

## **Romans 14 and The Tyranny of the Weaker Brother**

Romans 14 is often pointed to as support for the so-called doctrine of the tyranny of the weaker brother. What is meant by this doctrine is that the stronger is to give up his liberty in some matter of adiaphora in order not to offend the weaker brother, and thus cause that weaker brother to stumble.

There are a few pre-suppositions and definitions which are behind this doctrine, which need to be spelled out before we examine the text itself.

First, it is presumed that putting a stumbling block before a brother, or “causing another to stumble” refers to doing something which leads directly to any sin on the part of another. Thus doing something which makes another sinfully angry falls into the category of “causing another to stumble.” This view of the stumbling block will be refuted from the text in this essay.

Second, “offense” is presumed to be “take personal offense” as in “be offended” or “scandalized.” It is argued, then, that the offense spoken about in this text is the subjective feeling of being offended by the actions of another, as in “I was offended to see him drink alcohol.” This view of the offense will be refuted from the text in this essay.

Third, it is presumed that the large majority of Paul’s exhortations are directed towards the stronger brother. Particularly in those verses such as 14:15 and 14:21, the stronger brother is presumed to bear the brunt of Paul’s exhortation, and thus it is the stronger brother’s *duty* to refrain from the exercise of his liberty. Any refusal to do so is considered sin. This view of the direction of Paul’s exhortation will be refuted from the text in this essay.

Finally, a note on method. The method of this essay is quite straightforward. It is an exegesis of the text, with reference to the Greek as necessary. It is not necessary to read Greek in order to understand the essay. The Greek font used is the Bible Works Greek font “Bwgrkl.” The Hebrew font used is the Bible Works Hebrew font “Bwhebb.” Argument, flowing from individual texts, is interspersed in the exegesis, generally in the form of observation. The English text quoted is from the New King James version, unless indication is given otherwise.

On a positive note, I intend to show that Paul’s concern is to protect Christian liberty in both directions, liberty to partake and liberty to abstain. This protects the stronger brother from the tyranny of the weaker, and as well diligently warns the stronger brother not to ignore the weakness of the weaker brother and draw him into behavior that is contrary to his conscience.

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## Analysis of Romans 14

In chapters 12 and 13, the apostle Paul has begun his sections on the application of the doctrines of salvation that were taught in the previous 11 chapters. Chapter 12 touched on the call to be living sacrifices, the unity of the body, the heart of mercy which does not avenge, and the call to love one's enemies. Chapter 13 continued with instruction regarding submission to civil governors, and the principle of love as a fulfillment of the law. This principle echoes the words of Jesus as Jesus summarizes the law in Matthew 22:

Then one of them, a lawyer, asked *Him a question*, testing Him, and saying, "Teacher, which *is* the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is *the* first and great commandment. And *the* second *is* like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Love then, as conceived by Jesus and as explicated in Romans 13, (see especially Romans 13:9-10) is shown when one obeys the law of God in behavior towards another.

This is the contextual background of Romans 14.

Verse 1 *Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.*

The text is better translated by the ESV, which following the Greek word order, draws out the issue that Romans 14:1 is an application of the love principle described at the end of Romans 13 to a particular group – to those who are weak in the faith. "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions." The one who is weak in the faith is to be welcomed and received into the fellowship of the body, but is not to be a partaker in leadership or a disputer with others in questions of doctrine. The implication is that the weaker brother is unwelcome in such disputes – not from animus, but as an application of the principle of love.

Verse 2 *For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables.*

Verse 2 is introduced by a conjunction:  $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ . The construction  $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\dots\delta\grave{\epsilon}$ , as we find it here in verse 2 is a standard Greek construction that would be well translated "On the one hand"... "on the other hand." One the one hand some people think they may eat all things, but on the other hand others think that they ought not to eat meat. The ones who think that they ought not to eat meat are described as those who are weak, picking up on verse 1.

