

Matters of Conscience

1) What should I do when I believe a certain activity or practice is permissible (“lawful”) and other Christians don’t?

- A) First, you should study the Scriptures and verify that the given activity is in harmony with God’s Word. If it’s not, you should stop doing it, ask God to forgive you, and express gratitude to those who warned you (1 John 2:1; 1 Pet 4:8; Jam 5:19–20).
- (1) Some activities are *directly* prohibited by Scripture. For example, the practice of homosexuality is clearly forbidden (cf. 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10). The same goes for fornication, adultery, slander, drunkenness, murder, and many other such practices (cf. Gal 5:19–21; Rom 1:18–32).
 - (2) Some activities are *indirectly* prohibited by Scripture. For example, consider the practice of taking Meth or LSD. Although Scripture doesn’t explicitly prohibit you from taking such drugs, it does prohibit you by *necessary inference*: you must obey the law (1 Pet 2:13–17), you must live above reproach (Rom 14:16), and you must be a good steward of your body (1 Cor 6:19–20).
 - (3) Some activities are permitted by Scripture, yet *may still bad for you or for others*. It’s not enough to simply determine whether something is permissible. There are other issues to consider:
 - (a) Paul said, “All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are helpful” (1 Cor 6:12a). This means you should evaluate whether a given activity is beneficial to yourself and others. Ask yourself: Does this activity help me to run my race with endurance? (cf. Heb 12:1); Does it contribute in some way to being a disciple of Jesus Christ? (cf. 1 Tim 4:8); Does it uplift or encourage? (cf. Prov 17:22).
 - (b) Paul said, “All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be dominated by anything” (1 Cor 6:12b). This means you should determine whether a given activity has a controlling or mastering influence over you. The activity may be good in-and-of-itself, but if it starts to dominate your life or interfere with your priorities, you shouldn’t do it.
 - (c) Paul said, “All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up” (1 Cor 10:23b). This means you should consider whether a given activity is edifying to yourself and others. Loving others is about more than simply not harming them. Love also seeks their highest good and does all it can to edify and build them up in the faith. A certain activity may be good in-and-of-itself, but if it doesn’t “build up,” you would do well to reevaluate it.
- B) Second, you should discern whether those who disagree with you are “weak” in the faith (Rom 14:1). A fellow believer is said to be “weak” if they *would be influenced by your liberty to violate their conscience and do something they believe to be wrong* (1 Cor 8:10; cf. Rom 14:20–22). This is an important factor to consider because a fellow believer may believe that what you’re doing is wrong, and yet not be influenced to violate their conscience. If you can both agree to disagree on the matter, then unity

has been preserved and nothing more needs to be done (other than being gracious and sensitive to the person who believes the practice to be wrong).

- (1) How can you tell whether a fellow believer is “weak”? Here are some questions you could ask them: Does your conscience bother you when you do this? Do you have any doubts about doing this? Do you feel pressured or influenced to do this when you see others doing it? If they assure you that there’s no cause for concern, then you can feel free to exercise your liberty. However, if you discern that they are “weak,” then you should take the initiative to limit your liberty (Rom 15:1–2).
 - (2) What about the contentious? There are always some who are easily offended and want to argue endlessly about various matters. Such people are far from being classified as “weak,” for they have no intention of being influenced by anyone else’s opinion or liberty. Rather, they are what Paul called “divisive.” You are to admonish such people, and if they persist, you should avoid them (Tit 3:9–10).
 - (3) Should I be worried about “offending” other believers? Unfortunately, the KJV’s translation of 1 Corinthians 8:13 has been misunderstood by many modern English readers: “Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.” The word translated “to offend,” in context, does not mean “to cause dislike, anger, or vexation.” Rather, it means “to cause to fall into sin.” While believers should try to avoid angering or vexing one another (Rom 12:18), Paul’s point in this verse is that you *should avoid doing things that will cause other believers to violate their conscience.*
 - (4) What about those who have a very sensitive conscience? There’s a sense in which it’s good to have a sensitive conscience, that is, a conscience which is keenly aware of the difference between right and wrong (Heb 5:14). However, some Christians have all kinds of doubts and they struggle to feel like they can do anything “in faith.” Most of this is what I call “emotional doubt,” that is, they are not struggling with doubts about what God’s Word says, but rather with anxious and troubled feelings. In such cases, we should be careful not to “steamroll” over their doubts. If they continue to feel convicted about something, don’t push. Limit your liberty for their benefit (Rom 15:1–2).¹
- C) Third, if the Christian who believes that what you’re doing is wrong qualifies as a “weak” brother, then you have an obligation to limit your liberty out of love and concern for his soul (Rom 14:15–16; 1 Cor 8:13). If you encourage him to follow your example and he violates his conscience, then you have sinned against him and against Christ (1 Cor 8:10–12). This is so serious that Paul said, “If anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?” (1 Cor 8:10). This means that *even*

¹ Here are some suggestions for those struggle with a hyper-sensitive conscience: (1) Recognize the weakness of your conscience. (2) Immerse yourself in Scripture, (3) Cultivate your relationship with God, (4) Pray for God to strengthen your faith, (5) Be patient—God doesn’t adjust our consciences overnight, and (6) Keep your conscience clear during steps 1–5. Don’t do anything you have doubts about, unless it is something God’s Word commands you to do.

the possibility of causing a “weak” brother to violate his conscience should be avoided. The burden is on the “strong” to look out for and take care of the “weak” (Rom 15:1-2).

