

The Concept of the Weak Brother in the New Testament and in the Church Today

[North Atlantic South Pastoral Conference, October 23, 1991]

by: *Glen L. Thompson*

In the daily life of the church one hears frequent references to the “weak brethren” in our midst. We are constantly hearing the admonition not to offend a “weaker brother,” or that we must make allowances for him. Whether the discussion is about Christian sanctification, liturgical practices or even doctrine, there is a good chance that not only will there be the mandatory appeal to “do things decently and in order,” but also to think of “the weak brother.”

But who is this “weak brother?” In what way is he weak? And if he is weak, is our primary duty to make allowance for him or rather to strengthen him. Does there come a time when he ceases to be a weak brother and becomes an errorist? Does there come a time when a brother should be admonished for still being weak and not growing strong in the faith?

These are the questions that we will address in this paper. Surprisingly little has been written on this subject; the most extensive treatment I have found ran less than six pages. My approach will be to first take an exegetical look at the biblical concept of the weak brother as found in two longer passages of the Apostle Paul. Then we will try to list the various categories of weak brothers as the church has developed the concept, especially in our own Lutheran circles. As we do so, we will attempt to make some more practical applications to congregational life today.

I. 1 Corinthians 8

The Corinthian congregation had been ripped apart by opposing factions, each claiming to have the true teaching of Christianity. As often is the case this led to Christians giving labels to each other. Some claimed to be “strong” Christians, and labeled their opponents as “weak.” In Chapter 8, Paul takes up the matter that had led to this division, defines what this kind of “weakness” is in some detail, and speaks of the appropriate response to it by the “strong” Christian. The following is a slightly expanded translation with exegetical comments on the points germane to our subject.

1. Concerning the things sacrificed to cultic images. We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes a person proud, but love edifies a person. 2 If anyone thinks he knows something, he doesn't yet know what he needs to know. 3 But if anyone loves God, he is also known by Him.

The first phrase is a thematic title for our chapter. Paul then proceeds to underscore the real point at issue: Is the basis for Christian conduct knowledge or love? Knowledge can be deceptive. In fact, true knowledge includes knowing how little one actually knows. If one thinks of himself as a know-it-all, this is a false assessment that will cause pride and lead one to improper conduct. However, Christian love (*αγαπη*) will lead to edification, not pride. A Christian motivated by the love of Christ will seek to advance his own knowledge and be a blessing to his brother.

4Therefore, as for food sacrificed to cultic images, we know that no cultic image exists in the cosmos, and that no god exists except the One. 5 For even if they are called “gods” (whether

they are supposed to be in heaven or on earth—for many are called “gods” and many “lords”), for us there is still only one God the Father, from whom all things exist and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things exist, and we also exist through Him.

Having established his opening premise, Paul repeats the subject to which he is going to apply that premise, the situation of food (more specifically meat) which was sacrificed to pagan gods. Paul addresses himself to the “strong” and includes himself with them. We know that these images are just that, pieces of wood and stone. The gods they represent are imaginary (ειδωλον, meaning “ghost” or “phantasm” in classical Greek, was also used of an image reflected in water, etc.; Paul, following the LXX, uses it to denote the statue or image of a false god). They do not in reality exist anywhere in the cosmos. There is only one true God, Jehovah, the Creator of all things and the Preserver of all. And Jesus our Lord is the Son of the Father, a member of that same Triune God. We know that this is the only God in existence.

*7 But such knowledge is not in all people. For until now certain people, according to pagan custom, ate such food as if it were sacrificed to a pagan god, and so the **weak** consciences of such people became stained.*

But though we know and understand this, not everyone is so sure. People who have recently converted from paganism feel differently. They remember the hellish bondage of pagan religion. They see such religions and their sacrifices as tools of the devil. When they see meat on their plates which had been offered first to idols, they have a hard time asking Jesus to bless that food. They think it is much better to avoid it altogether. In fact, they feel so strongly about this that if they do eat such food, it deeply troubles their consciences. They feel that in doing so, they are not living their lives totally to the true God as they promised to do in their baptismal vows.