Verse 3 *Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.*

Two instructions are given, depending on which person is being addressed:

The one who is the stronger brother is not to despise the weaker. The Greek word for despise is the verb ἐξουθενέω. It means to look at them with contempt or look down on them. The idea is that the stronger brother, seeing another's weakness ought not use that as an opportunity for pride, and despising of the weaker, but instead remains humble himself.

The one who is the weaker brother is given a different instruction – he is not to pass judgment on the stronger brother. The danger is that the weaker brother, filled with false holiness will in his own heart and with his mouth, pass judgment on the stronger brother, who understands his liberty in Christ. See Colossians 2:20 ff:

Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations -- "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using -- according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

The warning then is to the weaker brother not to insist on his own standards – in this case not eating meat, as standards which must be obeyed by all.

The reason given is that God has received each brother. The “for” is probably distributive and refers to the fact that God has received both the weaker brother and the stronger brother – as opposed to be exclusively a reference to God having received the stronger brother. This reason is expanded in the next verse:

*4 Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.*

Specifically this command is addressed to the weaker brother – Paul repeats the command regarding judgment as the particular sin to be avoided. Generally, there is clearly application to all. If the weaker brother is particularly to avoid this sin, how much more the mature in Christ? The fundamental reason given is that each one is responsible not for to one another, but to God, and God will judge his actions, since God is his master.

Finally, Paul expresses his confidence that as he is a brother (verse 1), he will stand, and not fall, before God. God, having justified, also sanctifies and keeps secure those who are his own.

In verse 5 then, we get an example to which the principles of verses one through four are applied.

*Verse 5 One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.*

The example has to do with “esteeming one day above another.” Interestingly, Paul uses the verb κρίνω (“to judge” again), this time it is translated “esteem.” The idea is

that each one had been judging others – particularly the weaker brother had been judging the stronger brother. The contrast, however, is that each one is to come to his own judgment about his own behavior.

The oft asked question regarding the example is whether “one day” (simply ἡμέρα – anarticular “a day” in Greek) is about the sabbath-keeping of a one day in seven pattern, as it is often considered, or about the Old Testament feast days. The latter is more likely. See as a parallel Colossians 2:16, a text we have already considered and seen to be parallel in its ethical exhortation: “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.” Leviticus 23 refers to specific feast days as “sabbaths.” See for example Leviticus 23:32, where the day of Atonement, which is fixed to the monthly calendar, and is not a weekly sabbath is nevertheless called a “sabbath” (שַׁבָּת).

The specifics of what is meant by “one day” however, are not really salient to the immediate question before us. What is salient is that each person – both the weaker brother and the stronger brother should be fully convinced of his own opinion about his own liberty, so that his own conscience is guarded. “Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.”

Verse 6 expands on this exercise of liberty and conscience.

*Verse 6 He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.*

Each, fully convinced in his own mind, acts to glorify the Lord in his actions. Remember the context. This is something that the Bible gives liberty to do, against which the weaker brother’s conscience recoils. Again, the reasons for how persons are to treat one another when you disagree about ones own actions of Christian liberty follow. Please note that nothing so far has mentioned any actions other than one’s own.

*Verses 7 through 9: For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*

The fundamental reason that we should be circumspect regarding each other – neither despising nor judging the other’s actions – is that the other person is immediately answerable to God. Whatever way that either individual behaves, he lives not for or to himself, but for and to God.

Please note that there has been no mention here yet of any interaction between the two brothers, other than of watching what the other does. The interaction, so far, is only their attitudes towards each other, and the reactions that they have towards one another, things which Paul will deal with next.

Verse 10: *But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.*

Both brothers are addressed here, with verbs that repeat the verbs of verse 2.

First the weaker brother is addressed: Why, if your brother is exercising what he understands to be his liberty do you judge him? When Paul says “judge” him, he means make a specific judgment regarding the other’s behavior in his liberty – that his behavior is sin.

And then the stronger brother is addressed: Why do you pridefully look down on your weaker brother’s unwillingness to partake of a certain behavior – though you know it is within the bounds of Christian liberty?

