

A “Romans 14” Issue?

Some stumbling blocks are necessary. Some teachings are *required* for coming to the Father. In other words, they are “non-negotiable.” On those topics, we simply cannot yield, regardless of how many people do not agree with us. For example, faith in Jesus as the Christ is an essential belief, even though it *is precisely a stumbling block* for many! (Romans 10:9, 16; 1 Peter 2:5-8) This is a case of God establishing a foundation and people stumbling over the cornerstone. Similarly, the New Testament pattern for how to collectively work as a church and worship God is foundational. We must agree in order to have fellowship with God and with each other. But not every Bible topic is one on which we must be in perfect agreement.

The Romans 14 issues A question of liberty Personal and optional Other examples
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A question of liberty. In order for something to be optional, we have to *have liberty* to practice it in the first place. In other words, we must first have the *authority/permission* to do it. **If I cannot show that a practice is authorized, I have no liberty in the matter!** To use an *illustration*, I cannot let something go that was never in my hand in the first place. To give an *example*, I do not have the liberty to start waving incense in church as worship to God. *Why?* Because there’s no authority for that in the first place. *God has told us* what He wants in worship; we have no liberty to add to His word.

The Romans 14 issues. The main question under discussion in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 was whether or not a Christian could eat meat that had been cooked in sacrifice to an idol. Some thought that eating such meat was equivalent to participating in idolatry; others just looked at the meat like it was good food. The issue was actually *clear* from the standpoint of biblical teaching. Paul writes,

“I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself ... All things indeed *are pure*” (Rom. 14:14, 20).

“Concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one” (1 Cor. 8:4).

Other important teachings come from Romans 14 and its companion passages, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; 10:23-33. Here are a few:

- Eating that meat *inside the idol’s temple* (1 Cor. 8:10) was going too far, and Paul warned them to “flee idolatry” and not “have fellowship with demons” (1 Cor. 10:14, 20; see verses 14-22).
- “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies,” so I need to be careful how I exercise my knowledge and must seek to build up people.
- I must not judge or think less of someone who disagrees with me.
- I am limited by my conscience. While my conscience is not the standard for truth, I must live according to my conscience and not go against it.
- My activities are limited by the conscience of my brother.
- I can forego some activities that are allowed by God.
- I must not put a stumbling block in a brother’s path.
- I must seek not to be a personal stumbling block in the way of those who are outside Christ.
- I can sin against Christ by using my liberties in the wrong way.

On the question of the meat itself, the *fact* was that there was nothing wrong with it, and it was permissible to eat it. However, people had different understandings of the topic when Paul wrote, and some had a conscientious objection to eating such meat.

“*There is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled*” (1 Cor. 8:7).

“To him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean” (Romans 14:14).

In the final analysis, Paul left the matter of eating or not eating that meat up to the individual Christians. Even though he wrote the truth on the topic, he did not demand unanimity of practice. He could *forego* eating those meats himself in deference to the conscience of another person (even though Paul “knew” better). And that is the essence of what may be called “a Romans 14 issue”: **I can choose to practice it, or I can let it go.** I have the freedom (“liberty”) to “take it or leave it.”

We have seen that some topics are required (foundational), while others are matters of liberty. Exactly *what* makes a topic a matter of liberty? What makes something a “Romans 14” issue? Let’s explore the criteria.

Personal and optional. The question about eating that sacrificial meat had to do with *personal actions* that were, by their very nature, *optional*. Paul explained,

“Food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse.” (1 Cor. 8:8)

“The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.” (Romans 14:17-20)

Because eating those meats was optional and could be practiced on an individual basis without involving the whole group, it was a matter of *liberty* (“**this liberty of yours,**” 1 Cor. 8:9). This was *not* a question having to do with salvation or how to worship and work together.

Notice that some of our key verses come from 1 Corinthians chapters 8 and 10. The intervening chapter, *chapter 9*, is an extended discussion of *personal liberties* that Paul *chose not to exercise* (e.g., taking along a believing wife and being fully supported for preaching) and of some of the reasons for his decisions.

Other “Romans 14” issues. In modern times, idolatry is still very much an issue in certain places, and Christians are sometimes invited to share in meals with idolaters. Depending on where you live, you may face other issues as well. A couple of examples include Christmas trees and head coverings.

Some Christians see a **Christmas tree** as purely secular, with elves and reindeer and gifts. However, others view it (and many of the associated practices) as being equivalent to idolatry, similar to how some (the “weak in the faith” in Romans 14) objected to eating meat on the basis of conscience. So my decision to put up a Christmas tree or not may hinge on my brother’s conscience.

Some Christian women understand the use of a **fabric head covering** to be required when they worship. Biblical doctrine from 1 Cor. 11 will not be the only (or the driving) factor in deciding this question. As long as it’s a personal action that does not affect our ability to worship together, we must not press for a common understanding and cause someone to go against her conscience. (That goes for people on both sides of the question.)

In summary, Romans 14 does not deal with *all* matters of opinion, or with all matters we disagree on, or with all the topics on which we are unsure. But we have a lengthy example that helps us know how to approach these kinds of topics.

We can choose to practice something or let it go only if

- 1) it’s a *personal* activity that will not affect our worship together, and
- 2) if it is *authorized* but *optional*.