

**Scandalum Infirmorum
et
Communio Sanctorum**

The Relation between
Christian Liberty and Neighbor Love
in the Church

by **Nelson Deyo Kloosterman**



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ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

TER VERKRIJGING VAN DE GRAAD VAN DOCTOR IN DE THEOLOGIE,
OP GEZAG VAN DE RECTOR DR. J. DOUMA,
HOGLERAAR IN DE THEOLOGIE,
ZO GOD WIL IN HET OPENBAAR TE VERDEDIGEN
OP WOENSDAG 21 AUGUSTUS 1991
DES NAMIDDAGS TE 3 UUR IN DE LEMKERZAAL,
BROEDERSTRAAT 16 TE KAMPEN

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THESES

1. In the light of biblical evidence, the term 'weakness,' when used within a moral context, refers primarily to the innocent condition of a conscience whose deficient moral knowledge prevents guilt-free participation in a particular practice.
2. The danger of *scandalum infirmorum* exists, minimally, only where a difference of practice among believers has the potential for inducing someone whose conscience is weak to imitate another's behavior, against his own convictions.
3. The tension that results from viewing neighbor love as the *limit* to Christian liberty can be resolved best by viewing love and freedom as ecclesially correlative.
4. The suggestion that it was Moses' son Gershom whom the LORD sought to kill on their way to Egypt (Ex.4.22-26) enjoys strong exegetical support and is worthy of consideration.
Cf. James B. Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant: An Exposition of Exodus 21-23* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1984).
5. The description of idols and idolatry found in Psalms 115.3-8 and 135.15-18 is extremely useful for understanding modern secular society.
Cf. Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1990).
6. The suggestion of the Staten Bijbel that in Acts 8.1ff, πάντες δὲ διεσπάρησαν refers to the teachers who had been working in Jerusalem alongside the apostles, deserves widespread acceptance.
7. The translation of 1 Peter 1.25b as 'Now this is the word which by *the gospel* was preached to you' (New King James Version) can be improved by omitting the italicized words from the rendering of the Aorist passive participle εὐαγγελισθέν.

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8. The New International Version of the Bible cannot satisfy those objections to the Revised Standard Version raised by Reformed believers, alleging translational inaccuracies and theological bias, which objections led to the production of the New International Version.
 9. The premise of so-called 'biblical universalism,' namely, that all people will be saved except those whom the Bible declares will be lost, seems to jeopardize the Bible's teaching about the necessity of faith for salvation.

Contra Neal Punt, *Unconditional Good News: Toward an Understanding of Biblical Universalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

10. Within twentieth century North American Christianity, Reformed theology provides a distinctive and necessary emphasis especially in the area of ecclesiology (its doctrine about the church).
11. An evaluation of 'theonomy' will be most useful if it begins by understanding *πληρῶσαι* in Matthew 5.17 as 'fulfill' instead of 'confirm.'

Cf. Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 2nd edition (Nutley, New Jersey: Craig, 1984) 39-86; Jakob van Bruggen, *Matteüs: Het evangelie voor Israël*, Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament, derde serie (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1990) 92-93.

12. The public reporting of morbidity and mortality rates pertaining to mothers committing abortion would probably dissuade many Americans from killing their children in this way.
13. John Calvin's correspondence with Renee d'Este, duchess of Ferrara, provides significant perspectives for modern pastoral care.

Cf. P.Y. De Jong, 'Calvin and the Duchess of Ferrara,' *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1985) 32-86.

14. When Christian Reformed delegates to general synods of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (synodaal) addressed the latter church as 'our mother church,' this historically inaccurate designation likely arose from an unfortunate, but persisting immigrant ecclesiastical insecurity.

Cf. Doede Nauta, 'The Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland and the Christian Reformed Church,' *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in Its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity*, Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder, editors (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 298-299.

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15. Proper catechism preaching will go a long way toward guarding church members from a dispensational method of Bible interpretation.
 16. The church's understanding of ecclesiastical office and ordination is adversely affected when ministers whose principal work is not preaching, teaching or pastoring, nevertheless retain their ordination.
 17. Because the children's song 'You Cannot Hide from God' conveys a negative impression of God's omnipresence and omniscience, it should be neither taught to children nor sung in their presence.

SCANDALUM INFIRMORUM ET COMMUNIO SANCTORUM

THEOLOGISCHE UNIVERSITEIT VAN DE GEREFORMEERDE KERKEN
IN NEDERLAND TE KAMPEN

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*To Sue, my beloved,
and our dear children,
Kim, Nate, Nick, Katie and Hannah,
all of you the fulfillment
of Psalm 128.3*

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ABBREVIATIONS

BAGD	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , by Walter Bauer, trans., revised and augmented by William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979)
PG	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus. . . series graeca</i> , ed. by J.P. Migne, 162 vols. (1857-1868)
PL	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus. . . series latina</i> , ed. by J.P. Migne, 222 vols. (1844-1855)
RGG	<i>Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> . 3rd ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1958)
TCGNT	<i>A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament</i> , by Bruce M. Metzger, 3rd corrected ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975)
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. by Gerhard Friedrich and Gerhard Kittel, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1964-1976)

INTRODUCTION

The trail leading to this effort was uncovered by our study, several years ago, of one denomination's approach to the question of so-called 'worldly amusements' (movie attendance, dancing and card playing). Two landmark decisions framed a shift in attitude, the first in 1928, which essentially prohibited involvement in these activities, and the second in 1966, which permitted enjoyment of what was known by then as 'the film arts.'¹

Careful reflection on the moral arguments employed to defend this shift will turn up an interesting fact: whereas in former days people could be swayed by, and sway others by, the caution not to 'give offense,' modern moral argument among some Christians no longer sounds the warning against 'causing others to stumble,' and no longer alerts us to the possibility that others with less moral ability might be inclined to imitate our moral permissions.

There is a stillness in the forest of moral argument, where earlier there had been a chirp of caution, a warning whisper.

Could it be that, as with so many other moral choices, so too with 'the film arts,' individualism has invaded the most social of all sanctuaries: the church?

What, really, *is* 'giving offense'? Is the caution against 'offending others' or 'causing the weak to stumble' a valid moral appeal, or is it simply social control wearing a Sunday suit? What kind of moral system has room for the notion of causing another person to stumble? Who, in fact, are 'the weak,' and who are 'the strong'? What is weakness, anyway?

These questions have to do with far more than choices of private or social entertainment. Listen to one of the earliest defenses behind a domestic mission policy of separate ecclesiastical development: "The

¹The 1928 discussion and decision can be found in *Agenda 1928 van de synode van de Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Amerika*, Part I, 4-38; and *Acta Synodi 1928 van de Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Amerika*, 86-89. One finds the 1966 discussion and decision in *Acts of Synod 1966*, 32-36, 316-361. We have detailed and evaluated some weaknesses of each position, and the differences between both, in *The Christian Reformed Church and Theater Attendance: A Case Study in Calvinistic Ethics*, esp. 29-83.

domestic mission policy of separate ecclesiastical development: 'The [1857] Synod considers it desirable and scriptural that our members from the Heathen be received and absorbed into our existing congregations wherever possible; but where this measure, *as a result of the weakness of some*, impedes the furtherance of the cause of Christ among the Heathen, the congregation from the Heathen, already founded or still to be founded, shall enjoy its Christian privileges in a separate building or institution.'² That such a mission policy, followed by many denominations in many countries, could be justified by appealing to 'the weakness of some' might arouse a skeptical grin among us. Unfortunately, it seems that the abuse of the argument, among other things, accounts for its non-use today.

That's where the trail began. And if, now, you should like to accompany us on an expedition along its route, here is an overview of the terrain.

Its winding path will lead us deep into the evidence of Scripture, through the history of Christian ethics, and bring us eventually into an open clearing, looking out over the field of Christian ethics itself. Along the way one of the most surprising discoveries will be that what is 'going on' in the offense of the weak involves the relationship between Christian liberty and neighbor love. In fact, these will provide us with our points of reference on the horizon, enabling us to take a compass reading, find our bearing, and proceed to the next orienteering landmark.

In Chapter 1 we leave the trailhead to plunge deep into the undergrowth of terms and definitions. Our expedition pushes off under the theme, '*Scandalum infirmorum*: Christian liberty *versus* neighbor love.' After pausing first for a long, careful look at two cases of 'the strong and the weak' discussed in Scripture (1 Cor.8.1-11.1 and Rom.14.1-15.13), we proceed to examine the work of four men who have walked this trail before us: Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, Gisbert Voetius and Carl Henry. Our interest is sparked by their application of those

²Cited by John W. de Gruchy in *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 8 (emphasis added); the text of this resolution appears in 'The Dutch Reformed Churches and the Non-Whites,' Fact Paper 14, July, 1956. Lest we be inclined toward severity, it should be mentioned that such a policy permitting separate ecclesiastical development was employed in North America until the 1960s by at least one Reformed denomination, for reasons no less ethnic. It would be unfair to allege in either case that mission policy was necessarily determined by motives of racism.

Scripture passages (and others), by their formulation of the problem and solution to it. The first leg of our expedition concludes as we frame the issues needing attention if *scandalum infirmorum*, or causing others to stumble, is to be avoided. In the interest of concreteness we offer several examples which people might think would serve well as modern test cases; but we will have to decide in Chapter 2 whether or not these illustrations indeed fit.

The issues identified in Chapter 1 become the map for the second leg of our journey. In Chapter 2 we return to the trail, heading now into a synthesis of biblical and historical material, and an evaluation of the pioneering work examined earlier. Following our map will bring us deep into the thicket of questions regarding the nature of weakness, the process of stumbling, the arena of offense, and the theological context for best analyzing *scandalum infirmorum* as the collision between Christian liberty and neighbor love.

Chapter 3 will lead us out, guiding us along the trail of biblical and theological considerations pertaining to *communio sanctorum* as the context for liberty serving love. How can the confession 'I believe one holy, catholic church, the communion of saints' resolve the conflict between strong and weak in the church? What can we learn from it about the nature and aim of freedom, and about the proper response to moral weakness in the church?

Our trail will lead us out of the forest into the open field of Christian ethics. The value of our study for reflecting on all of Christian moral behavior is set forth briefly in an Epilogue entitled 'The ecclesial dimension of Christian ethics.'

Now then, let's check our supplies and equipment: canteen, compass, backpack. . . .

CHAPTER 1

SCANDALUM INFIRMORUM: CHRISTIAN LIBERTY *versus* NEIGHBOR LOVE

1.1 Delimiting our subject

As we set out on our trek, we must first scout the location of the trailhead, that is: examine and delimit the subject of our investigation.

We begin by accepting as our working definition of Christian ethics that it reflects on people's responsible actions toward God and neighbor.³ Under the light of God's Word, this reflection encompasses several distinct components within moral action, including the elements of principle, context, consequence and motive. These latter two—consequence and motive—are often determined only with great difficulty, and yet are just as important to Christian conduct as principle and context. Christian ethics deals with these matters, then, in terms of obligation and duty.

But how much of Christian living involves obligation?

It would be a serious misunderstanding to imagine that the 'field' of Christian conduct could be divided simply between matters belonging to Christian *duty* and those belonging to Christian *liberty*.⁴ Too easily the

³J. Douma, *Christian Morals and Ethics*, 7; he explains the elements of this definition on pages 7-14.

⁴Legal philosophy, by contrast, does operate with this kind of classification. This is defined and analyzed, entirely from the perspective of legal philosophy, by Joel Feinberg in his series *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, especially volume 1, *Harm to Others*, and volume 2, *Offense to Others*. These volumes form part of a study of the problem of 'victimless crimes,' and yield some conclusions that are tantalizingly similar to those we will evaluate. Consider Feinberg's delimitation of his own subject: 'We can also formulate the basic question of these volumes as one about the moral limits of individual liberty, understanding 'liberty' simply as the absence of legal coercion.' He divides civil morality into three categories: 'We can think of every possible act as so related to a penal code that it must either be (1) required (a duty), (2) merely permitted (one we are 'at liberty' to do or forbear doing), or (3) prohibited (a crime). Where coercive law stops, there liberty begins. The citizen's zone of liberty, therefore, corresponds to the second class since (1)

mistaken impression would be created that behavior occurring in one half (duty) may properly be evaluated, while actions performed or omitted in the other half (freedom) may not. In such a view, Christian ethics would be permitted to describe (and defend!) the boundaries of each half, and to busy itself with judgments concerning only matters of duty.

This view imagines a *freedom* whose field and function are morally neutral (or better: amoral). Such a view of moral freedom collides with any suggestion that, since many deeds performed in 'freedom' have consequences, these actions are properly subject to evaluation.

The fact is that many actions, whether proceeding in freedom or from duty, affect other persons. Consequences can range from the other becoming more—or less—wealthy, wise, happy, friendly, efficient, generous, etc. Among the myriad results we could imagine is this outcome: one's action can occasion another's moral injury or lead another into sin. Think only of children, so easily led into wrongdoing as they follow negative examples of others around them.

The primary aim of our study is to show that Christian moral responsibility includes intending, as one consequence of our actions, that others are not morally injured (negative), but protected from moral harm and assisted in their moral progress (positive). Here, consequence and motive merge to form a partnership; considering, as best one can, the negative and positive effects of one's action upon another person ought shape one's motive for committing or omitting that action.

Now, the Bible narrates several episodes where people were led into sin by the actions of others. It is important to note that often these actions themselves were wrong.

On the Bible's first pages we learn of Eve leading Adam to join her in wrongdoing (Gen.3.6). Scripture tells of the prophet Balaam who led Israel into sexual sin (Num.22-25), a spiritual seduction that receives repeated attention throughout both Old and New Testaments (Josh.24.9,10; Neh.13.2; Mic.6.5; 2 Pet.2.15; Jude 11; Rev.2.14). Another very strange episode, narrated in 1 Kings 13.11-32, involves a prophet from Bethel who seduces a man of God from Judah to come to his home and eat, contrary to the LORD's express prohibition. Another tragic episode occurred when Israel brought Moab and her king Mesha

and (3) are alike in directing coercive threats at him. . . . The goal of this work then is to trace the contours of the zone in which the citizen has a moral claim to be at liberty, that is, free of legal coercion' (*Harm to Others*, 7).

to such despair through her unmerciful military tactics which violated divine proscriptions (in Dt.20.19-20), that he sacrificed his son as an offering to Chemosh, presumably beseeching his god for deliverance (2 Ki.3.13-27). Rather than offer Moab conditions of peace, Israel employed total annihilation, driving Mesha to make the wall of his besieged city an altar of sacrifice to his god, where he offers a most costly sacrifice: his son. In other words, Israel by her disobedience led Moab to do what she herself had been forbidden to do (cf. Lev.18.21; 20.3; Mic.6.7) and what God hates.⁵

The Gospel of Matthew records one incident of *potential*—though *unwarranted*—injury, involving Peter and the temple-tax. Peter was accosted in Capernaum by the temple-tax collectors who wished to know whether Jesus was in the habit of paying His share (Mt.17.24-27). As prescribed in Ex.30.11-16, each Israelite twenty years and older was to pay at the census time a half-shekel as an atonement offering to the LORD. Peter assured the collectors that his Master was indeed in the habit of paying the tax, but later Christ invited Peter's further reflection on the matter by His question, 'From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their own sons or from strangers?' (Mt.17.25). When Peter answered with the latter, Jesus said, 'Then the sons are free.' Presumably Peter too was free from the obligation of paying the temple-tax, though he was told to throw his fishing line in the Sea of Galilee, where he would catch a fish with enough money in its mouth to pay the temple tax for both Jesus and himself—'in order,' Jesus said, 'that we not offend them' (Mt.17.27). Here the Lord waives His and Peter's right to exemption from the tax, to avoid the possibility that some, because of ignorance or unbelief, might misconstrue the omission as disdain for the temple.⁶ Contrast this renunciation of messianic right with Christ's frequent assertions of His divine right over against His enemies before whom He wished to demonstrate Himself as the fulfillment of the law.⁷

Each of these biblical episodes describes actual or potential moral injury. We could easily multiply examples of moral injury in our own times; in fact, we might even say that *everyone* is a potential victim of moral harm. Children come to mind almost instinctively as those most

⁵I. de Wolff, *De geschiedenis der Godsopenbaring*, 6:149; also C. van Gelderen, *De boeken der Koningen*, 2:395-396.

⁶H.N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 330.

⁷H.A.W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*, 318.

vulnerable and susceptible to injury through bad example. They need moral, as well as physical and emotional, development in order to travel without accident along the pathways of moral choice. But there are others: think of the new convert to the Christian faith, who sees experienced believers doing things he associates with his 'old' way of life, and is then tempted to return to such a practice against his convictions. Or consider someone outside the faith, who appeals, in defense of his unbelief, to the bad example of Christian leaders.

This study examines a certain group of people who are more prone than others to moral injury, identified in two specific cases (addressed by the apostle Paul) as believers with a 'weak' conscience. That is, their consciences prevent them from undertaking (or omitting) certain activities, and they are in danger of being injured by others who enjoy the permission of *their* consciences to engage in (or omit) those activities. These cases are discussed in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14-15; often people will describe the participants in these episodes as 'strong' and 'weak' Christians.

Our interest extends beyond the *people* who are injured, to include the *moral injury* itself. What happens when a person with a 'weak' conscience is injured? This concern helps explain the title of this chapter: '*Scandalum Infirmorum*: Christian Liberty versus Neighbor Love.' We hope to show that *scandalum infirmorum*, or offense of the weak, occurs at that point where liberty and love collide, where enjoying one's own moral permissions conflicts with the duty of caring for another's moral protection.

Now that we have located the trailhead, we are ready to begin the hike. During the first leg, we will examine the cases discussed in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14-15. This order of presentation arises from the likelihood that the apostle Paul wrote 1 Corinthians before his letter to the church at Rome. Three questions will guide us as we walk through these passages: (1) What was the occasion under discussion? (2) What were the responses within the church? and (3) What were the results being addressed by the apostle? It will become apparent that each of these passages addresses a different situation, though there is a similarity of language at points. But we should emphasize here that the textual material leaves many of our questions unanswered, and the focus of our study neither permits nor requires extensive analysis of the possible answers.