Both will be judged – not by each other, but by Christ. It is Christ who is the true judge, not one another. Paul continues then to declare the Lordship of Christ the true judge.

Verse 11 *For it is written: "As I live, says the LORD, Every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall confess to God."*

Paul continues pressing his point home – since Christ is the judge, be concerned about your own behavior – whether you exercise liberty or not.

Verse 12 *So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.*

And Paul transitions to the application for our interaction towards each other, and the part of the text which is most germane to our discussion.

Verse 13 *Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.*

Paul uses and inferential conjunction ἄρα at the beginning of the verse. It not only conjoins verse 13 backwards, as all conjunctions do, but it also tells us that what is following is the inference to be drawn from what has preceded. It is often translated “thus,” as we might use “thus” in drawing our conclusion. The exhortation of verse 13 then is inferred from the exhortations and declarations that have preceded – centrally that each one stands before God in his exercise, or non-exercise of some aspect of his Christian liberty. That declaration that Christ is judge was given as the to the initial exhortations of verses 1 through 3.

Paul writes a command: “Let us not judge each other anymore.” Given the earlier example, we know that some who would not eat meat were “judging” (using the same Greek verb - κρίνω) those who felt free to eat meat. Paul says that this passing of judgment – calling someone else’s liberty sin – must not continue. One the contrary – using a fairly strong adversative (ἀλλὰ), instead of judging someone else’s liberty, have

this different attitude: Resolve not to put a stumbling block in the other's path, nor a "cause to fall." Interestingly Paul, having declared that we are not to "judge" each other anymore, repeats the verb κρίνω (to judge) in an imperative form, here translated "resolve." The point is that we are to abstain from judgmentalism, but we must make judgments – literally "but this we must judge better, not to..."

The term "stumbling block" (πρόσκομμα) occurs in only six verses in the New Testament. In three verses it is applied to Christ, who is a stumbling block or, as it can be translated, a cause for offense. This is the usage in Romans 9:32 and 33 and 1 Peter 2:8. Christ himself is that over which the Pharisees tripped, because they were offended at who he was – considering him to be a Samaritan and one born of fornication (see John 8:41, 8:48). They were also offended because he called them sinners. So Christ was a "stumbling block" to them.

The other three verses that use the term πρόσκομμα are found here, in verse 20, and in 1 Corinthians 8:9, a parallel text, where Paul treats the same subject. In this verse, it is those who judge (the weaker brothers) who are commanded to resolve not to put a stumbling block in the other's way.

In 1 Corinthians 8:7-10, the weaker brother is the one whose conscience is defiled by the meat offered to idols. πρόσκομμα is found in verse 9: "But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a *stumbling block* to those who are weak." In this context, Paul warns the stronger to be careful, lest the stronger, in the exercise of his liberty, place a stumbling block in the path of the weaker. The issue is clarified in the next verse: "For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols?"

The stumbling block is not the actions of the stronger brother, but the possibility that the weaker brother might be drawn into behavior that his conscience opposes. Not understanding that the meat is simply meat and that the idols are nothing, the weaker brother might be drawn himself into the temple. However, the weaker, through his weakness, would not just be eating, but eating with an idolatrous heart, believing the idols to have power and the meat offered to them to be special. Importantly, then, the πρόσκομμα is the enticement to follow in behavior, and not the action of liberty.

The final use of πρόσκομμα is in verse 20 of this text, which we will deal with fully when we get there. The conclusion from that text is, however, instructive here, and that is that the evil, or the wrong, is not the behavior of the one who eats from liberty, but the one who eats "with offense." That phrase, διὰ προσκόμματος, could well be translated "through offense" or "through the stumbling block." The idea is that the evil comes in the behavior of the weaker brother who does an action (eating the meat offered to idols) which is contrary to his own conscience.

What we see then from a survey of the rest New Testament is that the πρόσκομμα – the offense – is not the subjective response of the weaker brother to the actions of the stronger brother (the feeling of being offended) but is rather the *behavior* of the weaker

brother as he follows the stronger brother. The offense is doing things that his conscience binds him to think that he really ought not be doing.

