention is to preserve the ‘integrity’ of the person and avoid inner dissonance.” (DPL)
- This reading makes sense of “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (23): From Rom 4 we know faith is about following God’s plan, whatever it may be, so it’s about trust and obedience. If God is telling you not to do something which Scripture doesn’t otherwise forbid, you should trust and obey.

Additional verses and notes on conscience:

- “Conscience” translates *syneidesis* in the NT; the OT has no word for conscience (and *syneidesis* is virtually absent from the LXX; but cf. 1 Sam 24:5)
- It refers to our faculty to judge right and wrong in ourselves and others, and the pain we experience in sin
- C. is universal (Rom 2:15) but fallible (1 Cor 4:4; 8:7-12; 10:25-29)
- C. can be guided by the Holy Spirit (Rom 9:1-2) and can serve as a witness (Rom 9:1), if not a final authority
- Heb 9:9, 14: Jewish law observance, while commanded prior to Christ, was powerless to cleanse the c.
- Another’s c. cannot stand in judgment over your behavior in matters of *adiaphora* (1 Cor 10:29)

¹ Lewis adds, “Disobedience to conscience is voluntary; bad poetry, on the other hand, is usually not made on purpose.”

1. The church is full of divisions regarding *adiaphora*, disputable matters which are not specifically forbidden by Scripture. Paul articulates in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 the principle that the group not offended by an action should voluntarily accommodate the group which is, for the sake of unity. Stott suggests an action puts you in the “weaker” category if you can’t answer “yes” to, “Can I thank God for this?” and “Can I do this unto the Lord?” (cf. 14:6). Which of the following should be treated using Paul’s principle, and which is the “weaker” party? Who should voluntarily be limited and how?
 - a. Those who avoid R-rated movies, salty HBO series, etc. and those who don’t
 - b. Those who wish to treat the sanctuary as holy ground vs. those who don’t
 - c. Restriction of contraception insurance coverage in deference to an employer’s conscience
 - d. Women and men who wear modest dress vs. those with socially acceptable but more revealing dress
 - e. Muslims who wear a hijab head covering for modesty in the presence of males outside the family (Should we make an effort not to cause unbelievers to stumble or are they on their own?)
 - f. Those who support women in leadership and those who believe it violates Scriptural mandate
 - g. Those who, despite sympathy for the poor and immigrants, ultimately vote on the basis of concern for the unborn and SCOTUS nominations
 - h. Those who approve homosexual behavior and those who don’t
 - i. Those who are offended by too much humor in discussion of Scripture
 - j. Should a father who believes in “just war” practice pacifism for the sake of his Mennonite son?
 - k. Did Jesus choose male apostles so as not to offend the Jewish conscience?
 - l. Those who dress up for church and those who don’t
 - m. Those who are willing to work on Sundays and those who aren’t (perhaps even 7th-Day Adventists)
 - n. Those who subscribe to weekly corporate confession of sin and those who don’t
 - o. Speaking in tongues in small prayer meetings (i.e. not in contexts Paul forbids)
 - p. Infant baptism vs. age-of-accountability baptism
 - q. Vegetarians, vegans and omnivores
 - r. Alcohol at communion or church gatherings

≡Ω≡

Fun fact: The “kiss of peace” (16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Pet 5:14) was a distinctive feature of early church gatherings. In Roman culture same-gender kissing was a regular form of greeting, but Tertullian describes a wife being smooched by “any one of the brethren” (*To His Wife* 2:4). In time kissing even became liturgical. By the second century, though, the practice had to be restricted and abandoned since, as Clement of Alexandria complains, there were those who made “the churches resound” with kissing, so that “the shameless use of a kiss... occasions foul suspicions and evil reports” (*Instructor* 3:12) [Morris, 537].