1.2 *Scandalum infirmorum* and Scripture: two cases

1.2.1 1 Corinthians 8.1-11.1

In 1 Corinthians Paul deals with several problems about which these believers had apparently written him earlier. The treatment of a new case begins in 8.1, indicated by the formula (περὶ δέ) employed also in 7.1 and 7.25. This case involves 'sacrificial foods' (εἰδωλοθύτα), a word that appears nine times in the NT (Acts 15.29; 21.25; 1 Cor. 8.1,4,7,10; 10.19; Rev. 2.14,20) to refer to that which was sacrificed to an εἶδωλον or 'idol.' Included in these offerings was everything from animals to produce, fruits, wine, cakes, fish, and milk products.⁸ This sacrificial food was often divided into three portions, one to be consumed on the altar, another to be given to the priest, and a third to be enjoyed at a sacrificial meal.⁹

Within the congregation were believers who had been converted from practices of pagan idol worship, which included participating in idol-meals and eating idol-food. Although they could subscribe to the confession that there is only one God and that idols were nothings (8.4), they nevertheless associated eating sacrificial food with idolatry.¹⁰

There were others in the congregation who, by contrast, possessed the confidence of 'knowledge' which served as the warrant for their freedom to eat sacrificial food and participate in sacrificial meals. Although there is insufficient evidence to suggest that an open dispute had broken out in the Corinthian congregation, what is clear is that diversity of opinion existed within the church. It was this disagreement that they had submitted to the apostle for advice.

In *1 Cor. 8.1-6* Paul begins by comparing the relative effects of knowledge and love. All believers possess knowledge-in-general (v.1a, where γνῶσιν is anarthrous), the kind that combines theoretical understanding with practical capacity for its use. But there is a kind of knowledge (v.1b, where γνῶσις has the article) that is insufficient to settle the dispute about sacrificial foods, because it consists of differing

⁸Friedrich Büchsel, 'Εἶδωλον, [κ.τ.λ.]: TDNT, 2:375-379.

⁹L. Batelaan, *De kerk van Korinthe en wij: De actualiteit van Paulus' eerste brief aan de Korinthiërs (1 Kor. 8-11.1)*, 15-18; L. Batelaan, *De sterken en zwakken in de kerk van Korinthe*; and Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 356-357, 361.

¹⁰John C. Brunt, *Paul's Attitude toward and Treatment of Problems involving Dietary Practice: A Case Study in Pauline Ethics*, 72.

insights and yields different actions, thus breaking the unity and commonality of the church at this point. Knowledge, by itself, inflates people, puffs them up like a pair of bellows. By contrast, love has the inherent quality of building up (cf. 1 Cor.13.4). Holding something intellectually is not yet a sufficient qualification of knowledge. Right knowledge includes the use to which it is put. In other words, knowing something (v.2) must be combined with love of God (v.3).

The solution, then, to the problem of eating food sacrificed to idols is clear: the primary requirement is love, the love that builds, a love that has its origin in love of God, a love that is the necessary and sufficient qualification of genuine knowledge.

All of this comes to bear on the real problem, namely, the *eating* of food offered to idols (v.4). Later we shall observe the various contexts of this eating, but for now we note the context indicated by the parallel confession: 'an idol is a nothing, and a god other than the One is a nobody.' Here the food itself is connected to its *use* within the context of cultic religion. To understand the food, one needs to know about its use.

Now, for the believer the fundamental thesis is that those objects of veneration and worship in pagan temples 'are' nothings and nobodies. There exists one, and only one, single, real God. But there are said to be other gods: emperors, the spirits of deceased persons who had lived distinguished lives, phenomena of nature (thunder, wind, fertility, etc.). Although in the OT, judges were called *מַלְאָכִים* (Ex.22.8-9; cf. Ps.82.1,6 and Jn.10.34-35), this term was used in a relative sense. Even the pagan emperor and his helpers were dependent on God as the source of their power and authority (cf. Rom.13.1,4).

In contrast to pagan ascriptions of deity to many persons and things, for us Christians (emphatic *ὁμῖν*, v.6) ours is the unique God. He is 'the Father,' that is, the origin and source of the universe. The pagan's gods are nobodies because they cannot create anything (Ps.96.5); in fact, they are 'of' the cosmos—reflecting the inescapable pantheism of all paganism. But notice: this God of ours is also the One 'from whom everything is,' including food abused in idolatry! In contrast to pagan ascriptions of *κύριος* to rulers and others, Christians have one Lord. He is Jesus Christ, whose claim to sovereignty rests in the fact that He too participated in creation: everything is through Him. He is the Owner, also of food abused in service to idols. With this confession believers acknowledge a duality, but no dualism; a creational independence, but no creaturely independentism. Creature and creator are two necessarily distinguishable, but related, entities.

In *1 Cor. 8.7-13* the apostle aims his discussion still more pointedly by isolating the first difficulty: this knowledge (referring back to that knowledge discussed in vv.4-6) is deficient among some believers, in that it does not yield the same implications and applications. It is important to stress that those with this deficiency were *Christian believers*, holding the confession about the only true God, Maker of heaven and earth. But this right confession was mixed with a consciousness of the idol, its place in religious veneration. It is likely that by force of habit and custom, they still consider the idols to be devils who take into their possession those foods offered to them; those who ate food sacrificed to idols would be infected and contaminated demonically. Regardless of whether the phrase 'until now' (ἕως ἄρτι, v.7) describes their consciousness or their eating, the connection is clear: the conscience of these believers pronounces a negative judgment, a disqualifying evaluation, concerning the action of eating sacrificial foods. This 'mixed' knowledge yields a conscience that is weak and polluted in the presence of idol-food. Weakness is due to the domination of conscience by convictions concerning idols, while pollution results from temptation to and perhaps participation in eating sacrificial foods. 'Their problem is not in coming to a decision, not in not knowing about idols, but in carrying through with a decision that creates too great a moral dissonance for them, and thus leads them back into idolatry.'¹¹ Their conscience is defiled when they are led, through the example of the 'strong,' to act contrary to their own convictions, and therefore not out of faith (cf. Rom.14.23).¹²

It may appear that Paul is rehearsing the Christian confession about God's uniqueness and creativity *in order to convince the weak*, to bring them to see the implications and applications of their belief so that they may join the strong. But this perception requires more careful nuancing, as we will seek to demonstrate below. At this point we mention three considerations that militate against that conception as stated.

- (1) If Paul's purpose is to instruct the weak, it is strange that he should use rather indirect and impersonal language: this knowledge, says he, is not 'among all,' and 'some' have consciousness of the idol. In other words, in these verses Paul never addresses the weak directly.

¹¹Fee, 381, n. 28.

¹²Brunt, *Paul's Attitude*, 85.

- (2) Rather than emphasizing the correct *content* of knowledge, the apostle's purpose is to give guidance in the proper *use* of knowledge, namely, in love.
- (3) Nowhere does Paul suggest that the consciences of the weak should *not* have been polluted by the *pagan religious use* of sacrificial foods.

Moving from description to declaration, Paul insists that neither food nor its use has an inherent spiritual or moral quality. Idol-food (εἰδωλόθυτον) is, after all, only food (βρῶμα)! (This will become important later in 10.25-28, when the apostle returns to the idea that the earth and its fullness are the LORD'S.) Eating and not eating have no advantage or disadvantage for our relationship to God.

Having cleared the way in 8.8 by saying 'if we don't eat, we're none the worse,' the apostle for the first time addresses individuals directly. In view here is a part of the church whom he enjoins to act cautiously toward another part, to avoid the possibility that the 'competence' (ἐξουσία, lit., authority, freedom, right) of 'strong' believers become a stumbling-block (πρόσκομμα) for those weak Christians described in 8.7. How that could happen is explained in 8.10: someone (presumably, one of 'the weak') might see them reclining in an idol-temple, partaking thus of sacrificial *meals*.

It appears that those with 'knowledge' were participating in cultic meals at the temple dining halls. After his conversion to Christianity, the 'strong' Corinthian believer maintained contact with friends and colleagues, continuing to attend festive meals held at the religious social halls devoted to the service of a patron deity or a national god. He 'knew,' in contrast to the weak, that an idol was nothing, that the gods alongside God were nobodies. And he correctly perceived that idol-food was ordinary food. But he went one step further: he viewed sacrificial *meals* as ordinary meals.

This public behavior of the strong created moral dissonance in believers whose consciences were weak. The weak were in danger, ironically enough, of being 'edified' unto their ruin. The brother's (note first time use in this passage) dissonance was not merely psychological, but spiritual, with eternal consequences (v.11, he will be 'destroyed'). All the more tragic in view of the fact that such weak Christians belong to those for whom Christ died—those whom He purchased and in whom He dwells. But the heart of this tragedy is that, sinning in this way against a fellow Christian by wounding his weak conscience, the strong believer sins against Christ Himself. To 'sin against Christ' is to stand

in the way of redemption's progress (cf. Mt.18.6; Mk.9.42; Lk.11.52; 17.1-2), in this case, the redemption of the weak.

Paul concludes with a maxim, a principle that reaches beyond his personal preferences to guide the Corinthian believers. The scope of Christian sacrifice and self-denial extends to the food we eat: permanent vegetarianism is preferable to a fellow believer's fall into sin (8.13). This leads us to the preliminary observation that rather than condemning or (re)educating the weak, the apostle subordinates the question about the permissibility of eating idol-food to the primary moral question concerning love for the weak believer.

This self-denying love is further described with reference, in *1 Cor.9*, to the apostle's own example. In spite of his expressed willingness to forego, forever, eating meat, Paul is an apostle, free in Christ whom he saw on the Damascus road. Although Paul and Barnabas had the right to depend on the Corinthian believers for support, to marry and take wives on their journeys, to devote full attention to gospel preaching instead of supporting themselves by their trades (vv.4-6), nevertheless they abstain from using their right, and instead exercise forbearance. They refuse their natural and lawful freedoms and rights, since their goal is to keep the path and progress of Christ's gospel clear of any obstructions which their use of rights might have occasioned.

In short, Paul and his co-workers declined material support from the Corinthians, lest they prevent someone from coming to grace. So they endure everything resulting from that self-denial (cf. 1 Thess.2.9; 1 Cor.4.6-13). In fact, the very idea that he should accept from their hands material support is so shocking that Paul would rather die than obscure what really is his ground of glorying: the *grace* of God which is sufficient for every need. Not only is Paul's gospel unique (proclaiming the God-Man Savior, risen and ruling), but his means of 'gospelizing' is correspondingly unique: Paul lived totally dependent upon the very grace he proclaimed. His *method* of gospel preaching glorifies the *content* of gospel preaching.

In 9.19-23 the apostle draws together his argument with the contrast which lay at the heart of the Corinthian problem: freedom vs. slavery. As an apostle preaching free grace without putting himself in their debt, Paul was free of all (9.1), yet willingly their slave (v.19). His purpose was clear: to win or gain more for Christ, a goal exemplified in his ministry to the Jews (those under the law) and the Gentiles (those without law), and to the weak. A key word in these verses is the little word 'as' (ὡς): Paul became 'as' a Jew, 'as' a Gentile, and 'as' weak. Without placing himself in subservience to the ceremonial law, he

circumcised Timothy (Acts 16.3), and honored his and others' ceremonial vows (Acts 18.18; 21.23). In subservience to Christ he could, with the Gentile believers, live free from the requirements of Mosaic ceremonies. Similarly, to the weak Paul became as weak, as though living under, and limited by, their convictions.

Examples from Scripture and Israel's history are provided in *1 Cor.10.1-13*, preparing the way for Paul's warning in 10.14ff against idolatry. The strong's claim of 'knowledge' apparently induced them to assume that their position as believers and their participation in the sacraments immunized them from 'falling.'¹³ These OT examples show exactly the opposite, however. The comparisons with eating, drinking, idolatry and sexual immorality alert the Corinthian believers to the danger of spiritual arrogance that precedes a fall.

With a pastoral urgency Paul brings his instruction to its climax in *1 Cor.10.14-33*, where he deals with three distinct questions relating to the *use* of sacrificial food. Each involves a particular context within which a Corinthian believer might encounter sacrificial food: (1) the idol temple; (2) the marketplace; and (3) at an unbeliever's home.

With regard to using idol-food in a pagan temple, Paul warns: Flee from idolatry! He has in mind participation at the *meals* in the idol-temples at Corinth, as 10.17b-22 shows. Not only does the history of the OT church demonstrate the sensibility of this command (cf. 10.1-13), but so does the nature of the NT sacrament of the Lord's Supper (v.16). The cup and the bread are a communion (κοινωνία) of Christ Himself, as Paul asserts by means of questions expecting affirmative answers. That is, eating-and-drinking means participation and fellowship with the one whose food is enjoyed. Moreover, eating-and-drinking unites one in solidarity with others who are ingesting the same food (v.17).¹⁴ To eat in an idol-temple is to associate with the altar; this was true of both OT Israel and their Jewish descendants still living in Paul's day, and of the believers in Corinth. To be 'communicants of the altar' (κοινωνοὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου, v.18) is to share in everything entailed in the worship of sacrifice: allegiance to the deity, veneration of his supposed powers and benefits, commitment to his service.

But in light of 8.4, where the apostle denies the personality and existence of idol-gods, does not his argument here (10.19) imply just the

¹³Brunt, *Paul's Attitude*, 100.

¹⁴Fec, 469.

opposite, namely, that idol-gods possess personality and existence? Communion entails two persons, at least—the worshiper and the one worshipped. True enough. What exists, however, is not the idol-god, but the demons who serve Satan himself (v.20).¹⁵ Idol-sacrifices are nothing less than sacrifices to devils, whereby one is brought into (comm)union with them. It is Christ or the demons, His food and drink or theirs. Not both. Otherwise those strong Corinthian believers risk provoking God to jealousy (v.22; cf. Dt.32.21). They may indeed be ‘strong,’ but stronger than God?

Participating at the feasts held in idol-temples was forbidden, therefore. But a second question was: What of the excess sacrificial food sold in the market? May Corinthian Christians use it? Already in 6.12 Paul had insisted that ‘all things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the dominion of anything.’ In chapter 8 he added the criteria of love (v.1) and not causing a brother to fall (v.9). Here in 10.23 he adds to the standard of ‘helpfulness’ that of edifying. Love seeks not its own (13.5), but the upbuilding of the other. Selfishness is its opposite.

The excess sacrificial food was put up for sale in the *macellum*, the architecturally and economically prominent marketplace in ancient Roman and Hellenistic cities. Everything for daily needs was sold there: perishables like fruit, grain, bread, fowl, fish; daily utensils; religious paraphernalia used for celebrations and ritual observances.¹⁶ In addition, the *macellum* served as a butcher shop and a communal kitchen. Meals could be ordered from chefs specializing in the preparation of communal celebrations, and even eaten in the *macellum*. Though the *macellum* was not used for cultic purposes, its goods and services bore a religious stamp. But in addition to the sacrificial foods sold over the counter, there was non-sacrificial food available.

The Corinthians are encouraged to buy and eat, asking no questions about the origin or prior use of the foods sold in the market. On this point their consciences were to be free. What is the basis of such freedom? Knowing that ‘the earth and its fullness are the LORD’s’

¹⁵See Ps.96.5, ‘For all the gods of the peoples are idols,’ which the LXX (95.5) renders with *δοιμόνια*, ‘are demons’; Ps.106.37 (LXX 105.37); Isa.65.3 (LXX); 65.11 (LXX). Cf. Fee, 472, n. 49.

¹⁶Thus the explanation of *μάκελλον* by J. Schneider is far too restrictive; see ‘*Μάκελλον*,’ *TDNT*, 4:370-372. We agree with L. Batelaan, *De sterken en zwakken*, 15-18; and his *De kerk van Korinthe*, 23-28.

(v.26; Ps.24.1; cf. 1 Cor.8.6). Food sold in the *macellum* belonged not to the demons, but to the Lord. Its possible sacrificial *use* would not have altered its created *nature*.¹⁷

In 10.27 we meet the third dilemma associated with eating sacrificial foods: May a believer accept an invitation to share a meal with an unbeliever, eating food that may have been sacrificed to an idol? The occasion may have been a birthday, a wedding, the safe return after a profitable voyage, or another festive celebration. It was customary to offer a sacrifice to the deity on these occasions, and part of the food dedicated at the idol-temple would be used for the meal.¹⁸ Now, if the believer was minded to accept the invitation, he was to eat the food given to him without asking questions about its possible religious use. But if 'someone' identifies the food as sacrificial food (v.28), the believer-guest must not eat it.

Within 10.28-29, at least three important exegetical points have occasioned debate among interpreters.

First, the *identity* of this informant, this 'someone,' is not easily determined. Possible identities include (1) the pagan host, (2) a pagan fellow-guest, and (3) a weak Christian fellow-guest. Many commentators choose (2) on the principal ground that Paul's hypothetical interlocutor must be speaking from a pagan perspective, since according to some manuscripts he employs a term referring to 'sacrificial meat' (ἱερόθυτον) rather than the standard Jewish-Christian designation 'idol-meat' (εἰδωλοθύτον), used earlier in these chapters. But others identify the informant as a weak Christian, insisting that the thread of Paul's argument in this context is to spare the brother moral injury.¹⁹

Coupled with the question of the informant's identity is that of his *motive* for informing the believer. If the informant was a pagan, he may

¹⁷This in contrast to the *Didache* 6:3, 'And in the matter of food, do what you can; but be scrupulously on your guard against meat offered to idols; for that is a worship of dead gods.' See *The Didache, The Epistle of Barnabas, et al.*, 19.

¹⁸L. Batelaan, *De sterken en zwakken* (86-87), and *De kerk van Korinthe* (130).

¹⁹The former view is defended by Fee (484) and Batelaan (*De sterken en zwakken*, 87). The latter is championed by Calvin (*Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, 345), F.W. Grosheide (*De eerste brief van den apostel Paulus aan de kerk te Korinthe*, 357) and Alfred Plummer (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 221-222).

Another solution is to leave τῷ unspecified, so that the warning of vv.28-29 covers both situations, namely, to avoid (1) causing a weak brother to stumble, and (2) giving the unbeliever an occasion for criticizing the Christian (so H.A.W. Meyer, *Critisch exegetisches Handbuch über den ersten Brief an die Korinther*, 275-276).

have viewed Christianity as a Jewish sect with Jewish scruples about food, and may be trying to help the believer out. Or he may be testing the believer to see what he would do, intentionally creating a predicament.²⁰ On the other hand, if the informant was a weak Christian, his motive may be to warn his co-believer of something violating his own scruples.

If one views the informant as a pagan, a third question arises. What then does it mean to speak of the *pagan's* conscience in 10.28b and 10.29b? One commentator suggests that here *συνείδησις* means 'moral consciousness' rather than 'moral arbiter.' Christian abstinence is advisable, therefore, to avoid offending pagan 'moral expectations of Christians.'²¹

Our reason for pausing here lies in the application or conclusion, drawn by some, that the weak believer's conscience may not restrict the actions of others, nor may the weak prevail over the strong. Rather, some would argue that the weak must be instructed in the knowledge of the strong, so that their consciences too may possess the freedom of the strong.²²

But this line of interpretation encounters difficulties in two areas, one textual, the other exegetical.