In other verses, Christ himself is a πρόσκομμα, without any sin on his part. Obviously it is not sin to place Christ before unbelievers, even though they may well “be offended” by Christ, as were the Pharisees, and may even sin in anger and rebelliousness in their hearts. Christ is not responsible for the reactions of the Pharisees who are “offended” by Him. Rather the Pharisees are completely and entirely responsible for their own sin.

In this text then, we are to read πρόσκομμα in a way consonant with the rest of the New Testament usage. All of us, but particularly the weaker brother, the one prone to judge, are not to “set up” stumbling blocks or causes to offense with respect to his brother. Well, the question must be asked, how does a weaker brother “set up” a πρόσκομμα or a σκάνδαλον to his stronger brother? The answer is explicitly contrary to the way this verse is often misread. The weaker brother sets up stumbling blocks by seeking ways to be offended – by the tyranny of saying that my offense is to rule over your liberty.

In verse 13, σκάνδαλον (cause to fall) is used in a parallel manner to πρόσκομμα. σκάνδαλον is found more frequently in the New Testament, 15 times in 13 verses. The words which translate σκάνδαλον are written in italics.

Matthew 13:41: The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that *offend*, and those who practice lawlessness.

- Here σκάνδαλον is those persons or things that “offend” God because they are sinful.

Matthew 16:23 But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are *an offense* to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

- Here σκάνδαλον is Satanic sinfulness, as evidenced by Peter’s call to Jesus not follow Peter’s way of kingdom instead of God’s way.

Matthew 18:7 "Woe to the world because of *offenses*! For *offenses* must come, but woe to that man by whom the *offense* comes!

- Here σκάνδαλον is synonymous with the heart of sin – see especially Matthew 18:8: "If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast *it* from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. The σκάνδαλον is your own hand or the foot which “causes you to sin. We should be aware of the figure of speech involved. Hands do not formally “cause” sin, the heart does, and the heart is responsible.

Luke 17:1 Then He said to the disciples, "It is impossible that no *offenses* should come, but woe *to him* through whom they do come!

- This verse is parallel to Matthew 18:7, and σκάνδαλον is to be understood in a similar manner.

Romans 9:33 As it is written: "Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of *offense*, And whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame."

- Here Christ himself is the σκάνδαλον. The offense that is caused by Christ is not the fault of Christ, but the fault of the offended.

Romans 11:9 And David says: "Let their table become a snare and a trap, A *stumbling block* and a recompense to them.

- Here Paul refers to that which is good – the table spread before Israel, becoming a trap to their own sin, because of the hardness of their own hearts – see verse 10: "Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, and bow down their back always."

Romans 16:17 Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and *offenses*, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.

- This is referring to those who are enemies of the unity of the church. The offenses that they create are described as contrary to the doctrine learned – ie sin which is contrary to God's word.

Corinthians 1:23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews *a stumbling block* and to the Greeks foolishness,

- Here Christ is the σκάνδαλον, particularly to the Jews.

Galatians 5:11 And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the *offense* of the cross has ceased.

- Here the cross, shorthand for the gospel is the σκάνδαλον. The offense that is caused is entirely the fault of those who hear and reject the gospel, not the fault of the gospel nor the one who preaches it.

Peter 2:8 and "A stone of stumbling And a *rock of offense*." They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.

- Here again Christ is the σκάνδαλον.

John 2:10 He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is *no cause for stumbling* in him.

- Here σκάνδαλον, a noun, is translated rather awkwardly as "cause for stumbling." John uses σκάνδαλον parallel to hating one's brother – see verse 9, and being in darkness – see verse 11. Having a σκάνδαλον "in him" (ἐν αὐτῷ) is the opposite of loving one's brother. Love follows Christ's pattern – of laying down one's life for another (1 John 4:10,11). Further, given the context of 1 John 2, which is about the love of God being displayed through personal holiness (1 John 2:3, 2:5, 2:6), the idea is that the brother who loves another does not draw another into sin.