*8 For food will not affect our standing with God; if we don't eat we are not missing out, and if we do eat we are no further ahead. 9 But watch out, lest this “right” of yours become a stumbling-block for the **weak people**. 10 For if anyone sees you, Mr. Knowledge, feasting in a pagan temple precinct, will not his **weak** conscience be “edified” to eat food sacrificed to cultic images? 11 Thus by your knowledge a **weak person** is destroyed, a **brother** for whom Christ died. 12 And thus when sinning against the **brothers** and harming their **weak** consciences, you are sinning against Christ.*

The fact is that eating certain foods or not eating certain foods does not affect our standing with God at all. In that sense, we could all be vegetarian tee-totalers or taste-testers at gourmet restaurants without being viewed any differently by God. Yet this knowledge (remember vv.1-3?) that we have a freedom of choice in such matters is only our Christian right as long as we use it in love. If by using it we cause a less knowledgeable Christian to sin, then we have sinned (v.12). If such a “weak” person were to see you, a Christian scholar and long-time pillar of the church, taking part in a barbecue at a local pagan shrine, his conscience would be pushed towards doing likewise. Thus you with your “know-it-all” Christian freedom might lead a brother into acting against his own conscience, an act that might lead to destruction. Such action is unloving and un-Christian; it is a sin against your brother and against Christ.

*13 Therefore, if food causes my **brother** to sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my **brother** to sin.*

Therefore, if there is any question at all in our Christian circles about anything being improper for a Christian to eat or drink, I would rather remove such things permanently from my diet than take a chance on offending a fellow Christian.

Exegetically, the most troubling point comes in verse 10. Up to this point, the exhortation seems to center around the eating of meat offered to idols in a non-religious setting. It is usually assumed that the meat market in Corinth and elsewhere was often filled with meat bought from local temples (left over from sacrificial ceremonies and feasts) and then resold to the general public. Thus the only question is whether having been part of such a ceremony in some way taints the meat. Paul's reasoning is that since these pagan gods don't exist anyway, there is no problem. The meat can be bought and eaten if so desired.

However, in verse 10, Paul seems to complicate the matter by adding physical participation of the "strong" Christian in the post-ceremony banquet at the pagan temple. In the typical Graeco-Roman religious offering, an animal brought for sacrifice would have only its entrails and perhaps a small part of the meat burnt for the god. A small amount of the rest was given to the priest or temple staff. The rest was taken by the person who had initiated the ceremony and he would use it to throw a big party for his friends. This was often done right in the temple precinct where *triclinia* were available for this purpose. Often the god of the precinct was thought of as one of this meal's participants.

Thus a Christian who was invited to such a feast, might react in several ways. He might simply say that even being seen in the pagan temple precinct would be a poor witness. He might decide to attend the feast as long as he could skip the sacrificial ceremony. He might, in fact, think that this was a good opportunity to witness to his pagan neighbors and show his attitude that the pagan god was purely imaginary and hence he could enter the precinct without compromising himself. However, since the natural way to begin such a feast was with a libation to the gods, the matter was far from simple. In any case, when St. Paul gives such a scene as the scenario for verse 10, the question no longer seems to be simply one of eating meat offered to idols but instead becomes a much wider issue of Christian witness and conduct.

Perhaps the meaning is this: The weak man cannot yet be certain in his own heart that eating meat offered to idols is proper. It reminds him of the old pagan parties in the temple. If he were to see a respected fellow-Christian taking part in such temple orgies, he would conclude that the partition between Christianity and paganism was not as complete as he had thought. He would be led into a syncretistic view of Christianity that would certainly destroy his faith in Jesus as the only way of salvation. So even if you *could* justify taking part in such a feast, Christian love would lead you not to.

Who is the "weak brother" in this passage? He is a fellow Christian who has a conscience that is weak, i.e. still affected by his pagan background. This weakness is also due, at least in part, to a deficiency in Christian knowledge (v.7). Besides the friction that the weak cause among the strong, the main danger seen by Paul is that the weak might fall from faith by seeing the strong eating in pagan temples (vv.10-11). Therefore the strong are specifically warned not to be proud but rather loving toward the weak (v.1), and they are warned not to use their "rights" (i.e. Christian freedom to eat all types of food) if there is any chance that this might cause a weak brother to sin (vv.8-9, 13). In summary, love, not merely knowledge, must be the basis for Christian action.

Let us note several facts. First of all this section of Paul's letter is *formally* addressed to the "strong." This is because the other side's weakness stems from their cultural past, i.e. their inability to treat pagan ceremonies as dogs howling at the moon. This weakness must be

outgrown through a steady diet of scriptural meat and cannot take place overnight. The “strong,” on the other hand have the scriptural background necessary to not only see the futility of all pagan practices but also to adjust their lifestyles so that the “weak” will be properly nurtured toward maturity. At the same time, this chapter is in itself meat for the weak. Vv.4 ff. are meant to *instruct* the weak and help them overcome their deficiency in knowledge.

Secondly, note that Paul is using this situation to answer a question: What is the proper basis and foundation for Christian behavior? In the first half of the chapter Paul tears down the argument of the “strong” that it is knowledge. In the second half Paul shows that all Christian action must have love of God and concern for one’s brother as its basis.