Establishing the informant's identity with appeal to the use of the term *ἑσθίωντος* (v.28) is textually uncertain, since that reading appears in a few Alexandrian manuscripts (P⁴⁶, *κ*, A, B), whereas the majority of

²⁰Philipp Bachmann, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, 342.

²¹Fee argues that the informant acts out of a sense of moral obligation to the Christian, thinking that Christians usually wouldn't eat such food. So as not to offend that person or his 'moral expectations of Christians,' one should forbear under these circumstances (485); similarly Batelaan, *De sterken en zwakken* (87). But precisely this difficulty of understanding what Paul could possibly mean by speaking of a pagan's conscience leads Grosheide to identify the informant as a fellow-believer (358).

Already prior to his discussion of this point, Fee has made an important exegetical choice (477) by insisting that in 10.23-11.1 Paul is not returning to the issue handled in chapter 8, concerning the relation between strong and weak, because several key words are absent ('idols,' 'knowledge,' 'the weak,' etc.). But what must we make of the appeal (twice in these vv.) to Ps.24.1, recalling the argument of 8.4ff? And what of the repeated concern for the other's conscience (8.7; 10.25,27-29)?

²²Fee, *Corinthians*, argues that Paul nowhere permits the believer's conscience to restrict the action of another, because the use of idol-food is not a matter of conscience at all (485); Carl F.H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, intimates that the weak should eventually outgrow their weakness (422); and Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Christian Ethics in a Secular Society*, strongly insists that since weakness is ignorance, this may be only a temporary condition (40).

manuscripts has the reading εἰδωλοθῆτον, 'idol-food' (or as we have been rendering it: 'sacrificial food').

There is a better solution to the exegetical puzzles in these verses, which might be arranged schematically as follows:²³

GENERAL RULES (23-24) All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. Let nobody seek his own, but let each seek the other's well-being.

SPECIFIC CASE #1 (25) Eat whatever is being sold in the market, investigating nothing on account of conscience.

(26) For 'the earth and its fullness are the LORD's.'

SPECIFIC CASE #2 (27) And if one of the unbelievers invites you, and you want to go, eat whatever is being set before you, investigating nothing on account of conscience.

EXCEPTION (28-29a) But should someone tell you, 'This is food sacrificed to an idol,' do not eat it, on account of the one who disclosed it and on account of conscience—for 'the earth and its fullness are the LORD's'²⁴—conscience, I say, not of yourself, but rather of the other.

RATIONALE (29b-30) For why is my freedom condemned by another conscience? If I partake with thanks, why am I blasphemed on behalf of that for which I give thanks?

GENERAL RULES (31-33) Therefore, whether you eat or drink or do anything, do all things to the glory of God. Be without offense for Jews and for Gentiles and for the church of God, just as I too please all people in regard to all things, not seeking my advantage

²³For a similar view, see G.G. Findlay, *The Expositor's Greek New Testament*, 2:867-868; by means of this schematic outline we wish to illustrate that the exception and rationale apply to both 'cases' where believers might encounter sacrificial food outside the pagan temple. The translation is our own.

²⁴We follow here the majority of manuscripts; contra Metzger, *TCGNT* (561), one good reason for the omission of this repeated citation of Ps.24.1 in some manuscripts may be that it is a genuine *lectio difficilior*.

but that of the many, in order that they may be saved.

The strong has been warned in 10.14-22 to stay away from feasts in idol-temples. This is followed in 10.23-24 with a general apostolic summary, stipulating that expedience, edification and the other's welfare ought to guide conduct. Then in 10.25-27 the apostle introduces two specific cases, both of them modified by the exception explained in 10.28-29a. The rationale for this exception is supplied in 10.29b-30, and followed by concluding general rules in 10.31-33.

Notice that the same advice is given for both moral cases: 'Eat without investigating anything on account of conscience.'²⁵ But, if any Corinthian believer learns, either at the market or in the unbeliever's presence, that the food has been consecrated to an idol, he must abstain for the sake of his informant's conscience. Notice the use of 'eat' in these verses: *eat* anything in the market (v.25), *eat* anything provided by the unbelieving host (v.27), but *don't eat* if in either case someone discloses the food's sacrificial use (vv.28-29a).²⁶

Twice the apostle roots his advice in the confession of Ps.24.1 that 'the earth and its fullness are the LORD's' (vv.26 and 28). If we may understand 10.26 as a 'swing verse' between 10.25 and 10.27, then this first use of the Ps.24.1 covers both specific cases. Moreover, its second use in 10.28 also covers both specific cases as warrant for the exception.

But how can the confession that 'the earth and its fullness are the LORD's' undergird advice both to eat and to abstain from eating?! It's rather common to relate the confession to eating, as the history of debate about Christian liberty illustrates. However, using this confession to defend *not* eating takes us by surprise. Its second use (v.28) seems to suggest that one can abstain from eating idol-food in these instances, and choose other food, in order to avoid injuring the weak brother, because everything in the world belongs to the LORD, and can be enjoyed. The strong is not dependent on idol-food for his physical existence, but has at his disposal an abundance of food other than what

²⁵Note the parallelisms between vv.25 and 27:

v.25a: πᾶν τὸ ἐν μακέλλῳ παλοῦμενον ἐσθίετε	v.25b: μηδὲν ἀνακρίνοντες διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν
v.27b: πᾶν τὸ παρατιθέμενον ὑμῖν ἐσθίετε	v.27c: μηδὲν ἀνακρίνοντες διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν

²⁶We disagree, therefore, with the RSV translators, Gordon Fee (486), and Brunt (*Paul's Attitude*, 114-115), who interpret vv.28-29b as parenthetical to the apostle's purpose. Instead, vv.28-30 lie very close to the heart of 1 Cor.8.1-11.1! See our outline above.

has been dedicated to idols.²⁷

It isn't necessary, then, to decide whether this informant is a believer or unbeliever. Although their consciences possess different orientations and content, for both believer and unbeliever conscience functions in the same manner (though not with the same effect!) as moral critic, judge and arbitrator.²⁸ The believer is to be so sensitive to others, whether pagan or Christian, that he is willing not to eat sacrificial food in order to avoid arousing questions of conscience.

The rationale for this exception to both cases we find in 10.29b-30. To understand this properly, let's ask: How does eating sacrificial food in spite of an informant's disclosure affect the believer's freedom? When I abuse liberty without regard for my neighbor, he will not only condemn my freedom (v.29b), but will also despise me for enjoying with gratitude what freedom permits (v.30).²⁹

We have seen why it is both difficult and unnecessary to identify the informant of 10.28. Further, whether he be pagan or Christian, whatever his motive (enforcing the scruples of his own weak conscience or sparing the believer potential embarrassment), the effects of liberty carelessly used are the same. Both the pagan and the weak believer would condemn this liberty and despise its practitioner for acting in a way inconsistent with his profession.

Does this passage, then, ban the weak from 'prevailing over' the strong, as some allege? If they mean that this passage nowhere exhorts the strong to modify his behavior for the sake of others, that view seems mistaken. In fact, the apostle emphasizes quite the opposite: the whole thrust of his teaching is found exactly in those verses thought to be parenthetical, in the exception to the specific cases (vv.28-29a). That thrust is this: For the sake of the person who, in this case, out of 'consciousness of the idol' (cf. 8.7) raises the point, the strong believer is to forego the permissible use of liberty in enjoying what is, after all, only ordinary food. Rather than speaking pejoratively of the weak believer or unbeliever 'prevailing over' the strong, why not echo the apostle in speaking of the strong *servng* the weak or unbelieving

²⁷S. Greijdanus, *Schriftbeginselen ter schriftverklaring en historisch overzicht over theorieën en wijzen van schriftuitlegging*, 94, 135.

²⁸Contra Fee and Batelaan, it isn't necessary to assign pagan conscience a function different from Christian conscience; see note 21.

²⁹Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, 346-347.

neighbor? The accommodation that Paul recommends is not because the weak *object* to eating idol-food, but because the weak (and unbelievers) are in danger of being *injured* by it. They risk possible spiritual injury by 'participating in acts not wrong in themselves but which violate the convictions of one's conscience and create associations with acts that are wrong.'³⁰

In vv.30-33 the apostle summarizes the character of living together as strong and weak. The cardinal principle for Christian conduct is to glorify God in everything. Such conduct will glorify God if performed according to knowledge that serves love. Negatively this is attained when our actions are devoid of offense or stumbling, when they do not occasion the fall of a Jew, Gentile or fellow believer. And if we must avoid occasioning their fall, that implies that we must determine to assist their progress unto God in holiness and obedience. Of this the apostle Paul is an example, as he had explained in 9.19-25, wanting to please everybody, enslaving himself to all, seeking their redemption.

This apostolic example is the basis for one final exhortation (11.1). Just as Christ did not seek His own advantage, but that of others whom He came to serve, so Paul sought the salvation of all to whom he proclaimed Christ's gospel. And so should all believers! If for some Corinthian believers, eating at the idol-temple was a matter of 'rights' and 'knowledge,' for Paul it was a matter of love and freedom. 'Knowledge and rights lead to pride; they are ultimately non-Christian because the bottom line is selfishness—freedom to do as I please when I please. Love and freedom lead to edification; they are ultimately Christian because the bottom line is the benefit of someone else—that they may be saved.'³¹

Summary: The 'strong' and the 'weak' in the Corinthian congregation are defined in terms of the moral permissions of their faith-knowledge concerning concerning idols and idol-food. Three distinct problems, or encounters with sacrificial food, are addressed by the apostle:

³⁰John C. Brunt, 'Love, Freedom, and Moral Responsibility: The Contribution of I Cor. 8-10 to an Understanding of Paul's Ethical Thinking,' 25. This instruction is confirmed by the apostle's own example: though he agrees with the strong that an idol is nothing, yet he doesn't berate the weak for their convictions.

³¹Fee, 477-478.

- (1) May a believer eat sacrificial food as part of a temple meal?
- (2) May a believer eat sacrificial food bought at the market?
- (3) May a believer eat sacrificial food as a guest in an unbeliever's home?

In terms of the last two cases, Paul discusses appropriate conduct if someone should identify the food as having been sacrificed to idols.

While clearly agreeing with the position of the 'strong' that idols are nothing and idol-food is permissible in itself, the apostle nevertheless turns his attention to a problem deeper than the question of food. The question whether it was right or wrong to enjoy idol-food was to be settled, finally, with reference to the co-believer and not to divine permissions.³² Paul is concerned about the effects of actions on fellow-believers (and possibly unbelievers) and on the church as a whole. All claims to knowledge and freedom must be placed in service to love. The 'weak' are in danger of sinning by acting against their settled moral convictions, and the 'strong' by misusing Christian liberty in disregard for the effects of his action on others.

1.2.2 Romans 14.1-15.13

The historical situation being addressed by this passage is quite different than the one we've been discussing. Some interpreters have identified five elements thought to indicate the specific contours of the problem: references to (1) clean/unclean foods; (2) vegetables; (3) abstinence from wine; (4) observance of 'days'; and (5) problems between believing Jews and Gentiles. Since evidence can be found suggesting the first four of these generated questions among *both* Jews and Gentiles, precise identification of the 'strong' and 'weak' tends to be rather speculative.³³ What can be said with certainty is that the apostle here addresses a situation in the missionary congregation in Rome involving a rancorous debate over the issue of food. The fight was between those more scrupulous (the weak) and those less scrupulous (the strong), the former despising and judging the latter, the latter scorning the former.

In the preceding context the apostle has been urging upon his readers the duty of love as fulfillment of the law (Rom.13.8-10). In

³²This is in basic agreement with Wolfgang Schrage, *Ethics of the New Testament*, 196; but he goes too far in saying that the question was to be settled finally with reference to the brother and *not to God*.

³³Brunt, *Paul's Attitude*, 143-161.

addition, because salvation is near, believers must be aroused to holiness and repelled by the works of the flesh (13.11-14). These exhortations undergird his discussion in chapter 14 of mutual acceptance instead of recrimination.

Our analysis of *Rom. 14.1-12* begins with our earlier observation that the precise identity of the weak is very difficult to determine; to defend our conclusion by replying to the many suggestions would be diverting.³⁴ We would rather examine, on the basis of the passage, both the origin and the character of their weakness, as being 'weak in the faith' (14.1).

Here the term πίστις is capable of two interpretations: objective content (*fides quae creditur*) or subjective confidence (*fides qua creditur*). Some commentators choose the latter, and hear Paul saying, 'Receive one who is weak in confidence, in conviction concerning faith's permissions.'³⁵ Further light is shed by 14.2, literally, 'One believes to eat everything, he who is weak eats vegetables,' and by the contrast to this provided by Paul himself in 14.14: 'I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself except to the one who thinks it unclean—to that one it is unclean.' Knowledge and persuasion, faith's content and confidence, combine to render one 'weak' or 'strong.' 'Faith' is here a synecdoche for 'faith-life' or even 'the obedience of faith' (cf. *Rom. 16.26*). And the one who is here spoken of as weak is then weak in reference to the application of faith's content and confidence to life's choices.³⁶

The weakness of the weak has, therefore, a religious origin and character. It is part of devotion to God.³⁷ This is clear also from the last part of 14.6: 'And the one who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and he gives thanks to God.' This point deserves emphasis in view of various identifications of weakness as timidity or over-scrupulosity, even ignorance.³⁸

³⁴See C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2:690-698. See also J. van Bruggen, *De oorsprong van de kerk te Rome*, 34-35.

³⁵H.A.W. Meyer, *Kritisch exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament - Römerbrief*, 461.

³⁶For a similar use of πίστις as a dative of relation with verbs of status, cf. *Rom. 4.19-20*; *Tit. 2.2*; *1 Pet. 5.9*.

³⁷John Murray, 'The Weak and the Strong,' in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4:145-146.

³⁸For the first, see R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the*

The main exhortation of this passage is 'receive' (προσλαμβάνεσθε), containing the notion of 'accept,' 'embrace,' 'bring toward oneself.' Obviously addressed to the non-weak, the word calls for an on-going acceptance and fellowship between weak and strong (cf. Ps.64.4; 17.26 LXX).

This counsel is further qualified by what follows.

The first qualification is a negative one, literally, 'not unto disputes over discussable things.' This clause functions modally, i.e., to explain *how* the weak believer is to be embraced: heartily, fully and equally.³⁹ It seems a bit prejudicial to insist that the word for 'discussable things' (διαλογισμῶν) is used in the NT with reference to wrong or mistaken ideas;⁴⁰ a more neutral sense of 'opinion' is preferable (cf. Lk.2.35; 5.22; 6.8; Phil.2.14; 1 Tim.2.8). Not the stating of personal convictions, but the attempt to convince the weak thereby, is being warned against.

Further characterization of the 'strong' person and the 'weak' believer is provided by 14.2. The strong person is one who, literally, 'believes to eat all things,' whose convictions and confidence permit such action. The weak person, on the other hand, eats (only) vegetables (λάχανα, vegetables, herbs; cf. Gen.9.3 LXX; Prov.15.17 LXX).

As v.3 indicates, the real problem here is not that one ate everything and another ate only vegetables, but that believers were involved in mutual recrimination. Notice how the apostle pares back his description of the occasion for disputes: simply 'eating' and 'not eating,' without further qualification. In other words, not the differences of either conviction or practice, but their *relationship* as believers is coming under scrutiny. 'Receiving' the weak entails not despising (lit., view as nothing) him (and his convictions). And the weak being received without the strong adjudicating his opinions requires that the weak in turn not (ad)judicate the strong. *These* are the characteristic injuries being committed by the strong and the weak, in violation of brotherly love.

The basis for receiving the weak is that 'God has received [προσ-ελάβετο] him.' The proper relationship between believers roots in their prior relation to God.

Romans, 816; for the second, see John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 491-492.

³⁹Herman Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen*, 303; so too A.F.N. Lekkerkerker, *De brief van Paulus aan de Romeinen*, 2:156.

⁴⁰Lenski, 815.

The weak believer who has been forbidden to judge the strong believer (v.3, μή κρινέτω) is reminded in 14.4 that he is not the boss of the strong; the God who has accepted the strong is his Boss. The weak stands alongside of, not over, the strong. The strong stands or falls first of all not before the weak, but before his divine Master (cf. the dative of relation, τῷ ἰδίῳ κυρίῳ).

Opinions diverge about the precise origin and character of the practice of honoring select days (14.5-6), leading in turn to divergent identifications of the weak and the strong. That this was probably not the residue of Jewish adherence to Mosaic law is evident by contrasting Paul's manner here with his harsh warnings in Gal.4.10-11 and Col.2.16-17.⁴¹ Nor does it seem likely that this refers to the Sabbath/Sunday conflict, for in that case both groups would have esteemed a day, but simply a *different* day! This difference in conviction and practice is not elucidated any further in the text. Rather, both groups esteem the day(s) *to the Lord* (v.6).

Whether strong or weak, each is further exhorted to 'be fully convinced in his own mind.' Here νοῦς refers to the capacity of the inner man for moral self-determination (Ridderbos), the power of moral willing (Meyer). Earlier in the epistle believers had been urged to be renewed by the transforming of their νοῦς, in order to prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Rom.12.2). Here in 14.5b two things are being emphasized:

- (1) *each* (ἕκαστος) is responsible (before the Lord, cf. vv.4,6,8, 10-12) for his own convictions and practice; and
- (2) each is *responsible*, i.e., must be fully convinced (cf. Rom.4.21).

Cranfield insists that 'this is not an injunction to cultivate a closed mind, which refuses all further discussion, but an injunction to resist the temptation (to which those whom Paul calls 'weak' were no doubt particularly liable) to luxuriate in indecision and vacillation. . .quite incapacitated for resolute and courageous action.' The apostle's objective is thought to be the inculcation of an obedience that is 'firm, decisive, resolute, courageous, joyful.'⁴² Moving in a similar direction, Ridderbos concludes that 'thus the apostle indirectly exhorts the strong

⁴¹Contra Meyer (*Römerbrief*, 465) and Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 661.

⁴²Cranfield, 705, 706.

as well as the weak to further reflection. This must compel the strong to seek their freedom exclusively in the faith, and the weak to reconsider seriously the reasons for which they think they must act.⁴³

While we can agree that Paul is urging a decisive and resolute obedience, we would argue that the passage lacks any indictment of *the weak* on that score. Nowhere does the apostle chastise those weak in the faith as if they had *ipso facto* fallen into error or tended to vacillate.⁴⁴ Rather, their tendency to judge the strong (vv.3,4,10-12) suggests anything but vacillation and indecision! Moreover, any implicit criticism of the weak by the apostle here in 14.5b would vitiate his own earlier exhortation to receive them (v.1). The weak are not being told, 'You must rethink your position.' No, whatever one's conviction, he must hold it fully and responsibly.⁴⁵

It is crucial to observe that one can be both weak in the faith (v.1) and yet 'fully convinced in his own mind' (v.5b). Weakness in the faith excludes neither conviction nor being persuaded and being happy (v.22).