Revelation 2:14 "But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.

- The σκάνδαλον of Balak was to draw Israel into sin, not to partake of his Christian liberty. See Numbers 25 for how this “enticing to sin” happened.

What we see in this survey is that σκάνδαλον largely has to do with sin and not with adiaphora. The manner in which Christ himself “causes” to stumble is that he brings out the sin which is in the sinner’s hearts. The responsibility for that sin lies entirely within the sinner, and not at all within Christ, nor within the preacher of Christ.

What this does is force us to take a look at how we have normally understood Romans 14:13. The “standard view” is that Paul is addressing the stronger brother, and exhorting the stronger brother not to place in the path of the weaker a “cause for offense” – that is, a cause for the weaker brother to be offended in his feelings by an action of the stronger. Thus, the stronger brother ought to cease exercising his Christian liberty so that the weaker brother might not see those stronger brother’s actions, and have cause for turmoil within his own heart.

However, as we have seen, not only is the weaker brother the primary focus (being the one who judges) but neither σκάνδαλον nor πρόσκομμα can carry the weight of “things adiaphorous which cause another to be offended by your actions.” Rather σκάνδαλον and πρόσκομμα generally refer to the manner in which righteousness is called sin by the sinful. Thus the idea that the stronger should repent of the exercise of his liberty, because it “caused” the weaker to react with anger or otherwise “take offense” is completely absent from the text. Christ himself is a stumbling block, and he continually places himself before the Pharisees – with the very purpose that they might “take offense.” Yet Christ has nothing to repent of because of the sin of those who stumble over him. Their sin is entirely their own.

The question we must answer from the verse, is “Who is setting up the offense?” Who is making this offense “stand” (τίθημι)? In the immediate context it is actually the weaker brother. The weaker brother is being warned against setting up places for himself to be offended with respect to his brother (τῷ ἀδελφῷ - perhaps “by” his brother). Paul in other contexts warns the stronger brother, but here he warns the weaker brother.

This argument is shown to be so in the following verses, and especially verse 16, which does not fit the “standard reading” victimization pattern.

*Verse 14 I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.*

Paul here is laying the groundwork for liberty – uncleanness or sin is about the heart, not about things. The things themselves are not unclean, yet if someone considers something unclean, it is actually unclean *to him*. Others are not warned off the item, but he is, by his own conscience.

Verse 15 *Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.*

This verse cuts both ways – the stronger is not to despise the weaker because the weaker is not free to partake of the meat, the weaker is not to “judge” (in the fashion of judgmentalism) the stronger because the stronger does partake. Love allows both to partake according to their own conscience, and does not set up any offense within one’s own heart because of their exercise of liberty. This flows fundamentally from the premise that God is the true judge of all.

Do not then “destroy with food” – i.e. create division (by being offended) between yourself and the other and divide the church of God. For Christ died for him just as he died for you.

Verse 16 *Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil;*

Thus – again following from the previous argumentation – neither party is to allow that which is good – either the exercise of liberty or not, depending on the conscience, to be described as evil. This verse completely undoes the tyranny of the weaker brother. The weaker brother may not speak of the exercise of liberty of the stronger as sin. They are not contrary to God’s law, but are adiaphora. Neither may the stronger describe the weaker brother’s abstaining as sin. God does not require him to exercise all the liberty that is available to him.

Verse 17 *for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

Here Paul adds another reason to the major reason already described (that God is the judge of each man). It is that the kingdom of God is not about food (adiaphora), but about real holiness (according to God’s law) and about peace and joy within the body of Christ, and not about contention about things indifferent.

The tyranny of the weaker brother is really strongly rebuked here. Do not call another’s liberty sin, and do not create contention and offense between brothers over such things.

Verse 18 *For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men.*

Because – and here Paul again returns to the principle that each stands before God – the one who lives to Christ in either his partaking or abstaining is received by God and approved by men. Both positions are to be honored because they are done out of right motivation towards God – serving Christ – and are thus approved by men.