Thirdly, notice that the *σκάνδολον* spoken of in this chapter is not “offense” as we often use the term. It has nothing to do with personality clashes, differences of opinion, or hurt feelings due to differing views of adiaphora. The word here denotes conduct that another person is being urged to emulate to his/her spiritual harm.

Fourthly, even though not specifically stated, it appears to me that the “weak” are made up of “new” Christians. Their former life of paganism is still fresh in their memory. They are weak because they have not had time to be built up and to mature. Not all new Christians may have remained among the “weak,” but there is no evidence in this chapter that long-time Christians were among the “weak.”

II. Romans 14

Let us now look at a somewhat similar passage in Romans. Here we will look only at select verses. Though commentators are not agreed on the exact background of this section, it appears that the “weak brothers” Paul is here concerned with are from both Jewish and pagan backgrounds.

*1. Accept the **person who is weak** in his Christian confidence, but not in order to dispute debatable things. For while one person believes he can eat all things, the **weak person** is a vegetarian. The meat-eater must not despise the vegetarian, and the vegetarian must not criticize the meat-eater, for God has accepted him. 4 Who are you to criticize someone else’s servant? He must stand or fall before his own master. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.*

V.1 assures us that the weak person here discussed is a Christian, though his confidence is weak. Luther seems to have missed this point in his early *Lectures on Romans* (summer, 1516). He says that the weak in this passage “are not yet in a state of salvation, yet are on the way and thus should be cherished and cultivated.” Or, again, “For even though a weak faith is not sufficient for salvation, as is evident in the epistle to the Galatians, yet such people are to be welcomed in the meantime, so that they may be strengthened and not allowed to remain in their weakness, as those do who are disdainful of them and are concerned only about their own salvation.”¹ Melancthon, in the *Loci*, however, more accurately sees the weak as men who have “embraced the Gospel, but still have some doubts concerning rites.”²

Paul tells the other Christians at Rome (he doesn’t refer to them as “strong” in this chapter) to accept as brothers those who are “weak in confidence.” Their weakness is not a weakness in “faith,” i.e. a weakness in believing Jesus to be their Savior, or a weakness in believing that God will preserve them from all dangers. The weakness comes in their confidence

¹ *Luther’s Works* vol. 25, pp. 485 and 492.

² P. Melancthon, *Loci Praecipui Theologici* (1559 ed., repr. Berlin, 1856), p. 181.

in matters of sanctification. They are *unsure* at times if their Christian faith allows them to eat certain foods (vv.22-23). Such people are to be welcomed into the congregation as brothers, not welcomed merely in order to set them straight on matters of adiaphora at the next spaghetti supper. Μὴ εἰς διακρίσεις διαλογισμῶν refers here to adiaphora: “not for the distinguishing/separating of debates/arguments.”

In matters such as eating meat or being vegetarian (note this does not seem to be even normal Jewish religious conduct), neither side should criticize the other. Both are serving God and God will judge both. In this case, God will not choose one above the other, or convert the “weaker” to a “stronger” position. Both can stand before God, for the Lord Jesus, through his work, has settled the important matters of sin and righteousness.

5 For example one man considers one day more (religiously) important than another, but another man considers all days to be equal. Let each man be certain in his own mind. The man who considers a certain day important, let him consider it so for the Lord; and the man who eats meat, let him eat it for the Lord and give thanks to God for it. And let the vegetarian refrain from meat for the Lord and let him also give thanks to God. 7For none of us lives for himself and none of us dies for himself...

What is important in such matters as food and religious celebrations is not so much *what* is done, but *why* and *how* it is done. Let people disagree on the religious importance of certain days. Let them disagree on eating meat or vegetables. But let them all act in accordance with their own consciences, and let them all act out of love and thanksgiving toward God. After all, He is to be the object of all our thoughts and actions.

*10 So why do you judge your **brother**? Or why do you look down on your **brother**? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.*

In these matters, take care of yourself. Don't go worrying about and judging the actions of others. People who are your brothers in the faith, who are united in doctrine with you, must not be judged on points of adiaphora. Each one will have the chance to explain his position on them before God himself.

*13 Therefore we should no longer condemn one another. But instead decide on this: not to place a stumbling block or a death-trap in front of a **brother**. 14 I know and I am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is ungodly in and of itself, but only when a person considers something to be ungodly does it in that way become ungodly.*

Don't spend your energy in convincing a brother that his position on a point of adiaphora is wrong and yours is right. Instead use your time ensuring that nothing you do will contribute to the loss of a brother. Don't do anything that might cause him to trip up, or even worse, to fall from faith. There is no right and wrong when it comes to days of worship or foods to eat. But something becomes wrong when a person acts in a way that violates his conscience.