Recalling the servant/master image (v.4) the apostle declares (note the indicative mood!) that both weak and strong are bound in their divergent convictions and practices 'to the Lord' (v.6, *κυρίῳ*, four times; *θεῷ*, twice). Both groups act from a religious motive! In spite of their differences, they both 'give thanks to God' (cf. Mt.15.36; 26.27; Acts 27.35; 1 Cor.11.24), a thanksgiving that would be injured drastically if the strong refuse to receive those weak in the faith and if despising/judging (v.3) were to continue in the church. Note here, as in 1 Tim.4.3-5, the connection between created things and the believer's thanksgiving.⁴⁶

In 14.7-9 we receive further explanation of 14.6 in particular, but also of 14.1-6 in general. The governing contrast is between a Christian existing 'to himself' or 'to the Lord.' To live to oneself is to consider

⁴³Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen*, 306.

⁴⁴Unlike his chastisement of errors identified in Gal.4.10, Col.2.6,21, and 1 Tim.4.3. So too G. Bornkamm, 'Ἀλλοτριον,' *TDNT*, 4:67.

⁴⁵S. Greijdanus, *De Brief van den Apostel Paulus aan de Gemeente te Rome*, 2:592-593.

⁴⁶This seems to confirm our previous judgment that the weak are not being censured for their convictions and practice. We think, therefore, that Calvin is unclear when he insists that the 'notion' of observing days is *condemned* by calling it 'an infirmity,' whereas the actual practice thereof is approved by God because the observer stays within the permissions of his conscience (*Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 497-498). How can a practice be legitimate that proceeds from an illegitimate conviction?

only one's own interests and aims. Not just living—consisting of eating and drinking and observing days and so much more—but even dying is a moral act, either for oneself or to the glory of the Lord (cf. Phil.1.20). What 14.7 says negatively 14.8 states positively, reaching a climax in the last words, 'we are the Lord's.' The totality of human existence (life *and* death) is brought under the totalitarian ownership of Christ Jesus. This new mode of existence is the express goal of divine redemption aimed at restoring creation's purpose, a purpose whose ethical implications for believers' relationships are elucidated in the following verses, where Paul applies Christ's totalitarian ownership to the attitudes of the strong and the weak.

Because in life and in death every believer belongs to the Lord, this establishes at least two new relationships. The first is triadic, between the believer, his fellow-believer, and their Lord. The second is fourfold, with this additional component: the thing/action about which opinions diverge among the strong and the weak. (Paul is clarifying the first in 14.1-13, and will clarify the second in 14.14-23.)

The weak is prone to judge and the strong inclined to despise. But if both act to the Lord (v.6), if both belong to the Lord (vv.6c,8b), then both will be evaluated by the Lord (v.9b), the certainty whereof is established by the Lord's oath formula ('as I live,' cf. Isa.49.18).

As Paul moves from the first person plural in 14.7-8 to the second person singular in 14.10, for the first time in this passage he employs the term 'brother' (ἀδελφός). To the weak he says, 'The strong one is your brother,' (not merely 'the servant of another,' v.4), and to the strong, 'the weak one is your brother.' But the second singular quickly gives way again to the first plural in 14.10b: 'for we all will stand before the judgment seat of Christ.' This *prospective unified status* among believers surprisingly becomes the justification (v.12) for tolerating a *presently differentiated actus* among believers. We who have died together *in* Christ and have been raised together *with* Christ (Rom.6.3-11), will also stand together *before* Christ.

In summary of 14.1-11, the application to 'each of us' in 14.12 contrasts with the 'all' of 14.10-11.⁴⁷ Note the progression of emphasis:

- (1) *each* will give account;
- (2) each will give account *about himself*; and
- (3) each will give an account of himself *to God*.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Greijdanus, *Aan de gemeente te Rome*, 599.

⁴⁸ Cranfield, 711.

Each of these has a corresponding implication for believers' relationships:

- (1) because each of you will give account, be fully convinced in your own mind (v.5b);
- (2) because each will account for himself, quit despising or judging a fellow-believer (vv.3,10; cf. v.13); and
- (3) since you will stand before God, do what you do to the Lord (vv.6-8).

As *Rom.14.13* shows, the immediate context places (2) at the center of Paul's exhortation here: 'Therefore let us no longer judge each other. But let us rather 'judge' this: not to place a stumbling-block or an offense before the brother.'

Up to this point only the weak, and not the strong, had been warned against *judging*. But in v.13 we read the warning against judging 'each other,' suggesting the presence of mutual recrimination rather than one-sided censuring. In our opinion, v.13a addresses *both* weak and strong, and serves to summarize vv.1-12.⁴⁹

But if v.13a addresses both strong and weak, does v.13b as well?

Some might argue that since the subject of the imperative 'rather judge this' is the same as that of the hortatory subjunctive 'let us no longer judge,' 14.13b is addressed to *both* strong and weak.

If so, why then does Paul warn both strong and weak against placing 'a stumbling-block or an offense before the brother'? How can the 'weak' believer put a stumbling-block before a 'strong' one? It is true that both were culpable, the one for despising his weak brother, the other for judging his strong brother. But the more natural explanation, supported by the following verses, is that by his eating practices, the strong was placing before the weak a stumbling-block and offense.⁵⁰

The apostle discusses, in *Rom.14.14-18*, the fourfold relationship between the believer, his fellow-believer, their Lord, and *the things of creation*. Paul is fully convinced that nothing—no food, no day, no wine

⁴⁹Greijdanus, *Aan de gemeente te Rome*, 600.

⁵⁰Is there a significant difference between πρόσκομμα and σκάνδαλον? Most likely not, according to John Murray (*The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, 187-188). While the former refers to an impediment in the pathway, over which someone could stumble, the latter refers literally to a trap; both words, used metaphorically, point to moral and spiritual injury.

(v.21)—is unclean, polluted, common, unholy, to which he adds: 'in itself,' which could also be translated, 'through Him' (i.e., Christ). Instead, all things are 'pure' (cf. v.20).

Many understand that Paul is speaking in 14.14 of the OT food laws as being invalidated through Jesus Christ (cf. Rom.10.4; Mk.7.15-20; esp. Mt.15.10-20 and Acts 10.3,9-16). Some understand the term 'unclean' in a cultic sense, denoting something that does not correspond with God's holiness.⁵¹ But seen in terms of redemptive history, the decisive feature is not cult, but corruption. Greijdanus states it most clearly: 'Through sin everything has become unclean, unholy, the whole world with everything in it. But through the work of His reconciliation and redemption our Savior has sanctified everything once again. This holiness rests in Him. . . This purity or holiness of things is connected to Him and His saving work. And therefore everything must be viewed in connection with Him. It is by doing this that the apostle possesses this knowledge and firm certainty. *ἐν* points to a ground or foundation upon which this knowledge and conviction rest, and thus describes a close fellowship.' Later he summarizes: 'To be *κοινόν* means that something does not exist in service to God, and since its fellowship with God is being broken, it is unclean and unholy.'⁵²

At this point the apostle may be repeating, and adding his agreement to, a slogan of the strong. Only to him who considers it so, is something unclean. But this seems to suggest that a thing's uncleanness is a matter of subjective consciousness. Its use then requires, in addition to objective divine permission, the subjective permission provided by a firm conscience as well (cf. vv.5,23).

At this juncture some might wish to appeal to Tit.1.15: 'To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled.' Calvin, for example, believes Rom.14.14 teaches that 'there is nothing so pure but what may be contaminated by a corrupt conscience; for it is faith alone and godliness which sanctify all things to us. The unbelieving, being polluted within, defile all things by their very touch. (Tit.i.15).'⁵³

Some of Calvin's assertions at this point are true. But we doubt that in Rom.14 Paul is speaking of the weak's *corrupt* conscience. Moreover, as the context of Tit.1.15 makes clear, Paul is not there speaking at all of believers; quite to the contrary, Tit.1.16 charges that

⁵¹Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen*, 311.

⁵²Greijdanus, *Aan de gemeente te Rome*, 601-602.

⁵³Calvin, *Romans*, 505.

those whose consciences are corrupt 'profess to know God, but in works they deny him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.'

In v.15 the apostle explains further what he meant earlier (v.13) by not putting a stumbling-block or offense in front of the brother: 'Yet if your brother is grieved because of food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.'

The verb rendered 'grieve' (λυπεῖται) is used elsewhere in the NT to mean 'be sorrowful, sad' (Mt.14.9; 17.23; 18.31; 19.22; etc.), but is also an action that can be committed against the Holy Spirit (Eph.4.30). The interpretation of moral injury seems to us a bit too strong, but the verb certainly describes the effect upon the conscientious scruples of the weak. The passive rendering here suggests culpability on the part of the strong.

This culpability is for more than causing sadness, however; the strong *destroys* his brother, i.e., causes his spiritual, moral, eternal ruin (v.15b). How this ruin is effected the text does not say. But this nevertheless marks progress in the apostle's argument, since up to this point he has simply characterized the actions of strong and weak toward one another. Now he identifies the result of the strong's disregard for the weak: grieving and destruction.

Two criteria are introduced in 14.15 as motives or grounds for the apostolic prohibitions: the standard of love and the status of salvation. The weak brother, because Christ died for him, is the Lord's possession (v.9), and thus his injury and ruin touch the Lord Himself. Notice the presence here in 14.15b of all the components of that fourfold relationship—the believer, his fellow Christian, the Lord and creation.

From 14.17 the context of the apostle's discussion expands beyond merely the personal salvation of strong and weak believers, to include 'the kingdom of God.' This kingdom consists of Christ's lordship (vv.6-9) through the application of the benefits of His redemptive work (v.9) within the life of believers.⁵⁴ It does not consist of food and drink (we might say, 'bread and butter'), but of 'righteousness and peace and joy.' Because these three are benefits of salvation, they are also Christian virtues generated by the Holy Spirit for exercise among the saints.⁵⁵ In this context they describe mutual relationships that should obtain among believers: righteousness, mutual peace (cf. v.19), and joy

⁵⁴Cf. Greijdanus, who distinguishes these three components, and understands this text to refer to the second.

⁵⁵Greijdanus, *Aan de gemeente te Rome*, 608.

in contrast to grief (v.15). These terms reappear in Paul's concluding benediction, 'Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit' (15.13).

But what is the precise nature of the contrast in v.17? Is Paul comparing the external (food/drink) with the internal (righteousness, peace and joy)?⁵⁶ Or creation with redemption? The natural with the spiritual? We must be careful here not to sow a separation between these two classes, only to harvest a dualism that is both ontological and therefore ethical. That contradicts Scripture at other points.

Perhaps a better translation will help us. The Greek words βρώσις καὶ πόσις could be rendered 'eating and drinking' (*actus edendi*) rather than 'food and drink' (cf. v.15, βρῶμα twice).⁵⁷ We might summarize the apostle's point this way: The believer enjoys not simply a threefold relationship—with himself, his Lord, and the creation—which is sufficient for evaluating 'eating and drinking.' Rather, in these activities he is also bound to his fellow-Christian, and must live *with him* in righteousness, peace and joy.

Such a believer 'serves Christ in these things.' We understand 'these things' to refer not to 'righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,' which by definition involve serving Christ. If, as Greijdanus asserts, the preposition 'in' has here a locative rather than instrumental sense, and if we may not view the triad of v.17b simply as human virtues instead of redemptive benefits,⁵⁸ it makes good sense to understand the progress of the apostle's argument something like this: Remember that God's kingdom is not eating and drinking, but living together in the righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; so serve Christ, not yourselves, with your eating and drinking. Once again that fourfold relationship is in view, between the believer, God/Christ, creation and other people. Using his food and drink in love for his brother (v.15), for God's glory (v.16) and in service to Christ (v.18a), the believer can stand before God (vv.4,10-12) and before others (vv.3-4,10).

Following Paul's instruction will yield the behavior exhorted in *Rom.14.19-23*. All members of the congregation must pursue, strive for, exert effort on behalf of things that advance the peace spoken of in v.17 (cf. Ps.34.14 [LXX 33.15]; Heb.12.14; 1 Pet.3.11). Harmony among

⁵⁶So Hodge, 668.

⁵⁷Meyer, *Römerbrief*, 473.

⁵⁸Greijdanus, *Aan de gemeente te Rome*, 609.

believers, in the sense of the absence of conflict, is not enough, for this ideal could presumably be reached even if each believer went his own way. But the Lord asks of us the positive, neighbor-loving pursuit of things that serve mutual edification.

We are now at the intersection between Christian liberty and neighbor love. The apostle has been dealing with its negative side in warning believers not to place stumbling-blocks or offenses before one another (v.13), not to despise (vv.3,10,13) or grieve (v.15a) or destroy (v.15b) one another. Now he specifies its *positive* dimension: rather than destroy, build up; instead of tearing down the fellow-believer, make him stand.

By moving from the first person plural in v.19 to the second person singular in vv.20-21, the apostle's attention narrows to the strong believer. The prohibition of v.15 ('do not destroy that one for whom Christ died') is matched here in v.20 ('do not destroy. . .the work of God'), both supplying the motive: the brother belongs to Christ; he is the work of God!

In this context, 'all things are pure' refers to food. We must avoid the impulse to expand this illegitimately to include all products of human culture and activity, as if such were by definition neutral.

The man who eats 'with a stumbling-block' refers to one whose eating is an occasion of stumbling, to the weak brother who eats to his own hurt (cf. v.14). It thus means something like 'eating with a bad conscience.' So strong is the apostle's aversion to occasioning another's fall that he recommends avoiding doing *anything* by which a fellow-believer stumbles, is made to fall or is weak (v.21).⁵⁹ The verbs used in 14.21 (προσκόπτει, σκονδαλίζεται, and ἀσθενεῖ) cover both offenses given and taken, both active and passive involvement in a brother's fall, indeed, his very condition of weakness.

With vocabulary reminiscent of his earlier discussion, Paul once more addresses in v.22 the individual strong believer who possesses precisely that in which the other is weak, namely, faith (cf. vv.1-2). Not that the weak believer has no faith, but he lacks the content and confidence of faith held by the strong.

When the apostle commands the strong to 'hold' or keep his faith to himself before God, is he recommending that one may act according

⁵⁹The translation 'or is offended or is weak' follows the reading found in the majority of NT manuscripts. Some modern critics suggest that this reading is an expansion by copyists who recalled 1 Cor.8.11-13 (see Metzger, *TCGNT*, 532).

to his faith-permissions privately but not publicly?⁶⁰ Doesn't that yield, in effect, a double morality?

The function of v.22a is simply to forbid public display of the convictions of the strong. We must be careful not to expand, beyond the text, on presumed private permissions. In any case, a *situational* morality that takes into account the presence of weaker believers is not the same as a *double* morality that operates with two conflicting standards.

The beatitude of v.22b contrasts with the warning of v.23. 'The one who does not judge himself' (v.22b) is better off than 'the doubtful one' who eats (v.23).⁶¹ Intellectual doubt questions whether something is *true*, while moral doubt wonders whether something is *right*. Here the apostle warns against acting out of moral doubt. A doubting eater is not a believing eater; his action proceeds from an emptiness, a lack of confidence, rather than from certainty of conviction. Such certainty is required for an action to please God; without it, eating falls under the sentence of conscience, which pronounces the deed sinful.

Then follows the doxology or benediction which applies to both strong and weak.⁶² Instead of looking at each other, the strong and weak need to look at God. Their attention is drawn to the power of God as the One who establishes both strong and weak. His tool is Paul's gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, which come in the

⁶⁰Grejidanus, *Aan de gemeente te Rome*, 614; Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen*, 317.

⁶¹Some insist that 'the doubtful one' (ὁ διακρινόμενος) refers to someone who vacillates about his convictions, someone who is at odds with himself (see Calvin, *Romans*, 511-512; F. Büchsel, 'Διακρίνω,' *TDNT*, 4:947-948; and in agreement with Büchsel, Ridderbos [*Aan de Romeinen*, 318]). It is tempting to adopt the doubter-as-vacillator interpretation on the strength of Rom.4.20 (Abraham 'did not waver [διεκρίθη] at the promise of God through unbelief') where, however, the verb appears in the passive voice. But surely Büchsel goes beyond the text when he identifies the subject of v.23 as 'the one who has no certainty as regards either his judgment or his action, who does with a bad conscience what he cannot refrain from doing' (947). The quality of this doubt, as v.23 indicates, is a faith deficient in confidence.

⁶²Again, we are following the text found in the majority of NT manuscripts. For argumentation defending the placement of these verses at the end of chapter 16, see Metzger, *TCGNT*, 533-536. It seems to us, however, that both external and internal evidence pleads for the majority reading. The manuscript evidence favoring placement in chapter 16 is (1) of narrow regional scope; (2) of limited strength (codex Bezae is decisive!); and (3) internally divided. Moving these verses from chapter 14 to chapter 16 can be explained with the hypothesis that after Marcion's amputation of the text, copyists attempted a restorative reconstruction which placed these verses at the end.

prophetic writings, or the Scriptures. The divine purpose, for both weak and strong, is the obedience of faith, because 'everything not of faith is sin' (v.23). Wisdom for this obedience is found in God alone, by whom the path in which the strong and weak in the church should walk together has been made manifest in Christ Jesus.

In *Rom.15.1-13* all specific talk about foods recedes into the background. To the foreground comes the matter of believers' relationship to one another. If chapter 14 directed both strong and weak to focus in faith on God, chapter 15 explains what strong and weak must be and do for one another. Resuming his exhortation, Paul now identifies with the strong (v.1, οἱ δυνατοί) and places himself with them under obligation to the weak. That duty is to bear them up, something more than simply tolerating or enduring them (cf. Gal.6.2).⁶³

Rather than pursuing his self-interest, the strong must seek the interests of his weaker brother, not simply as a people-pleaser, but with the aim of building him up.

This exhortation rests on two pillars: the power of Christ Himself, who bore for the sake of others hostile reproach and rejection, and the encouragement of Scripture, whose purpose is the church's instruction. These writings effect endurance and encouraging, which in turn generate hope. Because they are from God, the Scriptures bear the character of God Himself; He is the God of patience and enduring, that is, their source and origin.