Verse 19 *Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.*

In verses 19 and following, Paul repeats his conclusion. This is what we ought to be doing – instead of focusing our attentions and energies on the ways that we can be offended by the behaviors of others in matters of adiaphora, we should accept the other's position and not declare their good evil, nor allow our good to be called evil by them.

*Verse 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense.*

Do not bring down the church because of adiaphora – do not take offense by another's liberty, do not take offense at another's abstention. Paul repeats the scope of the conversation – things indifferent, adiaphora – all things are indeed pure, but the one who eats “with offense” does indeed do something evil.

Just as in verse 13, Paul uses πρόσκομμα. The final clause is: ἀλλὰ κακὸν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ τῷ διὰ προσκόμματος ἐσθίουσι. Woodenly translated this would be “But [it is] evil to the man, to him who eats through the stumbling block.”

Paul is not saying that it is evil for the man who has liberty to eat, he is saying that it is evil for the man who is constrained not to eat, because he eats “through” *his own* stumbling block. He denies his own stumbling block and eats anyway, denying his conscience.

*Verse 21 It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.*

The previous verse described what was evil – eating contrary to your own conscience, this verse describes what in contrast is good. It is good to eat within the dictates of your own conscience. It is good to neither eat meat nor to drink wine (and don't let anyone say you are sinning by not drinking wine). The final clause of the verse is somewhat difficult to translate, and there are some textual issues as well.

The sentence is structured with two verbs – both infinitives – to eat, and to drink, but with three parts to the good – neither to eat, nor to drink, nor... It is this final clause which is difficult. The Nestle-Aland text has μηδὲ ἐν ᾧ ὁ ἀδελφός σου προσκόπτει. Rather woodenly this would be “nor in which your brother stumbles.” The ESV, using the Nestle-Aland text translates by adding an infinitive verb – “to do” and loosely translates ἐν ᾧ as “anything.” This preserves the three part structure, but diminishes the clarity of the relationship of the “good” of this verse and the “bad” of the previous verse.

The New King James, working from the textus receptus has a longer third clause, yet still lacks the expected third infinitive: μηδὲ ἐν ᾧ ὁ ἀδελφός σου προσκόπτει ἢ σκανδαλίζεται ἢ ἀσθενεῖ. Again rather woodenly – nor in which your brother stumbles or is caused to sin or is weak. The New King James also adds “do” as well as translates ἐν ᾧ as “anything.”

Usually a missing verb is the verb “to be”, it is unusual to fill with the verb to do. If it is the verb to be, then the third clause would be “[that it is good not] to be, that in which your brother stumbles, is caused to sin, or is weak.” Either text is unsatisfying, a fact which is evident from further textual readings.

The question here is whom is Paul addressing? Is he addressing the weaker brother and reminding him that what he does is good (in parallel to verse 20), or has he shifted the emphasis to say to the stronger brother that it is good for him *also* to abstain? As we have seen, the abstention of the stronger brother has not been the focus so far, rather Paul has been clear to say that each, eating or abstaining according to one’s own conscience, is equally good and right before God. He has also been clear that neither may call the other’s position or actions sin.

There is, however, also the context of love, from chapter 13. Paul will again turn his attention to love as he rounds out this discussion in the beginning of chapter 15. Before he does, however, he reminds us of the central matter, that this is between the individual and God.

*Verse 22 Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.*

Whatever position one holds on the eating of the meat, the key is that one’s heart is clear before the Lord in this matter. This matter is truly one of adiaphora. The joy is on one’s own behavior before God, and not in the concern about what the other one does.

*23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.*

However, if someone eats, contrary to his own conscience, then he is sinning against God. In matters of adiaphora, if for some reason – in this case concern about mingling with idols, if a man eats contrary to his conscience, he sins against God.