*15 For if your **brother** is distressed on account of your food, you are no longer living in love. Do not destroy with your food a being for whom Christ died. 16Therefore do not let your good things be spoken evil of*

Remember that love is the basis for all Christian conduct. If you in any way trouble a fellow Christian over a matter of adiaphora, then you have not acted in love. Can you be so self-centered and unloving as to allow a fellow Christian to end in hell just to win an argument

about food! So don't let what you know to be right end up being something evil. V.16 might also be a brief recapitulation of the opposing problem (the vegetarian saying it is sinful to eat meat), but I take it as a continuation of the thought in verse 14b.

*19 Therefore, then, let us pursue the things that lead to peace and that build up one another. 20 Don't tear down the work of God through your food. All food is acceptable, yet it is an evil thing for the man who eats it when it is a stumbling-block. 21 It is good to avoid eating meat and drinking wine lest by doing it you cause your **brother** to stumble.*

Spend your time and energy seeking to establish peace in the congregation and building up each other in the faith. Don't destroy God's kingdom in controversies over food. Even the best food can become evil when it causes a Christian to stumble—evil to the one who eats it, and evil for the one who is thereby offended. So avoid any conduct that might cause a brother to stumble.

22 Before God hold to that confidence which you have within you. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he judges to be good. 23 But if a man eats while doubting, he has condemned himself because he is not eating with confidence. 24 For everything is sinful that is not done in confidence.

Paul now addresses the “weak.” If a person thinks that a certain action is un-Christian, he should make sure he doesn't do it, no matter what anyone else says. For if a man goes against what he believes is right, he will only be plagued by further doubts, possibly leading to a complete loss in faith. Doubts about what are right and wrong will be followed by doubts about forgiveness. The surety of salvation will soon be the next casualty.

*Romans 15: 1 For we the “able” ought to bear the **weak things** of the “disabled,” and not please ourselves. 2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For Christ did not please himself..*

Paul concludes this section and leads into the next by summing up. Those who have the Christian maturity to see adiaphora for what they are—matters of judgment—ought to be sensitive towards those who have not that same maturity. Christ's example will lead us to mutual edification not to self indulgence.

Let us summarize what this passage says about the situation in Rome. Here, scattered throughout the congregation, are “weak brothers” who are unsure whether certain types of conduct are truly Christian or not. The matters in question, the days of the week for worship and the types of meat to eat, are matters of Christian judgment not of right or wrong. Though by taking a conservative stance on such issues they are missing out on some of the freedom that God intended for them, they are only in danger when they are “offended” by others or themselves condemn those making use of Christian freedom. Hence, more mature Christians are to adjust their own lifestyles so as not to offend the weak, accepting rather than despising them, yet not allowing the weak to condemn the use of Christian freedom either. Patience, consideration and love will build up “one another.”

III. Types of Weak Brothers

Though we have just considered the only two New Testament passages which specifically contain the words “weak brother,” we must now widen our discussion. In order to

arrive at a clear basis for the use of that term today, we must consider other contexts where the term has been or could be legitimately applied.

Let us first remind ourselves how the two words are used separately in Scripture. Besides its literal use (two or more males having the same mother and father), the Greek word ἀδελφός can be used more generally to denote a social, ethnic, or religious compatriot (Mat. 5:22; Acts 7:23; 22:1). It is in the latter sense that it became the most popular term by which Christians referred to one another in the early church. The feminine form ἀδελφή is also used (Rom. 16:1; Jam. 2:15), but the masculine often encompasses both sexes (Phil. 3:1). Thus, in order to stay within the boundaries of Scripture, all our uses of “weak brother” in a theological sense will have to refer to Christians.

The Louw/Nida N.T. lexicon³ has no less than 44 separate entries for “physical weakness.” Of more direct concern for our subject are the five words cited under the heading of weakness in the sense of “incapacity.” Four of those words are built around the root ἀσθεν— (ἀσθενέω, ἡ ἀσθένεια, τὸ ἀσθένημα, ἀσθενής). In addition ἀσθενής also cited under the rubric of “moral weakness.” Thus we will have to consider the use of the term “weak brother” to denote aspects of physical weakness, moral weakness and more specific types of incapacity.

A. The “Simul Iustus et Peccator” Weak Brother

In the opening chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul states that “God selected the weak things (τὰ ἀσθενῆ) of the world in order that the strong things might be shamed” (v.27)⁴. What does he mean by “weak things?” In the following verse he goes on to speak of the “lowly,” the “despised” and the “nothings” (τὰ μὴ ὄντα) of this world. It would appear that Paul is here using “weakness” in its widest sense to include physical problems, spiritual incapacity, and moral flaws. God’s people can find all these in their own lives, as much as and, at times, even more than their heathen neighbors. Yet the Christian can find help for all such problems in the wisdom and power of God.