- (1) Should I be constantly worried that someone may see me doing some activity and be led into sin? You should *always* be concerned about how your life affects those around you. This is what it means to love others. Furthermore, if a certain activity has caused believers in your community to violate their conscience, you should definitely limit your liberty and seek to build them up in the faith. That being said, you are not called to be in bondage to every conceivable way in which someone might stumble. Follow the leadership of the Spirit and enjoy your liberty in Christ! Just make sure that you remain concerned for and protective of the weak.

- (2) Isn't it hypocritical and deceptive to limit my liberty around the weak? Won't I be leading them to believe that I think the activity in question is wrong? Not at all. The Holy Spirit never intended for you to deceive the weak. *You should be open and honest with them about the fact that you don't believe the given activity is wrong.* However, you should also tell them that you would never do anything to cause them to violate their conscience, and that you are limiting your liberty for their sake. In this way, you communicate your love for them while at the same time affirming your own view of the issue. This is the example Paul left us, for he said quite openly, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings” (1 Cor 9:19-23).²

- D) Fourth, you must not despise or disdain your “weak” brother (Rom 14:3). Instead, you should “welcome him” and not quarrel with him over his beliefs (Rom 14:1). If, at some future time, he wants to discuss the matter, you should do so in a spirit of gentleness and humility. You must be careful *not to force or coerce him into agreeing with you.* As Paul said, “Let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Rom 14:19).

² Moo's comments on Romans 14:22 are helpful: “Paul is not, then, telling the ‘strong’ Christian to be quiet about his or her faith in Christ—a plea that would be quite out of place in the NT! Nor is he necessarily requiring ‘strong’ believers never to mention their views on these matters or to speak of their sense of freedom before others. As the context suggests, the silence that Paul requires is related to the need to avoid putting a stumbling block in the way of the ‘weak.’ This will mean that the ‘strong’ are not to brag about their convictions before the ‘weak’ and, especially, that they are not to propagandize the ‘weak’” (Moo, *Romans NICNT*, p. 861).

2) What should I do when I believe a certain activity or practice is prohibited (“unlawful”) and other Christians don’t?

- A) First, you should study the Scriptures and verify that the given activity is truly prohibited. If it’s not, you should classify the activity as a matter of conscience and accept that it may be done in good conscience by other Christians.
- (1) If it’s *explicitly* forbidden (e.g., incest), you should stand firmly against it. If other Christians are practicing it, you should confront them with the truth (cf. 1 Cor 5:1–5). If this takes place in a church setting, the leadership has a responsibility to exercise authority in the matter, up to and including excommunication (1 Cor 5:13; Matt 18:15–17).
 - (2) If it’s *indirectly* prohibited (e.g., smoking), you should be prepared to show how Scripture prohibits the practice *by necessary inference* (cf. 1 Cor 6:19–20). Be patient in such matters, since some may struggle to see the inference. If the issue turns into a dispute, seek guidance from your pastor and ask him to help settle the matter.
- B) Second, once you have determined that Scripture does not explicitly or implicitly address the issue, *you should not pass judgment on those who practice the activity in question*. When discussing the issue of whether it was lawful to eat meat, Paul said, “Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God” (Rom 14:3–4, 6b). This means there are certain activities which some believers can practice in good conscience, while others cannot. You should be gracious and accommodating in such matters.
- C) Third, though you now realize that the given activity is a matter of conscience, you should *not* be quick to begin practicing it, *even if other believers you have confidence in are doing it*. Rather, you should give careful consideration to the following questions:
- (1) Is this a personal conviction? A personal conviction is the Spirit-led certainty that you should or should not practice a given matter of conscience. In such cases, it’s very simple—if your conscience convicts you, don’t do it. If you ignore your conscience and do it anyway, you commit sin and defile your conscience (1 Cor 8:7–12; cf. Rom 2:14–15).
 - (a) Recognize that personal convictions *apply only to yourself*. This is important because many have mistakenly tried to force their personal convictions on others.
 - (b) If possible (you will have to evaluate this yourself), allow other believers to practice the activity, even in your presence. For example, you may be a teetotaler, while another Christian may enjoy a glass of wine. If you can be around them without being led to violate your conscience, then fellowship

together in love and unity. As the saying goes, “In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty; in all things, love.”

- (2) Can I do this in faith? Paul said, “For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). If there is doubt in your mind over whether or not you should do a certain activity, then you shouldn’t do it (“when in doubt, don’t”). If you ignore your doubts and do it anyway, you commit sin.
- D) Fourth, you should be soaking yourself in God’s Word. This is, of course, something we should all be doing, but it’s especially important for those who have doubts and struggle with keeping a clear conscience. The more you know and understand the truth, the more your mind will become transformed (Rom 12:1–2). Paul prayed for the Colossians saying, “We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:9–10). Make this prayer your own, and ask God to help you grow in grace and in the knowledge of His will.