The ideal of being 'like-minded' (v.5, lit., to value [φρονεῖ, cf. 14.5] the same thing) was expressed earlier in Rom.12.16, 'Being of the same mind toward one another, not setting your mind on high things but associating with the humble, do not be wise in your own conceit.' We must ask whether the design of this prayer, addressed to God on behalf of the whole congregation, is that believers come to agreement about those matters over which the weak and strong disagree. Rom.14.14a and 15.1 indicate Paul's enjoyment of the confidence of the strong, so that this prayer might seem to desire the convincing of the weak, toward their growth in confidence. But the context militates against this explanation, for the apostle has urged forbearance and solicitude of the weak, not their re-education. Moreover, the norm for this like-mindedness is Christ Himself (κατὰ Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν). Its character is explained elsewhere as looking to one another's interests in humble service (Phil.2.1-11). Not an identity of conviction, but unanimity of commit-

⁶³P.H.R. van Houwelingen, 'Samen sterk,' 601, n. 1.

ment to follow the Lord Jesus together, is the content of the apostle's prayer.

And for what purpose? Unanimity of mind and sameness of spirit yield a coordinated confession. Paul prays that, rather than judging or despising the brother, believers thus like-minded may praise and magnify Him who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Turning toward Him rather than turning on each other is the direction and fruit of faith.

The exhortation of 14.1 ('Receive the one who is weak in the faith') extends now to the whole congregation in 15.7-13; both strong and weak are to embrace one another. As he has done repeatedly throughout this passage, once again the apostle appeals to the example of Jesus Christ and to His redemptive work. The basis of his exhortation here is Christ's reception not of strong and weak, but of Jew and of Gentile. Christ became a servant of the Jews ('of circumcision') for the sake of truth, so the Gentiles might be received for the sake of mercy. Truth and mercy harmonize in Christ Jesus to the glory of God the Father; Jew and Gentile believers have become one in Christ Jesus (Eph.2.19-22). Likewise, strong and weak must live harmoniously in the congregation, to the glory of God the Father who grants by His Word patient endurance for mutual forbearance.

Summary: The 'strong' and the 'weak' in the missionary congregation in Rome are defined in terms of their attitude toward the use of foods and abstinence from meat. This attitude arises from the content and confidence of faith: the weak one is weak 'in the faith,' unable to exercise the freedom born of the faith which knows that nothing is unclean of itself. Clearly, weakness has a religious origin and character, since the one who abstains from meat does so 'to the Lord' (14.6) and is to be fully persuaded in his own mind (14.5).

Both weak and strong are called to act on the basis of firm conviction (14.5,22-23). Each is answerable to his Master and Lord (14.4,12). Yet, both positions must be tolerated in the church. This diversity must be practiced without mutual recrimination or scorn, each welcoming the other for the building up of the church. For the strong to impose their convictions upon the weak would lead the latter astray, perhaps even to their eternal, spiritual and moral destruction. And to impose the view of the weak on the strong would be to destroy the latter's Christian liberty.

But where the practice of the strong might provide a negative example to the weak, love requires from the strong a voluntary 'accommodation' and renunciation of 'rights' for the sake of the weak.

1.3 *Scandalum infirmorum* in the history of Christian ethics

1.3.1 Introduction

By now the trail has taken us deep into the woods, perhaps further than we first expected. As we pause to catch our breath, a glance around tells us that we're not the first ones to have come this far. Over the years others have hiked through these parts, leaving behind evidence of their own search and study. We're going to spend some time now examining some of what they've left us.

Among the things we shall see is that, although our focus is on *scandalum infirmorum*, moralists have defined and evaluated a variety of *scandala* or offenses, depending on the victim or on the culpability of the agent. Another feature of interest will be the various contexts within which moralists discuss offense of the weak.

Virtually every period of church history has witnessed some discussion of the terms, distinctions and judgments relating to *scandalum infirmorum* and arising from the Scripture passages just considered. Although we don't intend to narrate every reference or allusion to 'offense of the weak' scattered throughout the exegetical, homiletical and pastoral writings of Christian thinkers, we may profit initially from observing that the church's early writers paved the way for subsequent reflection with their classifications.

Basil the Great (d. 379), for example, distinguishes three kinds of things that induce departure from the truth or disobedience to God's commandments. A thing or an act which is *by nature good*, which serves the building up of faith, can still cause damage among those who wrongly take offense, but the agent is not culpable (cf. Jn.6.56,65, where Jesus' words cause some to withdraw from Him). On the other hand, if someone does something which is *by nature evil*, the agent is guilty of being a stumbling-block, whether or not someone stumbles (cf. Mt.16.23a, where Peter was a stumbling-block to Christ). Finally, a *permissible* action may nevertheless be an occasion of stumbling for those weak in faith or in knowledge. Such an agent is guilty of being a stumbling-block (cf. 1 Cor.8.12, where those who ate in idol-temples were careless about weaker brothers).⁶⁴

⁶⁴*De baptismo, Liber II, Quaestio X* (PG 31:1617-1621); Eng. trans., *Saint Basil, Ascetical Works*, vol. 9 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*. See also Basil's *Regulae brevius tractatus, Interrogatio LXIV* (PG 31:1125-1129).

We find a slightly different emphasis in *Chrysostom* (d. 407), who insists that offense results from not having our brother's salvation in view. Something is better left undone if no benefit accrues to our neighbor from our action.⁶⁵

Yet a third early church father, *Peter Chrysologos* (d. 450), arranges offenses according to their origin, as from either (1) the devil (cf. Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve, and Peter's temptation of Christ), (2) people (cf. Balaam, Jeroboam, the Corinthian believer), or (3) our senses (cf. Eve desiring the fruit, and Jesus warning against being led into sin through our sensual desires, Mt.5.29f. and 18.8).⁶⁶

Understandably, later discussions of *scandalum infirmorum*, while drawing upon these initial analyses, became more complex as writers placed the subject within broader systems of theology and ethics. In the remainder of this chapter we shall present four treatments of 'offense of the weak' that possess unique elements or accents. These four representatives are Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, Gisbert Voetius, and Carl Henry. Each provides an extensive discussion of our subject, and each is relatively well-known within the discipline of theological ethics. Although we shall find many similarities among their treatments, each offers a somewhat distinct emphasis that deserves to be isolated and evaluated.

1.3.2 Thomas Aquinas

In the second part of his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) discusses the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, along with respective vices contrary to them. It is in the section on

1129).

⁶⁵See his *Homily XXV* on Rom.xiv.1,2 and *Homily XXVI* on Rom.xiv.14 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Chrysostom touches on these matters also in *Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant* and in *Ad eos qui scandalizati sunt* (PG 52:479-528).

⁶⁶'De scandalo tollendo,' *Sermo XXVII* (PL 52:275-278). See also 'Seu de eo quod dicit: Impossibile est ut non veniant scandala,' *Sermo XXVII* (*Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 24:155). For a German translation, see 'Vom Ärgernisses' in *Bibliothek der Kirchenväter, Des Heiligen Petrus Chrysologus Erzbischofs von Ravenna ausgewählte Predigten*.

vices against the virtue of love that Aquinas treats the matter of scandal,⁶⁷ introducing distinctions and definitions which have continued to shape viewpoints about offense in subsequent Catholic moral theology.

Aquinas relates the definition of scandal to the meaning of σκάνδαλον itself. The Greek word may mean 'offense,' 'downfall,' or 'stumbling against something.' Thus it can happen that 'while going along the spiritual way, a man may be disposed to a spiritual downfall by another's word or deed, in so far, that is, as one man by his injunction, inducement or example, moves another to sin; and this is scandal properly so called.'⁶⁸

Since nothing by its own nature disposes someone to spiritual downfall, but only something deficient in rectitude (that is, *minus rectum*), scandal is fittingly defined as 'something less rightly done or said, that occasions another's spiritual downfall.'⁶⁹ An act is deficient in rectitude either by being evil in itself and therefore sinful, or through having an appearance of evil (cf. 1 Thess.5.22). According to Aquinas, eating food in an idol's temple, mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor.8.10, although not sinful in itself, nevertheless gives an appearance of evil (worshipping an idol) and is therefore *minus rectum* and a potential occasion for scandal.

Scandal occurs, Aquinas says, when an act deficient in rectitude *occasions* another's spiritual downfall. This terminology generates the important question: How must we understand the factor of *causality* in scandal? Who is to blame if someone falls?

Aquinas devotes careful attention to this causality factor. The only 'sufficient cause' (*sufficiens causa*) of a man's sin is his own will; therefore, another person's act can only be an 'imperfect cause' of my downfall. For this reason Aquinas would rather speak of such an act as the *occasion* rather than the cause for another's fall.⁷⁰

This 'imperfect cause' is identified further as either direct cause or

⁶⁷Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIa IIae, Q. 43; for the Latin text, see S. Thomas Aquinatis, *Summa Theologiae*, Pars IIa,IIae, Quaestio XLIII; our English excerpts are taken from *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 20 of *Great Books of the Western World*. A similar treatment may be found in Aquinas' commentary on Rom.14.1-15.13; see *Des Heiligen Thomas von Aquin Kommentar zum Römerbrief*, sub loc.

⁶⁸Q. 43, Art. 1.

⁶⁹Q. 43, Art. 1.

⁷⁰Q. 43, Art.1, Reply Obj. 3: 'Et propter hoc non dicitur, *dans causam ruinae*: sed, *dans occasionem*, quod significat causam imperfectam, et non semper causam per accidens' (emphasis added).

accidental cause. The former occurs 'when a man either intends, by his evil word or deed, to lead another man into sin, or, if he does not so intend, when his deed is of such a character as to lead another into sin. . . .'⁷¹ This combination of factors constitutes an offense as an active scandal (*scandalum activum*). Such an offense is direct when one intends to draw another into sin; it is accidental when, contrary to the agent's intention, the act draws another into sin. Responsibility for leading another into sin lies with the agent.

On the other hand, the cause of another's fall is accidental when neither the agent intends to lead him into sin nor the act is of such a nature as to lead another into sin, but the one stumbling, 'through being ill-disposed, is led into sin,' as when one, for example, envies another's goods.⁷² This is then termed passive scandal (*scandalum passivum*), and 'implies that the mind of the person who takes scandal is unsettled in its adherence to good.'⁷³

With characteristic logical completeness, Aquinas concludes his discussion of the causality factor by identifying possible relationships between active and passive scandal. Both can exist simultaneously (on the part of both the agent and the one who falls). Or, there can be active without passive scandal. We might find an example of this in Peter's attempt to hinder Christ from going to the cross (Mt.16.21-23); Peter was committing active scandal, but since Christ did not fall, there was no passive scandal. Finally, there can be passive without active scandal. This is illustrated by the Pharisees taking offense at Christ (Mt.15.12-14); without cause they stumbled at His teaching.⁷⁴

Culpability for scandal depends in turn on whether it is active or passive, direct or accidental. Although active scandal may not always result in another's fall, yet its agent is always guilty of sin. But in passive scandal, the agent is not culpable. Though passive scandal may be occasioned by another's act, the one who falls is guilty of sin.⁷⁵

Further clarification is provided by differentiating 'weakness' from 'offense,' and these from 'scandal.' According to Aquinas, 'Weakness denotes proneness to scandal; while offense signifies resentment against the person who commits a sin, which resentment may be sometimes

⁷¹Q. 43, Art. 1, Reply Obj. 4.

⁷²Q. 43, Art. 1, Reply Obj. 4.

⁷³Q. 43, Art. 5: ' . . . scandalum passivum importat quandam commotionem animi a bono in eo qui scandalum patitur.'

⁷⁴These relationships are outlined in Q. 43, Art. 1, Reply Obj. 4.

⁷⁵Q. 43, Art. 1, Reply Obj. 4.

without spiritual downfall; and scandal is the stumbling that results in downfall.⁷⁶

In connection with avoiding passive scandal Aquinas considers the issue of abstaining from certain acts. He distinguishes between abstaining from 'spiritual goods' and from 'temporal goods.'

Excommunication is an example of a 'spiritual good,' one which Augustine argued should be avoided if it might occasion schism in the church. Similarly, doctrine, fraternal correction and works of mercy are 'spiritual goods' that may need to be temporarily withheld if their teaching or doing might cause the weak or ignorant to stumble.

Spiritual goods are really of two kinds: those necessary and those unnecessary for salvation. Naturally, something necessary for salvation should never be withheld. But with regard to spiritual goods unnecessary for salvation, everything depends on the attitude of the one taking offense. If passive scandal arises from malice, as with the Pharisees against Christ (hence, *scandalum Pharisaeorum*), abstinence is not required. But if passive scandal arises from weakness or ignorance (*scandalum pusillorum*, 'scandal of the little ones,' cf. Mt.18.6), abstinence is a temporary duty.

But here we come to a matter that will become very important in our subsequent analysis. Earlier we saw that 'weakness denotes proneness to scandal,' in which case a spiritual good not necessary to salvation ought to be concealed or deferred until the matter can be explained and the scandal thus terminated. After the explanation, however, any continuing passive scandal is to be considered as arising from malice, and the spiritual good need not then be renounced.⁷⁷ *Scandalum pusillorum* can become *scandalum Pharisaeorum!*

Giving up 'temporal goods' may be necessary in relation to the weak and ignorant. As Aquinas illustrates, we may need to abstain from certain kinds of food. Or, the church may need to refrain from demanding tithes from people unaccustomed to paying them. In such cases we must either give up these goods altogether, or abstain from them temporarily while we instruct or admonish the weak and

⁷⁶Q. 43, Art. 1, Reply Obj. 5: 'Ad quantum dicendum quod *infirmetas* nominat promptitudinem ad scandalum; *offensio* autem nominat indignationem alicuius contra eum qui peccat, quae potest esse quandoque sine ruina; *scandalum* autem importat ipsam impactionem ad ruinam.'

⁷⁷Q. 43, Art. 7: 'Si autem post redditam rationem huiusmodi scandalum duret, iam videtur ex malitia esse: et sic propter ipsum non sunt huiusmodi spiritualia opera dimittenda.'

ignorant. If scandal in connection with temporal goods arises from malice, however, they need not be given up at all.⁷⁸

EXCURSUS: *Scandalum infirmorum* in modern Catholic theology

Bernhard Häring is a modern Catholic theologian who discusses offense very much in the lines laid down by Aquinas, in his *The Law of Christ*.⁷⁹ He suggests that the degree of intention qualifies culpability for offense, with the least serious being *scandalum indirectum*, the most serious being outright seduction. Concluding his overview of Rom.14-15 and 1 Cor.8-10, he insists that the Christian must be prepared to limit the freedom of his action if he sees that an action which is right in itself may become an occasion for the spiritual ruin of his neighbor. We learn from 1 Cor.10.24 that no action is really right that does not consider in love its effects upon the neighbor. The sin of giving offense roots in an attitude of self-interested inconsiderateness with regard to the salvation of the neighbor.

Three points of difference are worth noting. First, Häring seems to remove himself somewhat from Aquinas by insisting that it is too simple to say that the weak must be educated, after which their taking offense arises from malice. Paul surely didn't solve matters this way. Second, a permissible 'redemptive offense' is given when the intention is to 'shake up' one who is undecided with regard to the Lord; a crisis is precipitated whereby such a person is placed squarely before the demand of faith. But caution must be exercised that where 'redemptive offense' is given, it focuses on a central, priority command of Christian living. Finally, in contrast to Aquinas, Häring devotes attention to the duty of making reparation for offense. Those guilty of giving offense (he has in mind writers, artists, actors, theater owners and politicians) must do all within their power to reverse the consequences of their sin.

In his more recent volume, *The Truth Will Set You Free* (vol. 2 of the trilogy *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity*), Häring indicates that scandal is quite simply a lack of responsibility for the salvation of one's neighbor. This being the case, we can easily understand how both individuals and the church can give offense by accommodating themselves to the evil spirit of this world.

⁷⁸Q. 43, Art. 8.

⁷⁹*The Law of Christ*, vol. 2, subtitled *Special Moral Theology: Life in Fellowship with God and Fellow Man*, 471-494; this translation was made from the sixth edition of *Das Gesetz Christi* (1960).

1.3.3 John Calvin

What Aquinas meant for the development of Catholic moral theology, John Calvin (1509-1564) has meant and still means for Protestant ethics. His theological discernment and pastoral sensitivity have yielded a treasury of writings rich in both biblical and ecclesial orientation. God's Word and God's people were fountain and field for the labors of Calvin the reformer and preacher.

Two rich sources for his views on the matter of offense are his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and a lesser known tract, *Concerning Scandals*. Because the latter relates to our subject only incidentally, we shall offer a summary of its contents in an excursus below. We turn now to Calvin's extended discussion of offense in the *Institutes*.

It is very instructive to observe where in his *Institutes* Calvin treats the subject of offense. In the third of his four 'books,' Calvin considers subjects often included in Dogmatics (also called Systematic Theology) under Soteriology or Pneumatology. His explanation of such matters as faith, regeneration, repentance, the Christian life, justification, the relation between the Law and the Gospel, and the place of works in Christian living serve as the prelude to his pastoral application, in Chapter XIX, regarding 'Christian freedom.'⁸⁰

Indeed, it was Calvin's pastoral heart that motivated his consideration of Christian liberty as a subject of prime importance, for 'apart from a knowledge of it consciences dare undertake almost nothing without doubting; they hesitate and recoil from many things; they constantly waver and are afraid. But freedom is especially an appendage of justification and is of no little avail in understanding its power.'⁸¹ To avoid the errors of unbridled license and fearful enslavement, proper understanding of freedom is necessary for rightly knowing Christ, gospel truth and inner peace of soul.

Christian freedom, says Calvin, consists of three parts.

First, it enables believers' consciences to 'advance beyond the law, forgetting all law righteousness,' to 'embrace God's mercy alone, turn our attention from ourselves, and look only to Christ.' The law of God does not cease urging obedience, but it no longer possesses the power

⁸⁰For a similar presentation of Christian liberty by Calvin, see his French sermons on Galatians (according to P. Lobstein, *Die Ethik Calvins in ihren Grundzügen entworfen: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der christlichen Ethik*, 38).

⁸¹III.xix.1.

of condemnation before God's judgment seat. Christ is the source of our confidence before God; He has set our consciences free.

Second, these liberated consciences now obey the law, 'not as if constrained by the necessity of the law, but that freed from the law's yoke they willingly obey God's will.' In assurance of the Lord's approval for Christ's sake, believers live no longer as servants who fulfill assignments in fear of their master, but as children who please their Father with readiness and cheer.

