

WEAKER CHRISTIANS AND INTERPERSONALISM

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Weaker brother situations come up with people who differ from us. Weaker brother matters deal with issues not wrong in themselves: eating shamble meat (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8), practicing vegetarianism, observing holidays (Romans 14:5), drinking wine (Romans 14:21). They are wrong depending on how we look at them and how we do them.

Weaker brothers are people whose viewpoint and feelings we cannot easily share on practical matters. They may be led into sin by seeing us indulge in what we do with a clear conscience. Their danger lies in following our example with a different meaning and motivation from ours. They do so because they cannot easily know our thoughts and motives.

Weaker-brother circumstances call on us to live with others in mind. We must choose our actions, not just follow our inclinations; we act in light of their conscience and feelings as well. The guiding principle in such cases is what edifies the other (1 Corinthians 8:1); we are to “*live in love*” (Romans 14:15; cp. 1 Peter 2:16-17). The situation requires us to concentrate on our own behavior rather than on their status before God. We do not criticize or condemn them; we accept them. Acceptance implies an attitude toward them, not their ideas, preferences, or impulses. Often it requires that we refrain from certain things in their presence. We refrain, not because we will succumb to what is a temptation for them, nor because we fear guilt by association or approval by presence. We refrain for their welfare.

Weaker brother relationships highlight truths applicable to all interpersonal relationships but particularly important here:

- (a) Motives and circumstances affect whether actions are right or wrong (Romans 14:14). We must remember that fact about our and other people’s actions.
- (b) Not all actions are matters of right or wrong. Their morality is relative to personal and interpersonal considerations, which can vary.
- (c) Responsibility for the weak lies with the strong.
- (d) Personal and social aspects cannot be separated in behavior (Galatians 6:1-5).
- (e) Horizontal and vertical cannot be separated in interpersonal behavior (Romans 14:7; Luke 15:18, 21).