

## **Question: How do Weak Believers Stumble?**

The issue of stumbling is part of the overall doctrine of “Doubtful Things.” Two passages discuss this issue in some detail: Romans 14:1-15 and 1 Corinthians 8:1-13.

Both passages deal with the liberty of the believer in things that are not specifically taught in Scripture. Paul uses the idea of food offered to idols as the illustration of such a problem. Scripture does not address the issue of whether a believer is at liberty to eat such food. The strong brother, realizing that it is not an impurity to do so, participates; but the weak brother, *because of a lack of knowledge*, believes it is impure to do so.

The key verses on what causes a weak believer to stumble are Romans 14:20-23 and 1 Corinthians 8:9 & 10.

Speaking to the stronger brother, Paul in Romans 14:20-23 states:

<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> DO YOU HAVE FAITH? HAVE IT TO YOURSELF BEFORE GOD. HAPPY IS HE WHO DOES NOT CONDEMN HIMSELF IN WHAT HE APPROVES. <sup>23</sup> BUT HE WHO DOUBTS IS CONDEMNED IF HE EATS, BECAUSE HE DOES NOT EAT FROM FAITH; FOR WHATEVER IS NOT FROM FAITH IS SIN.

A strong brother is not to participate in pursuing a “doubtful thing” in the presence of a weak brother. In his strength, he is to have his “faith,” that is, his belief in the purity of his actions, to himself before God, but not before the weak brother. So if the weak brother is in his presence he should abstain from whatever doubtful thing that he is at liberty to do, because the act could encourage the weak brother to violate his own faith system by practicing something he believes is impure.

What causes the weak brother to stumble is the actual participation in the doubtful thing (verse 23). He is condemned if he eats because he is not eating from faith. In other words, he believes one thing and practices a different thing. So the strong brother should not encourage the weak brother to violate his faith system, even though it is a weak faith system.

1 Corinthians 8:9-10 confirms the statements of Romans 14:

BUT BEWARE LEST SOMEHOW THIS LIBERTY OF YOURS BECOME A STUMBLING BLOCK TO THOSE WHO ARE WEAK. <sup>10</sup> 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 strong believer’s liberty could be a cause for a weak brother to “eat those things offered to idols.” For a weak brother to do so is a violation of his conscience, and therefore not to be practiced.

The answer to the above question is simple: *A weak brother stumbles when he participates in an activity that he believes to be wrong.* Until he grows in grace to the point where he recognizes his mistake in understanding, he is not to be encouraged by the strong brother to violate his conscience. Therefore, the strong brother must participate in such things that he knows the weak brother does not understand only when the weak brother is not so encouraged.