These weaknesses to which all men are prone are the results of sin. They remain in the convert because he is unable to completely conquer the sin in his life and body. In the *Large Catechism*, Luther speaks of this kind of weakness: “For those who are wanton and dissolute must be told to stay away [from the Lord’s Supper] But the others, who are not such callous and wicked people, and desire to be godly, must not absent themselves, even though otherwise they be feeble and full of infirmities (*schwach und gebrechlich, fragiles et imbecilles*)” (§59). Then, after quoting St. Hilary to that end, he adds, “For no one will make such progress that he will not retain many daily infirmities in flesh and blood.” Luther’s discussion of the Eighth Commandment includes a reference to 1 Corinthians 12 and the stronger and weaker members of the body (§287). Not only are we to put the best construction on our neighbor’s actions, but we should adorn (*schmucken*, better translated “cover” (*conteguntur*) the faults of the weakest (*die Schwachsten, infirmissima*). Obviously the “weak” Christian, as Luther uses the term in the *Large Catechism* is not the weak brother of Romans 14 or 1 Corinthians 8, but merely the Christian fighting his old Adam on a daily basis.

³ *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Society, 1988).

⁴ 1:27 ἀλλὰ τὰ μωρὰ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξ ἐλέξατο ὁ θεός, ἵνα καταισχύνῃ τοὺς σοφοὺς, καὶ τὰ ἀσθενῆ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός, ἵνα καταισχύνῃ τὰ ἰσχυρά;

Article 3 of the *Apology*, “On Love and the Fulfilling of the Law,” tells how the churches are rent with divisions when bishops do not respect the “weakness among the people” (*imbecillitatis in populo, schwere Burden auflegen dem Volk*) or the people judge too quickly the conduct of the clergy (§112). But unity is preserved when “the strong bear with the weak” (*firmi tolerant infirmos, die Starken die Schwachen dulden und tragen*, §60). It appears to me that Melancthon is here thinking primarily of the general weaknesses among Christians.

In the *Formula of Concord* we find similar language in Article 2, “On Free Will”: For there is a great difference perceptible among Christians not only in this, that one is weak and another strong in the spirit, but each Christian, moreover, experiences in himself that at one time he is joyful in spirit, and at another fearful and alarmed; at one time ardent in love, strong in faith and hope, and at another cold and weak” (§68).

This same idea can be seen in the dogmatic distinction that Gerhard and others make between *peccata infirmatis* (sins of weakness) and *peccata contra conscientiam* (sins against conscience).⁵ Quenstedt defines the sin of weakness as that “which arises either by an unconquered ignorance, or by the good intentions of the will (like the sword of Peter in the garden, cf. also Lk. 9:54), or compelled by zeal, or in the haste of passion, without offense, without being the seed of greater sin (James 1:15), not contradicting the conscience.” He then uses Luther’s term “*tagliche Kinder-Sunden*.”⁶ Further, in discussing the difference between mortal and venial sins, Quenstedt describes the latter sins as being “by their nature venial... having arise from weakness (*infirmitate*) or ignorance.” Thus it would be proper to say that all Christians are equally “weak brothers” in the sense that we have not yet arrived at our eternal state of perfection. And Pieper reminds us that “for the troubles of a weak faith, the orthodox Lutherans have as the last restorative always and only the Word and Sacrament, and not an inner activity and reflection.”⁷

B. The Sensitive Sinner as Weak Brother

Our Lutheran tradition has used the term “weak brother” at times to speak of those Christians who have especially sensitive consciences. For example, in Article 7 of the *Formula of Concord*, “On the Lord’s Supper,” the “weak in faith” are urged to partake of the Sacrament. What follows is a wonderful description of what “weakness of faith” means in this context, namely people who are

“diffident, troubled, and heartily terrified because of the greatness and the number of their sins, and think that in this their great impurity they are not worthy of this precious treasure and the benefits of Christ, and who feel and lament their weakness of faith, and from their hearts desire that they may serve God with stronger more joyful faith and pure obedience...” (§19).

Pieper also speaks of “particularly earnest Christians who feel their infirmity more than others.”⁸ I’m sure we have all had members who would fit into this category of “weak Christian” and who have tended to avoid the Lord’s Supper because of their feelings of unworthiness.

⁵ J Gerhard. *Loci Theologici* (9 vols., 1657; in 5 vols. in Berlin, 1863), vol. 5, p. 287.

⁶ J. Quenstedt, *Theologica didactio-polemica* (4 parts in 1 vol., Wittenberg, 1691), part 2, p. 147.