Third, Christian liberty is useful for granting repose to consciences and for ending superstition in regard to outward things which in themselves are indifferent, for 'we are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using them and other times not using them, indifferently.' Discussions about eating meat, honoring holidays, and wearing vestments are not unimportant, since through these practices consciences are often ensnared, confused and guilty. But all outward things are subjected to our freedom (cf. Rom.14.14). However, when 'superstitious opinion' stands in our way of using something, then that thing which in itself is pure is for us impure and corrupt (cf. Rom.14.22-23). Freedom of conscience requires a hearty thanksgiving in using or not using outward things, a thanksgiving that recognizes in God's gifts His kindness and goodness (cf. 1 Tim.4.4-5). This confidence grants peace of mind and confession of divine liberality.

Having identified its constituent parts, Calvin significantly qualifies Christian freedom as being 'in all its parts, a spiritual thing. Its whole force consists in quieting frightened consciences before God—that are perhaps disturbed and troubled over forgiveness of sins, . . . unfinished works. . . the use of things indifferent.'⁸² They misunderstand Christian liberty who see it as an excuse for gratifying their desires, and who see it as something necessarily employed publicly. Such people use freedom without regard for weaker brothers. 'Away, then,' says Calvin, 'with uncontrolled desire, away with immoderate prodigality, away with vanity and arrogance—in order that men may with a clean conscience cleanly use God's gifts. Where the heart is tempered to this soberness they will have a rule for lawful use of such blessings. . . . And let them regard this as the law of Christian freedom; to have learned. . . to be content; to know how to be humble and exalted. . . to be filled and to hunger, to abound and to suffer want (cf. Phil.4.11-12).'⁸³

That men may with a clean conscience cleanly use God's gifts—that

⁸² III.xix.9.

⁸³ III.xix.9.

is the blessed fruit, and the high calling, of Christian freedom!

This, then, is the context within which Calvin talks about causing others to stumble and fall. Weaker people are made to stumble by people who use their Christ-given freedom in an indiscriminate, unwise and heedless manner. Such 'stronger' believers forget that Christian liberty, because it is freedom of conscience, *consists as much in abstaining from something as in using it*. Carefully echoing the apostle Paul, Calvin insists that freedom and its use are two quite different things.⁸⁴ This distinction enables the believer to be free while abstaining from something. Those who abstain from eating meat, for example, are not thereby less free; rather, because they are free, they abstain with a free conscience. We should act with such forbearance of our brothers' weakness 'that we do not heedlessly allow what would do them the slightest harm.'⁸⁵

So much for the context of Calvin's discussion of offense. He enters into the matter itself by accepting what he calls the common distinction between an offense given (*scandalum datum*) and an offense taken (*scandalum acceptum*), and this for two reasons: it has the clear support of Scripture and properly expresses what is meant. The former corresponds to Aquinas' *scandalum activum*, the latter to his *scandalum passivum*.

Someone gives offense by doing anything 'with unseemly levity, or wantonness, or rashness, out of its proper order or place, so as to cause the ignorant and the simple to stumble.'⁸⁶ On the other hand, someone takes offense when any deed 'not wickedly or unseasonably committed, is by ill will or malicious intent of mind wrenched into occasion for offense.'⁸⁷ The first kind of offense makes the weak to stumble (hence, the offense of the weak, *scandalum infirmorum*), while the second kind affects 'persons of bitter disposition and pharisaical pride' (hence, the offense of the Pharisees, *scandalum Pharisaeorum*). 'We shall so temper the use of our freedom,' writes Calvin, 'as to allow for the ignorance of our weak brothers, but for the rigor of the Pharisees, not at all!' Such solicitude for the weaker brother was taught

⁸⁴So P. Lobstein, *Die Ethik Calvins*, 40: 'When Calvin remarks that freedom in and of itself, and the use of freedom, are two different things, he identifies in principle with the apostle Paul's way of thinking.'

⁸⁵III.xix.10.

⁸⁶III.xix.11.

⁸⁷III.xix.11.

by Paul in Rom.14-15, 1 Cor.8-10 and Gal.5.13. Our feeble neighbors must be served by our freedom, a freedom given so that, 'having peace with God in our hearts, we may also live at peace with men.' But Christ's word and example teach us to ignore and disregard the offense of the Pharisees, those blind leaders of the blind (Mt.15.12,14).

But who are the weak and who are the Pharisees? Lacking clarity regarding this, our liberty remains useless. For this Calvin turns to the example of the apostle Paul.⁸⁸

It was the same Paul who both circumcised Timothy (Acts 16.3) and refused to circumcise Titus (Gal.2.3). 'Here was a diversity of acts but no change of purpose or mind,' Calvin insists. He continues: 'We have due control over our freedom if it makes no difference to us to restrict it when it is fruitful to do so.'⁸⁹ The mark of maturity is the ability to mix freedom with self-control, to exercise freedom in either foregoing or enjoying something with equal satisfaction, depending on the situation. In a real sense, the use of Christian freedom is situational.

Not only the restriction of freedom, but the assertion of it may be demanded by the situation. Again, it was the same Paul who became a Jew to the Jews, so that they might be saved (1 Cor.9.19-20,22), and who also asserted and insisted upon his freedom when that liberty was brought into danger by the demands of judaizing teachers (Gal.2.3-5).

To summarize with Calvin's own words: 'Nothing is plainer than this rule: that we should use our freedom if it results in the edification of our neighbor, but if it does not help our neighbor, then we should forgo it.' There are those who imagine abstinence to be more prudent, but they are not interested in the duties of love (cf. the Judaizers). In the presence of such it may be necessary to employ Christian freedom for their edification and salvation. Such is the nature of Christian liberty, that the believer has received freedom in order to be the more ready for the duties of love.⁹⁰

Proper use of freedom in either abstinence or enjoyment applies especially to 'things indifferent.'⁹¹ These are things or actions about which God has given neither prescription nor proscription. (One may never omit doing those things commanded by God, out of fear of

⁸⁸ III.xix.12.

⁸⁹ III.xix.12.

⁹⁰ III.xix.12.

⁹¹ III.xix.13; 'ad res medias et indifferentes.' For a discussion of Calvin's terminology and thought with regard to 'adiaphora,' see Thomas Watson Street, *John Calvin on Adiaphora: An Exposition and Appraisal of His Theory and Practice.*

offense.) The permissibility of 'adiaphora' is determined instead by considerations other than specific divine mandate. With elegance born of biblical reflection, Calvin insists that our freedom must be subordinate to love, and love must be subordinate in turn to faith.⁹² He berated the papists who pretended that their perversions were necessary to avoid giving offense to the weak and ignorant. Instead, believers are summoned to let nothing stand in their way of doing what God commands, not turning aside 'even a fingernail's breadth' from divine authority, and not attempting anything except what God allows.

EXCURSUS: Calvin's *De scandalis*

In his dedicatory letter to Laurent de Normandie of Noyon, Calvin's birthplace, Calvin prefaces his treatise by explaining the general character of 'scandal.'⁹³ He praises his friend for 'relying on the unconquerable power of the Spirit of God' in proving 'to everybody else that there is no obstacle [*obstaculum*] so troublesome and difficult that it may not be surmounted with that same help.'⁹⁴ This metaphor reappears when in the tract he defines scandals to be 'obstacles [*impedimenta*] of all kinds, whether they divert us from the right direction, or keep us back by being in the way, or provide the means for making us fall.'

⁹²III.xix.13; 'Quemadmodum enim charitati subiicienda est nostra libertas: ita sub fidei puritate subsidere vicissim charitas ipsa debet.' This contradicts Lobstein's assertion that Calvin 'reduces freedom, in a purely negative sense, to liberation from sin and from the law. For those three constitutive elements of Christian liberty. . . comprise nothing else than the negative freedom from the domination of the law over terrified and enslaved consciences' (*Die Ethik Calvins*, 39). In Calvin's statement we hear the opposite of Lobstein's conclusion that 'because for Calvin the positive definitions of the concept of Christian liberty got lost, the ethical profit of this teaching had to remain insignificant and ineffectual' (44). Rather, it appears that Lobstein's view of law and freedom inclines him to allege that 'due to his interpretation of the law and the practical outworking of the Christian life, it follows unambiguously that with [Calvin], Christian liberty fails to attain its full evangelical right, but is instead reduced in a peculiar way' (44). For a penetrating analysis of Calvin's development of freedom's positive side, see J. Bohatec, 'Autorität und Freiheit in der Gedankenwelt Calvins.'

⁹³We are relying for our English citations on *Concerning Scandals*, trans. by John W. Fraser; the translator informs us that his translation is based on the text in *Johannis Calvini, Opera Selecta*, edited by P. Barth and W. Niesel, vol. 2, edited by P. Barth and Dora Scheuner, 159-240 (indicated in subsequent notes as B-N). This treatise, entitled *De scandalis quibus hodie plerique absterrentur nonnulli etiam alienantur a pura evangelii doctrina*, appears also in Johannes Calvini, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, edited by Guilielamus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz and Eduardus Reuss, vol. 8.

⁹⁴B-N, 162; *Concerning Scandals*, 2.

Before classifying these general 'obstacles,' Calvin identifies four kinds of people who are turned away from Christ by scandals. Those who are naturally (and somewhat fearfully) modest are put off by the prospect of the gospel's offense. Still others are hindered from coming to Christ by stupidity rather than ill-will. These two kinds deserve more mild treatment, whereas harsher handling is reserved for those who stumble because of their own arrogance and for those who hate the gospel outright. Calvin is especially solicitous toward those of the first two kinds, and desires by this little tract to enable 'the weak and the ignorant' (*infirmi ac rudes*) to overcome scandals. 'My concern,' writes Calvin, 'is for the weak, for when their faith is shaky then it is our place to support it as with a sustaining hand.'⁹⁵

The obstacles to faith Calvin distinguishes into three classes.⁹⁶

First, there are intrinsic scandals, which arise from the gospel itself. This class includes the doctrines and demands of the gospel. The incarnation of the Son of God, predestination, the language and style of some Bible writers, the demands of discipleship are among obstacles intrinsic to Christianity.

A second class embraces scandals connected with the gospel, but originating elsewhere. Here Calvin mentions the gospel's exposure of ungodliness, doctrinal and moral heresies, the tendency toward libertinism, and the dissolute lives of Christian pastors and teachers (another of the church's 'ulcers,' mourns Calvin). David brought ruin on God's people through his adultery. Simeon and Levi, as well as Judah, brought disrepute upon the church by their wicked behavior. Even Paul's quarrels with Barnabas (Acts 15.39) and Peter (Gal.2.11) were nothing more than Satan's stratagem to undermine the gospel.

Calvin refers in this context to the Supper controversy between Luther, on the one side, and Oecolampadius and Zwingli, on the other. 'Everywhere there is agreement about the teaching on all these points (concerning the object and efficacy of the Supper),' he insists; but he laments, 'Why then do proud men find such a stumbling block in this connection that it bars the way to the gospel?'⁹⁷

The third class of scandals encompasses those that flow from sources unrelated to the gospel, called extrinsic scandals. They include false accusations hurled at Christianity, intended to cause people to avoid the gospel. The insidious demands of the papists for auricular confession, celibacy and abstinence from certain foods belong to this class of offenses. And the self-serving claims of Rome against the church of the Reformation, accusing her of breaking with antiquity and of having no right to the name 'church,' are not related to the gospel at all, but arise from human pride and ambition.

Everyone belonging to Christ Jesus will encounter obstacles, Calvin concludes.

⁹⁵B-N, 168; *Concerning Scandals*, 12.

⁹⁶Calvin's brief introductory description of these classes is found in B-N, 168-170, and *Concerning Scandals*, 12-14; he devotes the rest of the treatise to explaining and illustrating each kind of scandal.

⁹⁷B-N, 215; *Concerning Scandals*, 82.

Although they are erected by Satan, these innumerable scandals must be overcome by retaining Christ as foundation. On the one hand, we must take care that no stumbling block occur through our fault; but on the other, we may remove no stumbling block imposed by the gospel itself.

1.3.4 Gisbert Voetius

Here is a Dutch theologian who, as a lifelong opponent of Arminianism, Roman Catholicism and Cartesianism, illumines an important dimension of our subject.⁹⁸

Gisbert Voetius (1589-1676) virtually echoes Aquinas in his terminology, tone and treatment of offense. Beginning with the definition formulated by Basil the Great and adopted by Aquinas, Voetius differentiates among active and passive scandal, among active scandal *per se* and active scandal *per accidens*, and so forth.

But one dimension of Voetius' treatment of offense deserves special attention, since he emphasizes it in a variety of ways. That is his concern for causing not believers, but *unbelievers* to stumble.

This concern is emphasized first by the context within which he treats offense, entitled 'Concerning the Good Example.'⁹⁹ But it is repeated when he classifies offenses according to their object. Appealing to 1 Cor.10.32 ('Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God'), Voetius distinguishes between injuring fellow believers and harming those outside of the faith and the church.

But the most remarkable clue to this Voetian emphasis appears from the arrangement of his entire treatment. In thomistic style Voetius proceeds in eight sections (corresponding to Aquinas' eight articles!) to define scandal, its subjects and objects, its kinds and culpabilities, and to discuss whether spiritual and temporal goods should be omitted to avoid scandal. In his *eighth* section, however, Voetius diverges significantly from Aquinas' arrangement, when he asks 'whether scandals are given to, or in reality taken by, those who formerly as pagans and nowadays as papists and others wander from the truth and

⁹⁸For further information about Voetius' life and work, see A.C. Duker, *Gisbertus Voetius*, 3 volumes; S.D. van Veen, 'Gisbertus Voetius,' *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 12:220-221; see also S. van der Linde, 'Voetius, Gisbertus,' *Christelijke encyclopedie*, 2nd ed., 6:506; and J. Moltmann, 'Voetius, Gisbert,' *RGG*, 3rd ed., 6:1432-1433.

⁹⁹Gisberti Voetii, *Selectarum Disputationum Theologicarum*, Pars Quarta, 146-156; the Latin section is entitled 'De exemplo bono, ejusdemque imitatione, et opposito scandalo.'

are turned away from the profession of the Christian religion?"¹⁰⁰

His answer: Both occur. *Scandalum acceptum* occurs when, in rejection of divine revelation, unbelievers impute wrongdoing to the church and the Christian religion.

But *scandalum datum* can also occur when the church causes those outside to fall, in four ways: (1) through quarrels in the Christian church about dogmas of faith; (2) through schisms, divisions and separations, whether of churches or of ministers; (3) through the degenerate and evil customs of many Christians, whereby the faith and the church are perverted in the presence of unbelievers, as people are led, under the name of Christ, to live against the faith and to deny Christ by their actions; and (4) through too much toleration of remaining customs in external matters, especially too many concessions to pagan rituals, and adaptations of them to the worship of the true God, whereby they will sooner instruct Christians to be pagans than pagans to be Christians.¹⁰¹

1.3.5 Carl F.H. Henry

For Carl Henry, spiritual liberty is the primary principle of Christian living, a liberty that is limited by several considerations, including concern for the weaker believer and the unbeliever.

Few people have been as influential in transforming early 20th century fundamentalism into late 20th century evangelicalism as Carl F.H. Henry (b. 1913). Among the founding editors of the magazine *Christianity Today*, Henry has been a prodigious writer, a sharp thinker and an effective Christian leader and opinion shaper.¹⁰²

His *Christian Personal Ethics* examines speculative philosophy and its moral quest in general, and then turns particularly to Christianity and the moral revelation it proclaims. In Chapter 18, 'New Testament Principles of Conduct,' Henry discusses seven chief principles which are the foundation of ethical maturity.

¹⁰⁰*Disputationum*, 154: 'VIII. Quaest. An scandala sint data, an vero accepta, quibus olim Gentiles, et hodie Pontificii alique errantes a veritate et professione religionis Christianae avertuntur?'

¹⁰¹*Disputationum*, 154-156.

¹⁰²For more information about the thought of Carl Henry, see J.D. Douglas, 'Carl F.H. Henry,' *New Dictionary of Theology*, 291.

The *first* NT principle is that of Christian liberty in grace, freedom from the Law as a means of salvation, freedom from a legalistic conscience. In fact, the NT maxim that 'All things are lawful' (1 Cor.6.12; 10.23) 'is the primary principle of Christian ethics. This is a summary of the disciple's morality (cf. 1 Cor.9.19).'¹⁰³ Christian living is essentially world affirming, because it roots in and presupposes creation and redemption. The creation is not evil in itself, but the world is evil only as fallen world.

As one who wrote against the background of American fundamentalism with its strict code of behavior and rigid rules concerning abstinence from certain practices, Henry argues that believers don't always see the full implications of their liberty. Not all possess the same knowledge (1 Cor.8.7), and consequently another principle comes into play, namely, that the conscience of the weak must be honored. But caution is advised, for 'his conscientious objection does not in itself have final validity. Christian conscience is not infallible. It requires growth and education.' 1 Cor.10.25 teaches not that one is to ask no questions in order to avoid knowing whether the food is sacrificed or not, but rather that 'the overscrupulous conscience of the weaker brother needs enlightenment. . . . Here the conscience is not to be stifled but to be educated.' Indeed, there is a proper burden to be placed upon the weak, namely, that they 'recognize the principle of Christian liberty, and not offend the strong.'¹⁰⁴ But because the believer is a member of a community, his liberty may not become license. The guideline of 'all things are lawful' is not a self-sufficient principle of Christian morality, but depends upon other circumstances for its validity and adequacy. In terms of eating idol-food, the action itself is, according to Henry, a matter of ethical indifference, while there may be situations in which it becomes wrong.¹⁰⁵

Using that which is lawful is further restricted by Henry's *second* principle of conduct: the purpose of Christian liberty is to glorify God, not to engage in sin. 1 Cor.10.23 ('All things are lawful') is followed by 10.31: 'Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.' That which is lawful, then, is determined by the will and authority of God Himself. Liberty is not lawlessness.

¹⁰³Henry, *Ethics*, 420.

¹⁰⁴Henry, *Ethics*, 422.

¹⁰⁵Henry, *Ethics*, 423.

Taking care to avoid defiling one's own conscience is the *third* principle that Henry mentions. Something generally permitted may yet be wrong for a believer in a particular situation, if his conscience is thereby defiled. One's spiritual health is a major ethical consideration, so that 'the principle of inward intention and inner consequences becomes vital for ethical living.'¹⁰⁶ This principle generates variety and individuality of moral action, since that which defiles conscience will not be the same for everyone. Personal ethical decisions are required in terms of spiritual consequences of doing or not doing a certain thing. This principle comes into play particularly with regard to the 'adiaphora,' those things neither commanded nor prohibited in Scripture. Defilement of conscience can then result from excessive attachment, for example.

A *fourth* NT principle of conduct is that the believer should avoid placing a stumbling-block before weaker believers. Our Christian liberty is limited, according to this rule, by expediency. The effects of our actions on ourselves and on others must be evaluated. Because we are not isolated Christians but members together of a redeemed community, we are not to employ our liberty 'for an occasion to the flesh, but by love [we are to] serve one another' (Gal.5.13). Appealing to Calvin, Henry insists that 'love smoothes out the path for the other person; it does not place stumbling-blocks before him.'¹⁰⁷ Honoring the other's conscience may require that we suspend our Christian freedom for his sake.