*Romans 15:1 We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*

Notice what the context is – verse 23 describes the *eating* by the weaker brother as sin, nothing else. What then is the “bearing with” that is called for? It is refraining from placing meat before the weaker brother, or leading them to the table to eat this meat. This is not an issue of the stronger brother giving up his liberty to himself eat, but is an issue of not drawing or leading the weaker to eat against his conscience. The stronger is tempted (because of his natural inclination to “despise” the position of the weaker) to press the weaker into partaking. But Paul warns the stronger – don’t seek to please yourself, and fulfill your desire to control the behavior of the other. You are free, but he is not, do not force him – by coercion or other means – to a liberty he does not yet have.

We should be reminded, however that one ought to grow up, as one matures in the faith, to a greater exercise of liberty. One should move from being a weaker brother to being a stronger.

2 Let each of us please *his* neighbor for *his* good, leading to edification.

Paul expands the scope from the previous verse. In the previous verse he addressed the strong explicitly, here he broadens it to “each of us.” This verse applies to both the weaker and the brother, in their respective positions.

In contrast, then, to desiring to please one’s self by having one’s own way be the behavior of all, we are to please our neighbor. This could be freely taking up the behavior of our neighbor – not under compunction, but freely from love. Or this could be encouraging our neighbors in their own walk with the Lord, and thus encouraging them to walk well before God in whatever their position is – whether they are free to eat or not. This leads to our neighbor’s “edification” - οἰκοδομή. οἰκοδομή is perhaps better translated “building up”, or “strengthening.” Our neighbor is to be built up in his faith and love by our actions rather than torn down by accusations of sin (in the judging of the weak) or of foolishness (in the despising of the strong).

*3 For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me."*

Earlier Paul had given as a foundational argument that we each stand before Christ who is the true judge. Here he expands the argument – as Christ is the true judge we are not only to allow the other to stand before Him, and not us, but we are to also clothe ourselves in the humility of Christ. note again that this is not a call to give up liberties so that others are not offended. Christ in his exercise of his Sabbath liberty, whether in healing or simply in eating the grain, did not deny his own liberty for the sake of keeping the Pharisees from sinning in their anger towards him.

Rather this is a call to the humility of Christ who sought what was truly best for others. Christ did so by taking the reproaches (or anger) of those who reproach God on himself. This text is quoted from Psalm 69, where the context is quite clear – the “you” is God. Christ suffered under the reproach of those who hate God – and so are we to do the same. Our attitude towards those who either exercise their liberty, or who do not may cause us to come under the scorn or reproach of the world – so be it.

The chapter continues with the reminder that what is really important here is the unity of the body (verse 6), and the place of the Gentiles as equal brothers in the church (continuing in the chapter). This concludes the commentary section of this paper.

## Conclusions

Having worked our way through the text itself, we have seen a number of things:

First, the issue is clearly how we deal with differences which are adiaphora. If the Bible speaks clearly to an issue, it is not one of adiaphora, but is then one of obedience or disobedience to God's law. It would thus be outside the scope of this text.

Second, this text does not support the contention that the stronger brother is primarily the focus, and is to give up his liberty in order not to offend the weaker brother's sensibilities. Rather both the stronger and weaker brother are addressed in the text, and both are warned that they are not to insist that their view is to be pressed on all in the church. Each one stands before God individually, and Christ is judge of each individually.

Third, the issue of the "stumbling block" is not whether a brother is subjectively "offended," or "caused to sin" in any way whatsoever, but is instead the narrow one of whether a brother is pressed or drawn into the specific disputed behavior. Thus either side can "offend" by insisting that their view *must* be normative.

Fourth, not only are you to give liberty to your brother to either partake or not partake, but you are to support him in his decision. This means that you may not call his position sin, and you may neither judge him nor despise him for his position.

Finally, we need to distinguish carefully between that which a brother *may* do, and that which he *must* do. A brother, whether weaker or stronger *may*, from his own love, abandon his behavior – whether eating or not eating, in order to display unity with his brother. However, neither brother may put a compunction on the other, saying that the other *must* change his behavior to conform to his behavior. This is equally true for the weaker and the stronger.