⁷ F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (4 vols., St. Louis, 1951), 3:198, 205.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:387.

Ironically, it is only Word and Sacrament that can salve and strengthen such sensitive consciences.

C. The Weaker Brother who Leads a Less-Sanctified Life

It may also be useful at times to speak of a Christian who leads a quite openly unsanctified lifestyle as being a “weak brother.” The man who is struggling with an alcohol problem, having trouble controlling his language, or fighting some similar sin might be used as an example. One might equally use the term of a Christian who does not seem to be “fighting” his lack of sanctification, but merely clinging to a barren, fruitless Christian existence, always seemingly on the verge of totally losing his faith.

I have found no Scripture passages that directly link the term “weak” to such situations, but it would appear that the term “weak brother” would not be a misuse in such situations. Again, examples should readily come to mind from your own congregational experience. Once again Word and Sacrament are the only medicines and Christian concern and loving exhortation the best way to apply it.

D. Persons Incapable of Maturity as Weak Brothers

This is another category not specifically so labeled in Scripture. Here I am thinking of those Christians who are for various reasons unable to mentally mature as Christians. This may be due to mental impairments from birth or acquired later in life. It may also apply to the elderly who seem incapable of advancing beyond the basics and may in fact regress in knowledge. In terms of the foreign mission field one might think of people who have somehow become familiar with the basics of Christianity but who do not have further access to Scripture in an understandable form.

Those of us who have had experience working with the mentally handicapped will be quick to point out that in this group weakness in amount of Scriptural knowledge cannot be equated with weakness in the quality of faith. The “childlike faith” that Jesus held up as an example to his disciples is often seen among people of this group. And yet the concept of “weak brother” might be helpful when deciding on or explaining ministry decisions such as participation in the Lord’s Supper. Though in the English translation of Luther’s *Large Catechism*, we are told that the “simple-minded and weak” should be especially encouraged to partake (On the Lord’s Supper, §43), it does not seem that Luther is referring to this group but rather those who are in general unlearned (*Einfaltigen, simplices*) and weak in the sense of A or B above.

C. Brothers Weak from Faulty Christian Knowledge

In Article 7 of the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, On the Church, Melancthon points out that in the holy Christian Church there are also “many weak persons who contain the stubble of unprofitable opinions” yet have not overthrown the foundation, Jesus Christ (§20). Here we might see yet another group of “weak brothers.”

As distinct from the group mentioned in Romans and Corinthians, the matters at issue here are matters of doctrine, not adiaphora. Pieper for instance speaks of “weak Christians” in whose hearts faith dwells despite their error, and defines such Christians as those who “are ready to receive instruction and do not stubbornly resist.”⁹ He states that such weaknesses may cause

⁹ F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:90.

doctrinal error without the loss of all faith, and obtains the same righteousness as strong faith.¹⁰ Pieper says that even false teaching can be due to weakness. “The view that the copula *is* means *signifies* is a consequence of the intellectual weakness of man since the fall into sin,” and he agrees with Luther that people who doubt the real presence “from weakness in knowledge” may still be saved.¹¹

This view was developed in our own circles in the 60s. Carl Lawrenz, when speaking of putting our fellowship principals into practice with friends or family in the Missouri Synod said that we should remember that the problem may be that they are “weak in understanding the implication of their church fellowship.”¹² At the same time he warned that we must clearly “distinguish with Scripture between an adherent of false doctrine or practice and a weak brother.”¹³ The latter will manifest itself “in a lack of understanding of Christian truths, in an involvement in error, or in a deviation from Christian life.”¹⁴ Persons who fall into this category are to be treated as weak brethren only “as long as we still have reason to assume that they are ready to receive correction and instruction.”¹⁵ In such a case “weakness of faith is in itself not a reason for terminating church fellowship, including prayer fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing church fellowship vigorously ...for helping one another in overcoming our individual weaknesses.”¹⁶

However this is no longer the case when the weak brother becomes a persistent errorist. “With equal clarity the Lord tells us ...that we can no longer recognize and treat those as Christian brethren who in spite of earnest admonition *persistently* cling to an error in doctrine or practice, who demand recognition for their error and make propaganda for it.”¹⁷

The way to handle this kind of “weak brother” is to teach the truth in love and clarity. Here again a loving attitude and prayer for discernment will be necessary in our evaluation of such weak brothers and when they might become persistent errorists.

F. Brothers with Weak Consciences

Finally we come to the weak brothers we began with, those mentioned in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8. Here we are dealing with adiaphora and weakness of conscience.