Still, the question arises: what if the weaker brother's opinion is mistaken, immature or wrong? How far must the stronger believer go in denying himself? Some issues, according to the apostle Paul, are not matters of conscience at all. When he withstood Peter for seeking to bring believers in bondage to the Jewish system, Paul clung firmly to the primacy of Christian liberty. But we must distinguish between the truly weaker brother who is offended, and the 'cavilling brother who uses an appeal to conscience as a tool to serve his own ends. Jesus sharply rebuked the religious hypocrite (Mt.15.14), and none can be more hypocritical than one who pleads 'conscience' to further his own cause.' But can one be faced here with a clash of choices? Indeed, says Henry, 'Christian judgment faces one of its most demanding tasks when the performance of an act harms someone, while its omission would harm

¹⁰⁶Henry, *Ethics*, 427.

¹⁰⁷Henry, *Ethics*, 429.

someone else, as is sometimes the case in questions of Christian liberty.¹⁰⁸ Rather than looking down on the weaker brother, or baiting him by deliberately doing what violates his conscience, the stronger believer must enlighten the other's conscience, in order to lead the weaker one out of bondage to false scruples. 'A practice which is contrary to the dictates of a brother's conscience can be carried on only alongside of an enlightening of that brother's conscience.'¹⁰⁹

The dangers faced by the weaker believer are two: (1) viewing an innocent or indifferent act as intrinsically evil, and (2) shunning his duty to bear Christian witness in some cultural areas. Likewise, the stronger believer faces two dangers: (1) travelling into forbidden territory out of reaction to the weak conscience, and (2) by his use of liberty, leading the weaker one into sin or a defiled conscience. All of these dangers can be avoided by *keeping together* the freedom Christ gives *and* the claim Christ exercises. Neither legalism nor libertinism is the solution. Rather, 'conduct must be forged by spiritual decision before the fires of motive and judge by conscience. May I as a believer partake in this activity or that pleasure? If my conscience will allow me to do it 'to the Lord' and give thanks for it, then most assuredly I may. If my conscience does not give me liberty, than I may not. For it is to God and not to men that we must give account for our conduct.'¹¹⁰

Concern for the effect of one's actions on unbelievers is the *fifth* NT principle of conduct. The Scripture is concerned that believers walk without reproach before the world (cf. 1 Pet.3.15f). Abstention for the sake of others broadens into a general principle here, one unique to Christianity and without parallel in non-Christian ethics.¹¹¹

Henry identifies a *sixth* NT principle of conduct from 1 Cor.6.14 ('Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?'). A believer is not to be allied with the unbeliever, and 'is prohibited from an entrance into pagan life for a mutual effort and aim.'¹¹² This prohibition envisions any situation in which the unbeliever determines the course of action or directs the

¹⁰⁸Henry, *Ethics*, 430.

¹⁰⁹Henry, *Ethics*, 431.

¹¹⁰Henry, *Ethics*, 432-433.

¹¹¹Henry, *Ethics*, 433.

¹¹²Henry, *Ethics*, 433.

thought of the believer.

A final and *seventh* NT principle requires that in certain times and places, the Christian may be answerable to an 'interim code' as a temporary or local expedient. This 'interim code' is characterized as temporary not on account of eschatological considerations (as, for example, with Albert Schweitzer, who defended an 'interim ethic'), but on account of 'the particular direction which godlessness and sin take in a particular place and time.'¹¹³ According to Henry, this is what 1 Cor.11.1-16 illustrates (where women who appear in public with uncovered head are criticized). The basic principles are modesty, propriety and order, which may find expression in different ways in various cultures, depending on the social customs. Church history provides many fine examples of the application of 'interim codes' in the so-called church manuals. These collections of 'counsels' and case laws provided advice for conduct in the light of current customs in the surrounding culture.

In this connection Henry discusses the place and dimensions of 'Christian separation.' The call to separation can be an excuse for both unholy divisiveness and unhealthy withdrawal from the world. But the ideal of toleration can also be an excuse for fleshly indulgence and fluid broadmindedness. Biblical morality recognizes, in distinction from both 'separationists' and 'tolerationists,' that separation is *unto* God and His purpose (cf. the separation of Abraham and of Israel; Gen.12.1ff; Dt.7.1ff; 14.2). The suggestion of separation from evil is only implicit here. In terms of Christian separation, then, from what areas of culture must the believer withdraw?

That this is not the real question Henry makes clear by pointing to the function of common grace in restraining sin and making possible legitimate expressions of culture.¹¹⁴ The real question is: *How* must the Christian enter the cultural arena? Here all the previous NT principles of conduct come into view once again: the believer must beware of defiling his conscience, must scrupulously examine his motives, and must exercise liberty with care. Such a believer recognizes, then, that he has a mission. In Henry's words, 'One who has a concern to find in cultural expression the best achievements of common grace

¹¹³Henry, *Ethics*, 434.

¹¹⁴Henry neither defines nor discusses this concept any further. 'Common grace' is often differentiated from 'special grace,' the latter referring to the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit through the gospel.

and who has a desire to infuse into the general life of humanity the higher motif of redemption can walk in the midst of what may defile a weaker conscience. And he can be an ambassador. . . .All things are pure to the pure.' The only warning is that one never become enslaved to any cultural practice.¹¹⁵

EXCURSUS: *Scandalum infirmorum* and *scandalum pusillorum*

The history of Christian reflection on the subject of 'offense' compels us to distinguish *scandalum infirmorum* from *scandalum pusillorum* (offense of the little ones).

The latter term derives from Mt.18.6, where Christ warns His disciples, in reference to a child He had placed in their midst, about leading little ones into sin: 'But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!' (Mt.18.6-7).

It is worth observing that when, in his treatment of offense, Aquinas sorts passive scandal into two kinds, the scandal of the Pharisees and that of the little ones, he nowhere employs the term *scandalum infirmorum*, and appears to designate the matter of offending the weak entirely by the term *scandalum pusillorum*. As we have seen, Aquinas treats also the possibility that passive scandal arising from weakness or ignorance (scandal of the little ones) can turn into scandal arising from malice (scandal of the Pharisees), if enlightenment is rejected. Similarly, when Voetius sorts passive scandal into two kinds (*scandalum acceptum*, or offense taken, and *scandalum datum*, or offense given), he identifies *scandalum datum* as 'scandal of the weak ones or little ones.'¹¹⁶ These two classifications he combines elsewhere: both *pusilli* ('little ones') and *infirmi in fide* ('the ones weak in faith') are those inadequately established in New Testament Christian liberty,¹¹⁷ and the objects of *scandalum datum* can include the weak and infants in Christ.¹¹⁸

In our judgment, *scandalum infirmorum* and *scandalum pusillorum* have in common the potential for inducing someone to err by imitating another's

¹¹⁵Henry, *Ethics*, 436.

¹¹⁶Voetius, *Disputationum*, 147: '[Scandalum] Datum est, quod vere oritur ex activo scandalo alterius; quod etiam scandalum infirmorum seu pusillorum dici solet.'

¹¹⁷Voetius, *Disputationum*, 148: 'Pusilli & infirmi in fide stricte dicuntur illi, qui circa libertatem Christianam in N.T. sufficienter instituti non sunt, 1 *Corinth.* 8.v.7.'

¹¹⁸Voetius, *Disputationum*, 148: 'Dividitur scandalum datum secundum objecta: ut aliud scandalizet a fide & ecclesia extraneos; aliud domesticos fidei, eosque aut sapientes & viros (quod tamen non ita frequens), aut infirmos & infantes in Christo.'

behavior. This similarity explains Voetius' treatment of offense as the opposite of the good example. But the most relevant difference between them appears to be the victim's aptitude of conscience involved in the process of moral injury. We would suggest, in light of 1 Cor.8.7, that offense of the 'weak' necessarily results from the violation of his formed conscience functioning restrictively in a given situation, whereas offense of the 'little ones' injures someone whose conscience is (yet) neither formed nor functioning concerning the error into which he is led.

1.4 A description of the issues

Our survey of these four representatives has provided an orientation to the terminology, the various contexts and Scripture passages related to *scandalum infirmorum*. In order to evaluate these positions, we must collate and organize their conclusions in an effort to establish parameters for our further reflection and to describe the contours of this moral problem.

The material presented above yields the following dimensions which can serve as suitable headings for our analysis of *scandalum infirmorum*:

1. What is the nature of weakness?
2. What is the process of *scandalum infirmorum*?
3. What is the arena of *scandalum infirmorum*?
4. What is the theological context of *scandalum infirmorum*?

Two more preliminary comments need to be made. First, from the four questions it becomes clear that we are narrowing our focus to one of several kinds of offense. Aquinas speaks of active and passive offenses, dividing the latter into scandal arising from (1) malice and (2) weakness and ignorance. Calvin simplifies matters by identifying offense *given* (*scandalum datum*) as offense of the weak, and offense *taken* (*scandalum acceptum*) as the offense of bitter and proud persons. But because Christians need not concern themselves with offense arising from malice, or delay over those who *take* offense, that aspect comes now to lie outside of our focus.

Second, we must recognize that modern word usage diverges significantly from historical terminology. Today one frequently hears people say things like 'That offends me!' or 'We must be careful that others don't take offense.' But as we shall see, the burden ought to be shifted terminologically by warning against *giving* others offense. Put another way: the person *given* offense is not to be confused with the person who *takes* offense!

1.4.1 The nature of weakness

In order to identify precisely the moral nature of offense of the weak, we will want to know what it means to be 'weak.' Is it true, as Aquinas states, that weakness denotes proneness to scandal? Is Calvin correct in insisting that without clarity about the identity of the weak, our freedom remains useless?

The weakness in view here is not moral weakness in the sense of 'inclination to sin.' All of our spokesmen agree that the weak are not *initially* culpable for their weakness. Moreover, the weak are not those who take offense out of malice, as the Pharisees did with Christ. Nor are they persons of bitter disposition or pharisaical pride, or hypocrites. Further, weakness has some connection with conscience, a knowledge deficient in its ability to apply biblical teaching to life.

Clearly, our description of weakness will determine our recommendations for dealing with the offense of the weak.

Interestingly, our representative spokesmen diverge at this point. Although all three agree that the weak are not *initially* culpable for their weakness, they disagree on the matter of *subsequent* culpability. Both Aquinas and Henry advise *conditional forbearance* of the weak, that is, making concessions to the weak while educating and cultivating his moral opinion. If, after such education, he continues to object, his weakness is no longer innocent, but culpable, and the situation changes from someone *giving* him offense to his (illicit) *taking* offense. By contrast, Calvin nowhere speaks of trying to change the opinion of the weak by seeking to develop his moral insights or his convictions of conscience. Calvin's tone urges instead the *continued forbearance* of the weak, so tempering 'the use of our freedom as to allow for the ignorance of our weak brothers.'

It is also at this point that Henry issues the warning about domination of the strong by the weak. It seems that unless the opinions of the weak are changed, the strong risks being governed by those opinions in that he must subordinate his liberty to the scruples of the weak.

Perhaps, then, the most weighty question facing us is this: Is educating and enlightening the weak unto fuller knowledge and a more liberated conscience an appropriate response?

1.4.2 The process of *scandalum infirmorum*

In the previous section we outlined questions about the nature of the *infirmi*; here we are interested in the character of *scandalum* itself.

What is the nature of the *offense* of the weak? Are there discernible stages or moments that can be isolated for further examination?

Aquinas discusses the matter of offense in the context of vices against the virtue of love. *Scandalum infirmorum* is thus a violation of neighbor love. In language borrowed from Aquinas, we might say that it is any action—any word or deed either inherently evil or appearing to be evil—which could or does occasion, lead or otherwise cause, intentionally or unintentionally, another to fall into sin. One falls into sin by violating either a divine command or prohibition (to which Calvin adds: his own conscience).

Implicit within this definition is the fact that offense of the weak occurs not between a believer and the creation, or between a believer and himself, but between a believer and another person (whether believer or unbeliever). In other words, *scandalum infirmorum* is an inherently *social* conflict.¹¹⁹

Two questions arise with this definition. First, who decides whether an act *appears* to be evil—the agent, the one given offense, or someone else? And second, how does one measure the *possibility* of his action leading another to sin? We're not at all suggesting that these questions cannot be answered; but for Aquinas' discussion to be useful, they will need to be.

Calvin and Henry handle the matter in the context of Christian freedom; offense of the weak occurs through the abuse of Christian liberty.

This freedom is preeminently a soteriological matter, the fruit of Christ's redeeming work, produced within the believer by the Spirit of Christ. Christian liberty is by definition freedom *of conscience*, whereby the believer is freed to embrace God's mercy, to obey Him willingly, and to live before Him confidently. Conscience is a human capacity that is continually active; activated at creation, it functions apart from regen-

¹¹⁹So also Werner Schöllgen, *Soziologie und Ethik des religiösen Ärgermisses: Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des §166 R.St.G.B. und der Strafrechtsreform*, 32,37-38; he summarizes: 'In conclusion, the concept of offense can be summarized as follows: an offense occurs when, in forming an increasingly more effective We-I sociological value, a threat to its validity releases a qualitatively unique character response which is typified by a tension-filled agitation and impels toward an act of protection and retaliation' (38; 'Abschliessend kann also der Begriff des Ärgermisses folgendermassen gefasst werden: Ein Ärgermiss liegt dann vor, wenn ein soziologisch in der Formung eines Wir-Ich wirksam gewordener höherer Wert bei einer Bedrohung seiner Geltung eine qualitativ eigenartige Willensantwort auslöst, die von einer spannungsvollen Erregung getragen ist und zu einer Schutz- und Vergeltungshandlung drängt').

eration, but requires faith to function properly, that is, freely—free from servility and superstition.

For Calvin and Henry, then, offense is both possible and problematic in terms of this freedom of conscience. Recall Calvin's dictum, 'in order that men may with a clean conscience cleanly use God's gifts.' Without freedom there is neither proper employment nor prudent enjoyment of these gifts. But here is the problem: believers' consciences are not equally free with respect to the use of God's gifts. Though they may unitedly embrace divine mercy and obey the divine will as part of their freedom of conscience, yet believers might not share the same confidence concerning what Calvin called 'indifferent things.'

Since offense of the weak occurs in the context of a freedom of conscience produced of faith, it is an inherently *ecclesial* conflict, that is, it occurs between *believers*, within *the church*.

But their descriptions generate questions similar to those we raised with Aquinas' analysis. Calvin's positive characterization of offense was that it is given to the ignorant and simple by doing anything with unseasonable, rude or violent lightness, levity, fickleness or inconstancy; by doing anything licentiously, lasciviously or insolently; or by doing something with rashness, inconsiderateness or temerity. Negatively, its deficiencies include doing anything without order or disorderly, or not in its own place. To these negative characteristics he adds actions twisted by malevolence which nonetheless are not done in a morally bad, wicked, depraved, reprobate manner, nor unseasonably, rudely or violently. Although we observe here Calvin's pronounced focus on the *manner* of action in place of Aquinas' focus on the *nature* of the action, we will need to ask: *By what measure* and *by whom* is an act determined to be committed with unseasonable levity or without order?

1.4.3 The arena of *scandalum infirmorum*

We turn next to the scene or arena of conflict between the strong and the weak, that world of practices, ceremonies, customs and all sorts of things belonging to human cultural activity.

This arena within which the weak can be offended or made to stumble is, properly speaking, where convictions differ as to what is permissible. The nature of these differing convictions, we saw above, entails knowledge of divine permissions. And since *permissions* are those things neither prescribed nor proscribed, their identity and extent become the subject of debate and the source of disagreement.

This arena is often denoted by a variety of terms: 'adiaphora,' 'indif-

ferent things,' and 'the permissible,' for example.

These terms are conspicuously absent from Aquinas' discussion of *scandalum infirmorum*. He speaks instead of temporal and spiritual goods, distinguishing among the latter between things necessary and things unnecessary to salvation.

Calvin by contrast describes three kinds of adiaphora: doctrinal, ceremonial and ethical. For ethical adiaphora he employs terms like 'outward things,' 'indifferent things,' 'God's gifts,' and 'middle things.' Several theological premises serve to ground his view of adiaphora, among them that God's creation is good and to be enjoyed, that His sovereign will is revealed in Scripture, that justification is by faith, that the Christian has a new relationship to the law, and that conscience is the realm of Christian liberty.¹²⁰

But 'adiaphora' have limits, according to Calvin. There are no indifferent *acts*, since every act is to be for God's glory, and therefore good. Every act has a moral quality.¹²¹ Nevertheless, *things* can be indifferent or neutral, their use neither commanded nor prohibited. Any moral quality involved inheres not in the thing itself but in its use. Moreover, abuse doesn't warrant disuse, though disuse may be temporarily desirable because of dangers and corruption accompanying the use of a thing. Somewhere Calvin offers the conclusion that no abuse or evil can abolish those things which God has instituted, whereas if the use of human traditions and ceremonies contaminated by human sin gives harm or produces offense to fellow-believers, they are to be avoided.¹²² Right use entails moderation in the employment of outward things; moderation, the doctrine of the mean, directs propriety at this point. Such moderation is to be pursued in proper relation to God (thanksgiving and confidence), to the neighbor (loving accommodation), to self (motive, vocation and progress in righteousness), and to the thing itself (using it for its intended purpose).¹²³

Clearly this matter of 'adiaphora' is central to the conflict known as *scandalum infirmorum*. Important decisions determining whether the encounter between liberty and love will result in their collision or their communion are registered at this juncture. Do 'indifferent things' and 'neutral territories' really exist? How helpful is the distinction between

¹²⁰For a discussion of these see Street, 105-120, 127-139.

¹²¹Street, 120-121.

¹²²Mentioned by Street, 137.

¹²³Street summarizes Calvin's remarks in these four areas under the heading 'The Tests of Things Indifferent' (174-208).

a thing and its use? We shall return below to diagnose the adequacy of these concepts.

1.4.4 The theological context of *scandalum infirmorum*

Our evaluation reaches its widest expanse as we consider the broader context within which to diagnose and resolve the conflict between the strong and the weak. The four theologians surveyed treat *scandalum infirmorum* within one of three larger contexts. Offense of the weak is either (1) a vice contradicting love for neighbor (Aquinas); (2) the abuse of Christian liberty (Calvin and Henry); or (3) the failure to provide a good example (Voetius).