Before we go further, however, we have to clarify our definitions. In a fairly recent essay, Prof. Dobberstein divides these weak brethren into two categories, those people with doubting consciences and those with erring consciences.¹⁸ However, in a *Northwestern Lutheran* John Raabe points out that both of these expressions are misnomers. The conscience itself does not err; it makes a valid assessment based on faulty knowledge. Doubting also is a result of faulty knowledge (contradictory or incomplete information) that leaves the conscience without the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:518.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3:305, 392.

¹² C. Lawrenz, *A Statement on the Application of our Fellowship Principles* (unpublished xerox, WLS Library EFR242), p. 1.

¹³ C. Lawrenz, *Pertinent Passages, Pertaining to Prayer Fellowship*, Paper to South WI Pastoral Conference (WLS Library EF333), p. 7.

¹⁴ C. Lawrenz, *Essay on Church Fellowship* (originally presented at the 1960 convention of the Northern WI district and recently published in “The Scriptural Principles Concerning Fellowship” in *Our Great Heritage* [3 vols, NPH, 1991], 3:443-471), p. 462.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 463.

¹⁶ *Pertinent Passages*, p. 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁸ L. Dobberstein, *The Doctrine of Offense*, presented to the Metro North Conference in 1985, reprinted in *Our Great Heritage* 2:349-355.

basis for a decision.¹⁹ Pieper agrees that the problem is “weakness in knowledge.” He warns us lest “by our example, Christians who are weak in knowledge may be induced to do things which in their erring conscience they regard as wrong and thus endanger their faith.”²⁰

Thus “weak brothers” have consciences that are just as good as those of other Christians. The problem is merely that their consciences have been misinformed by their upbringing or instruction. As we have learned from our computers, garbage in, garbage out. Though Prof. Dobberstein’s two categories, thus understood, may still be valid, I have not found them extremely helpful while practically considering the matter of weak consciences. More important is remembering that although, as with the previous category, we are dealing with a weakness in knowledge, here it is not a matter of doctrine but rather of adiaphora.

Let us first consider the weak brother with a doubting conscience in Romans 14. As we have seen, this chapter deals with the “weak in confidence” (v.1), those unsure whether eating meat or setting aside certain days for worship are proper or improper conduct for the Christian, i.e. for himself. In Reformation times, Melancthon sites the example of people having doubts about certain church rites. In Locus 23 of the *Loci, De scandalo*, he cites Rom. 14 and defines the “*infirmum in fide*” as “teachable men who have embraced the Gospel but still have some doubts concerning church rites.” Such a situation is best cured through teaching. But if brothers insist on certain rites, it then becomes a “manifold scandal” (*multiplex scandalon*) because it encourages enemies of the true doctrine and leads the more weak-minded (*imbecilliores*) into doubts.

In the early Roman congregation, in Melancthon’s day, and in most cases yet today, the “weak” are usually unsure whether a departure from traditional customs is Christian. It is most often the freedom to change things that is questioned. Modern consciences balk at the use of a new Bible translation, liturgy, or modern musical forms in the same way as Roman consciences balked at moving worship from the Sabbath to Sunday. Some Romans may have questioned the dropping of the traditional Passover feast just as one of my parishioners questioned our starting to celebrate it again. The very nature of the weakness makes it almost inevitable that this class of weak brothers, those unsure about the Christian’s freedom in matters of adiaphora, are the traditionalists.

What is Paul’s advice? The other Christians are to accept the weak, not criticize them, take care not to offend them, and allow them the freedom to serve Christ in their own way. Both sides must live in loving harmony despite such variant opinions. Mutual edification may eventually lead to agreement on the best way to handle the doubtful matters.

In Lutheran dogmatics, the greatest danger is usually seen in one side or other legislating their position upon the church. Remember that even the doubtful conscience can take a firm position: since we can’t be sure if certain conduct is godly or not, we shouldn’t do it. In Article 10 of the *Formula of Concord*, On Church Rites, the concept of adiaphora is defined and Romans 14 is cited as teaching us “how we can yield and give way with a good conscience to the weak in faith (*Schwachen im Glauben, infirmis in fide*) in such external adiaphora” (§9). Yet we are urged to stand up against those who would impose these as necessary things (§13); otherwise, human ordinances might soon replace divine commands (§15). In this way idolaters are confirmed in their idolatry and true believers are “grieved, offended, and weakened in their faith” (§16).

¹⁹ Cf. J. Raabe, “The Conscience,” *Northwestern Lutheran* 64 (1977):357, 362; reprinted in *Our Great Heritage* 2:257-260.

²⁰ *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:561.

Similarly, in Article 23 of the Apology, On the Marriage of Priests, after discussing the virtues of continence, the conclusion remains that the matter of celibacy must be left free and “snares ought not be cast upon the weak through the law.” Here one might wonder if the priest who desires marriage is the “weak brother?” But the German text, “*und sollen nicht solche Stricke den armen Gewissen angeworfen werden,*” makes it clear that the weak, as at Rome, are those whose consciences were unsure about the matter of marriage and hence a law prohibiting it (or, for that matter, requiring it) would cause them to act without “faith,” i.e. without the sure confidence that they were following God’s will by what they did.

In the Corinthian congregation, it appears that we have a situation of erring consciences. There the question was about eating meat sacrificed to idols and whether such action compromised a Christian’s witness. Those being called “weak” (so termed by their opponents more than by Paul) are those whose consciences have led them, as new Christians, to decide to have nothing at all to do with paganism. The “strong” are those who, having been Christians for some time, are living in the world with a more complete freedom, at times going to the very edge of unChristian conduct (v.10). I cannot help feeling that Paul not only rebukes the latter for offending the “weak,” but is also warning them about abusing their Christian freedom and endangering their own souls. Their own consciences may be too “strong” and not sensitive enough. In other words, both sides may have erring consciences.

Melancthon applies a story from Eusebius (*Historic Ecclesiastica* 5.3) to those with erring consciences. Among the Christians imprisoned during the second-century persecution at Lyons, France was a man who even in prison refused to eat more than bread and water. Another Christian was told by God to persuade him to give up this strict life style lest the weaker (*rudiores*; literally “less-experienced”) Christians think such a strict lifestyle was necessary. The stricter (*durior*, “tougher”) Christian accepted the advice and began to eat with the other prisoners. Melancthon then remarks, “This story recounts a serious matter, why the stubbornness of those who recognize distinctions in rites must not be commended, lest error among the ignorant and doubts among the more weak (*imbecilliores*) be confirmed.”²¹ Though not strictly following the story, Melancthon’s point is important. When either side in such a controversy is allowed to impose its point of view, the ignorant may be led to falsely believe the imposed position to be doctrine, and the weak who do so will be confirmed in their false understanding (that their position is the correct one).

What is Paul’s advice here? Such disagreements do not affect our standing with God (v.8), hence again the two sides should be able to live within the congregation in loving harmony. Those who consider themselves “strong” and superior in Christian knowledge must if necessary adapt their lifestyle so as not to offend the “weak.” Again, neither side must impose its own view on others. As Pieper says, “We are to restrict our “correct theological knowledge in practical use” whenever it might “induce the brother who, weak in knowledge to act contrary to his erring conscience.”²² As we said, this weak conscience is really a weakness in knowledge, in this case a knowledge about Christian freedom.

I think one might also view the “weak brothers” at Rome and Corinth as representing slightly different “weaknesses.” As an analogy, consider the Christian approach to alcohol. A new Christian who was an alcoholic in his pagan days may have a “weakness” for alcohol and for that reason may totally avoid it himself. Also, knowing the ease with which a person can slip into alcoholism, he may urge other Christians to totally avoid it. Other Christians might urge

²¹ *Locus* 23.

²² *Op. cit.*, 1:562

total avoidance because they associate alcohol consumption with wild parties, loose women, drugs and the like. Hence all alcohol consumption is guilt by association.

Would you encourage a former alcoholic to have a beer with you? Definitely not. That seems to be what Paul warns the “strong” Corinthian meat-eaters not to do to the ex-pagans in their midst. The weak were afraid that if they started eating meat offered to idols, they would soon end up at the pagan temple parties again.

Would you go out of your way to offer an ex-Baptist a beer? No, unless he insisted that it was wrong to drink it. This was more the situation at Rome. The vegetarian or Sabbatarian were weak only in so far as they considered it profitable to keep more traditional customs of eating and worship. Only when they insisted on such behavior for other Christians did that weakness become a deadly flaw. In all other cases, the strong were to accommodate their actions to the weak, not please themselves.

IV. Conclusion

My foregoing study of the weak brother has convinced me that this is a subject worthy of considerably more attention. Not only are there questions remaining to be solved in the two lengthy Pauline passages, but the exact meaning of some passages in the confessions might also be usefully re-considered. The relationship between the various categories of weak brothers, as well as additional categories that I may have overlooked, also could profit from further consideration. If we as pastors have the charge of feeding our flocks and building them up in the faith, we need to be clear about the possible weaknesses and Scripture’s remedies. If we are to maintain harmony in congregations of increasing diversity, we should be familiar with the diseases (not merely the symptoms) which can cause such deadly divisions. As we face such daunting tasks, let us take comfort from the fact that *God* has chosen us even if we are the “weak,” and that He has promised to crown our efforts with success through the power and the strength of the Gospel.