Which of these is preferable? Should we choose one context or formulation over another? Are these mutually exclusive? Do the contexts themselves involve assumptions and contain components that prevent a biblically adequate understanding of the relationship between Christian liberty and neighbor love, between the strong and the weak?

1.5 Some examples

Until now we've not illustrated the conflict between the strong and the weak with specific examples, in order first to consider its biblical dynamic and theological dimensions. But now we want to make our discussion more concrete and lively.

Understandably, the range of possible examples is as wide as Christian living itself. To serve our subsequent analysis we offer three kinds of examples that people may be inclined to use in a discussion about offending others. The following examples are distinguished as to the conflict's point of origin.

We urge two cautions, however. First, we must yet determine whether or not each of these examples properly involves *scandalum infirmorum*; and second, this study is not about any of these examples in particular. The discerning reader will therefore understand that we do not intend discussion of these illustrations to dominate or displace attention to the broader problems just sketched.

Type A: Conflicts arising from a believer's pre-Christian past

Example 1. Many converts to Christianity have led lives steeped in

superstition, lives held captive to belief in demonic powers and unlucky forces. Many primitive cultures are held in the grip of religious fear by practices of witchcraft and sorcery, while many 'civilized' lands entertain superstitions about unlucky numbers (13), days (Friday the 13th) and encounters (a black cat crossing one's path). In both kinds of cultures these convictions often induce people to alter their plans. Among believers convictions about these practices vary; conflict can arise in the church about the permissibility of maintaining these superstitious practices.

Example 2. Many cultures contain practices that have evolved from social and national traditions, customs that often decorate even religious celebrations with the imaginations of folklore. Think of Halloween, Santa Claus, the Christmas tree, Easter eggs and Easter bunnies. Here too convictions about the rightness or wrongness of these customs vary among believers.

Type B: Conflicts arising from potential transgression of God's law

Example 3. Among heirs of the Puritan Calvinist tradition one of the most warmly debated questions of Christian lifestyle is Sunday-observance. Here too change in customs accompanies change in convictions; people say, 'When we were growing up, we couldn't do this or that on Sunday, but now nobody sees anything wrong with it.' Physical recreation, hobbies, school homework—if these were permitted on Sunday in the past, they were private permissions; today, many believers engage in these activities openly. But precisely that process of change generates moral conflict among believers, a clash bearing all the marks of a contest between 'strong' and 'weak' Christians.

Example 4. Many consistories (church boards) decide, in deference to the alcoholic, to use grape juice instead of fermented wine for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Is this an example of 'the weak' dominating 'the strong'?

Type C: Conflicts arising from the contact between believers and their culture

Example 5. In every age the church wrestles with the moral permissibility of what is abused by unbelievers. These contests are settled, at least

temporarily, when communal judgments are registered against specific occupations, styles of personal fashion (clothing, hair length, etc.), forms of entertainment, business associations, social practices, and so on. As time goes on, believers change their evaluation of once-prohibited practices, often because the grounds for prohibition are rendered meaningless by social change. The intellectual elite in any age often prefer to snicker at the church's attempt thereby to define 'worldliness' for its day and age. We all may disagree with some of those judgments; nevertheless, this entire history of moral discourse is characterized by the inescapably *ecclesial* dilemma of contradictory moral convictions in the context of united religious allegiance.

CHAPTER 2

SYNTHESIS AND CRITIQUE

2.0 Introduction

In our first chapter, we set forth the biblical discussion of two cases involving offense of the weak, and sampled moral reflection on that material. In addition, we framed questions and offered examples that will now be useful as we further analyze and evaluate the nature and dynamics of *scandalum infirmorum*.

According to the topics isolated in our earlier description of the issues, we will look first at the nature of weakness, and then consider the process, arena, and theological context of *scandalum infirmorum*. We conclude Chapter 2 with our evaluation of the examples provided earlier, to see whether, in fact, any of them really involves offense of the weak.

2.1 The nature of weakness

Is it true that the criteria by which Paul employs the terms 'weak' and 'strong' are not easily discernible?¹²⁴ Yet, identifying, resolving and avoiding offense requires that we be able to identify weakness; the relationship between the strong and the weak is determined to a large degree by the character of weakness.

Clarity may be served best if, at this point, in the light of 1 Cor.8-10 and Rom.14-15, we summarize the *weakness* involved in *scandalum infirmorum* as consisting of *an incapacity for a particular moral undertaking caused by a knowledge deficient in applying certain elements of the Christian faith to life*. Two questions about this 'deficient knowledge' will occupy our attention: (1) Is it culpable or blameworthy? and (2) Must it be removed?

¹²⁴So E.W. Schaeffer-de Wal, 'De weg naar menselijke vrijheid,' *Wat is christelijke vrijheid?*, 107-108.

2.1.1 Is weakness culpable?

We wish to consider in the first place the suggestion that a believer's 'weakness' is a blameworthy or culpable condition.¹²⁵

According to Gustav Stählin, for example, the reference in 1 Corinthians and Romans is to a 'weakness which must be overcome,' characterized as a 'religious and moral condition.'¹²⁶

Our previous study has shown 1 Cor.8.7 to be very important here: 'But not among everyone is that knowledge, for some with the consciousness of the idol up until now eat it as food sacrificed to an idol, and their conscience, because it is weak, is polluted.' Weakness entails both a deficiency and an excess: the weak are *deficient* in applying knowledge about the nothingness of idols and the singular uniqueness of God (8.4,6); on the other hand, they *abound* in 'knowledge,' born of custom, of idols and idolatry. Their weakness qualifies their conduct, for the weak 'eat it as food sacrificed to an idol.'

Similarly, Rom.14.1 speaks of one whose faith lacks both sufficient content and confidence to permit certain activities (or omissions). This faith, weak though it may be, nevertheless guides behavior: the one who is weak eats vegetables only (14.2). In addition, we observed that it is possible to be *both* weak in the faith (14.1) *and* yet 'fully convinced in one's own mind' (14.5), *so that weakness is not vacillation or irresoluteness*. Nor is this weakness deficient in devotion to God, but is *full of religious direction*, for 'the one who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and he gives thanks to God' (14.6). Recall also our judgment that transporting the idea of a corrupt conscience from Tit.1.15 into Rom.14-15 and imputing it to the weak (Calvin) violates both the argument of Rom.14-15 and the context of Tit.1.15, since the latter speaks of the defiled conscience of *unbelievers*. The weak believer is fully 'brother' (therefore, not 'corrupt') because he is one for whom Christ died (14.15), because he is the work of God (14.20), and because he too is considered to be serving Christ rather than himself 'in these things' (14.18). Moreover, weakness is a condition that can be exacerbated if the strong believer violates the scruples of the weak (14.21). Finally, not only are the weak in the faith to be received, but the strong are to carry on their shoulders the weaknesses of the weak: 'We who are the

¹²⁵By this time it should have become clear that the weakness and strength in view are not *emotional*, but *spiritual*, conditions; the emotional conditions are discussed by Paul Tournier in his work entitled *The Strong and the Weak*.

¹²⁶Stählin, 'Ἀσθενής, [κ.τ.λ.],' *TDNT*, 1:492.

strong ought to bear with the weaknesses of the weak and ought not to please ourselves' (15.1).

In both Corinth and Rome, then, the condition of weakness affected the functioning of conscience. The weak believer was weak *in conscience*, that capacity serving as arbiter between belief and action.¹²⁷ The mere presence of a moral conviction means that an arbitration has already occurred, a 'judgment' has already been made. The defendant (past or future action) has been tried in terms of the 'law' (faith) and sentence has been pronounced by conscience. This description can help us define conscience as 'that authority within a person which places him before his own decisions, past or future, and judges them either approvingly or disapprovingly.'¹²⁸ Even the *weak* conscience judges, in spite of deficient knowledge and excessive sensitivities. But it is the kind of conscience that others can 'build up'—prop up, really—to violate itself (8.10), the kind that can thus be wounded (8.12). But more about that in a moment.

We pause first to evaluate Stählin's claim that the ethical connotation of 'weakness' in the NT refers to something that must be overcome, a weakness of religious and moral condition. Doesn't this formulation presume *culpability* (i.e., moral blameworthiness) for one's weakness if, after all, it must be overcome?

This seems also to be the presumption behind Aquinas' insistence that we must temporarily avoid certain behaviors that offend the weak while we instruct and admonish them. Similarly, Carl Henry argues that Christian conscience 'requires growth and education' and 'the overscrupulous conscience of the weaker brother needs enlightenment.' Henry goes so far as to warn the weak against offending the strong! Aquinas and Henry both seem to presume that such weakness is culpable.

In vernacular English, to 'have a weakness for' something often means 'to be inclined to the excessive enjoyment of' that thing, an enjoyment usually reduced by the warnings of conscience. Consider these conditions of weakness:

1. A husband with 'a weakness for' other women has, we could say, an appetite for adultery. His is therefore a culpable weakness because

¹²⁷For a fuller discussion of conscience, see Christian Maurer, 'Σύννοια, συνείδησις,' *TDNT*, 7:898-919; W.J. Aalders, *Het geweten*; J. Douma, *Christian Morals and Ethics* (66-67) distinguishes between a *clear* conscience (cf. 1 Cor.4.4), a *weak* conscience (cf. 1 Cor.8.7,10,12) and a *bad* conscience (cf. 1 Tim.4.2).

¹²⁸Cf. J. Douma, *Christian Morals and Ethics*, 66.

the behavior needed to satisfy his appetite is always blameworthy. His is indeed a 'weakness that must be overcome' and his conscience should always say, 'No, because God says it's always wrong!'

2. But there is another type of weakness that needs only to be regulated. Someone with 'a weakness for' beautiful clothes, who therefore spends too much money and attention on external appearance, comes into conflict with divine warnings about covetousness, idolatry, etc. Because clothes are permissible and necessary, this person's conscience must be trained to say, 'This much and no more!'
3. There is yet a third condition of weakness: someone with 'a weakness for' alcohol (probably the most common example of 'weakness' in fundamentalist ethical discussions!) fears that any enjoyment, any taste, of alcohol will lead to enslavement and decides therefore never to use it. His conscience must say, 'No, because I may not.'

Each of these is a different condition of weakness, and in each case that properly functioning arbiter between faith and action called 'conscience' renders a different service. The believer traveling the first path is heading toward moral suicide, and his conscience must function as a moral *roadblock* preventing any further travel. The Christian on the second path travels with an eye on his own hand-drawn map, and conscience ought to serve as a moral *stop sign*, permitting him to check his location before either proceeding in the same direction or turning onto another road. But on the third route, conscience signals the need for a moral *detour* to assist the believer who has a moral handicap, a detour making travel easier and less hazardous, diverging only minutely and perhaps temporarily from the main route.

Only the first moral condition of weakness is clearly culpable *per se*. The second requires accompanying circumstances to become culpable weakness, and the third becomes culpable when the private judgment of the weak's conscience is contradicted by his own action contrary to that judgment.

Which of these moral conditions of weakness correspond(s) to the situations of 1 Corinthians and Romans? Five specific issues can be identified in these passages:

In Corinth,

- (1) eating/abstaining from sacrificial food offered in the market;
- (2) eating/abstaining from sacrificial food offered by a pagan host;
and
- (3) eating sacrificial food/meals in idol-temples.

In Rome,

- (4) eating/abstaining from meat; and
- (5) observing special days or ignoring their observance.

In order to apply correctly these passages to contemporary church life, we must understand that these five issues arose *within the missionary context* of the Corinthian and Roman congregations. Although, as we have said in Chapter 1, it is both difficult and unnecessary to identify the weak and the strong precisely (as being Jewish or Gentile Christians, for example), it seems clear that the disputed practices contradicted convictions which the weak retained from their pre-Christian Jewish or Gentile past (corresponding thus to the examples classified in Chapter 1 as Type A). But the disputes in Corinth and Rome involved neither ungoverned appetites (too much of a good thing; thus: condition #2), nor fear of moral enslavement due to a moral handicap (condition #3), but the moral suicide of the strong (according to the judgment of the weak; thus: condition #1) and the moral injury of the weak by the strong.

Of these five behaviors, the only one absolutely forbidden by the apostle was eating sacrificial food/meals in idol-temples, because that involved the moral suicide of communing with demons (1 Cor.10.20-21). Both strong and weak consciences were to say, 'No, because God says it's always wrong!' Concerning the other four issues, the apostle had a word for both parties. To those whose consciences were strong he said: 'If your brother, because of his faith, cannot travel with you, help him walk the easier path. Don't make him stumble!' And to those with weak consciences he says: 'If you, because of your faith, cannot travel with the strong, don't condemn him—the Lord didn't put a roadblock there—but move over to the less hazardous path.' *Both the careless one and the censorious one were wrong in their relationship to the other before God.* The strong risked wounding the weak by careless moral *permissions*, while the weak was in danger of shackling the strong with his own moral *disability*. *Only that censorious domination would render the weak culpable.*

Returning to our point, then, it seems to us that the biblical teaching in 1 Cor.8-10 and Rom.14-15, where 'weakness' describes a 'religious and moral condition,' does not warrant the view that weakness itself is a *culpable* condition. In our judgment Stählin's interpretation here of weakness as a moral condition that *must* be overcome suffers from exaggeration. Although the weak are warned not to judge the strong, nothing in these passages suggests that the weak believer is in error, and therefore needs to repent, *because of his weakness*.

2.1.2 Weakness as ignorance

But even if weakness is not culpable, must it nevertheless be overcome through education, enlightenment or moral growth? As we have seen, Christian moralists through the centuries have answered in the affirmative. Let's consider their arguments.

We spoke above of the weak believer as someone who has a temporary moral *disability*, a term that implies absence of culpability. And yet, isn't that term prejudicial if, as so many writers agree, weakness is defined as ignorance?

A review of the positions of Aquinas, Calvin and Henry shows that all of them spoke of weakness as ignorance, an undesirable (if not culpable) condition. Though Calvin is less explicit than Aquinas and Henry, the recommendations of each for dealing with the weak include reference to his education and enlightenment.

Calvin's advice, for example, combines solicitude for the weaker brother with a vague expectation of his instruction. In connection with giving offense we find in two places his discussion of eating meat on Fridays. Upbraiding those who disallow any use of 'things indifferent,' as if Friday meat-eating necessarily gave offense, Calvin in his commentary reminds us that 'Paul here [1 Cor.8.13] inveighs against those who impudently abuse their knowledge in the presence of the weak, whom they take no pains to instruct. Hence there will be no occasion for reproof, if instruction has been previously given. Farther, Paul does not command us to calculate, whether there may be an occasion of offence in what we do, except when the danger is present to our view.'¹²⁹ Observe that instruction of the weak was needed to protect the strong from reproof, rather than to perfect the weak. The same example occasioned Calvin in his *Institutes* to recommend 'the care of the weak, whom the Lord has so strongly commended to us' (III.xix.10), adding: 'Thus we shall so temper the use of our freedom as to *allow for the ignorance of our weak brothers*, but for the rigor of the Pharisees, not at all!'¹³⁰ Allowing for the ignorance of the weak seems to include permission of that ignorance. But Calvin nowhere echoes Aquinas in suggesting that *scandalum pusillorum* becomes malicious *scandalum Pharisaeorum* when the weak rejects instruction.

Such pastoral sensitivity appears also in Calvin's remarks on

¹²⁹John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, 285-286.

¹³⁰John Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xix.11; emphasis added.

Rom.14-15. Concerning the apostle's exhortation 'let each be fully convinced in his own mind' (Rom.14.5b), Calvin remarks: 'If any object and say, that infirmity is ever perplexing, and that hence such certainty as Paul requires cannot exist in the weak: to this the plain answer is,—That such are to be pardoned, if they keep themselves within their own limits.'¹³¹ Similarly, ' . . .there is nothing unreasonable in the matter, if we say, that the modesty of the weak is approved by God, not on the ground of merit, but through indulgence.'¹³² By contrast, Calvin says concerning Rom.14.22b, 'Here [Paul] means to teach us, first, how we may lawfully use the gifts of God; and, secondly, how great an impediment ignorance is; and he thus teaches us, lest we should urge the uninstructed beyond the limits of their infirmity.'¹³³ And Paul's instruction that the strong 'bear with the weaknesses of the weak' (Rom.15.1) summarizes the discussion, 'for as God has destined those to whom he has granted superior knowledge to convey instruction to the ignorant, so to those whom he makes strong he commits the duty of supporting the weak by their strength; thus ought all gifts to be communicated among all the members of Christ.'¹³⁴

More recently Philip Hughes has with vehemence argued the need for enlightening the conscience of the weak. Ignorance thwarts the conscience, but knowledge sharpens and shapes conscience for its moral service, he says. The weaker brother should therefore not be 'left with his weak and misinformed conscience. On the contrary, he too can become a strong Christian with a well-informed conscience by being instructed. . . .Thus the person with a weak conscience should not prevail over the person with a strong conscience, for it is impossible that the apostle would have sanctioned any Christian's continuing weakness through ignorance when the remedy is for him to become strong through knowledge. . . .'¹³⁵ Hughes summarizes as a principle for application that in his actions, the knowledgeable Christian (i.e., the one with a strong conscience) must not only be considerate toward the ill-informed Christian, but also instruct him toward moral maturity.¹³⁶

Recall also that Aquinas, among others, identifies especially children

¹³¹John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 497.

¹³²John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 498.

¹³³John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 511.

¹³⁴John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 514.

¹³⁵Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Christian Ethics in a Secular Society*, 40.

¹³⁶Hughes, 40; cf. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Christian and Alcoholic Beverages: A Biblical Perspective*, 93.

as being weak due to moral ignorance, immaturity and inexperience—a condition of moral innocence, thus. The term itself—*scandalum pusillorum*, or offense of the little ones—comes from Christ's teaching about kingdom greatness, when He insisted that His disciples be converted and become as little children to enter the kingdom. 'But whoever causes one of these *little ones* who believe in me to sin,' Jesus continues, 'it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea' (Mt.18.6). Moral immaturity appears to be rather innocent when Paul, though agreeing that 'we all possess knowledge,' returns a few verses later with this qualification: 'But not among everyone is that knowledge' (1 Cor.8.7). Knowledge and conviction differed in Rome also, but whether one was strong or weak, Paul exhorts, 'Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind' (Rom.14.5b).

Is it true, then, that though native moral ignorance is not blameworthy (in children, for example), *persistent* weakness-through-ignorance is? Must the weak then be instructed in the knowledge of the strong (with its moral implications)? And does instruction rejected turn *scandalum pusillorum* into *scandalum Pharisaeorum*, as Aquinas seems to allege? Is Henry correct when he insists that a practice contrary to the dictates of another's conscience may be carried on only while the strong seeks to enlighten the other's conscience?

The question here really concerns the process of moral growth. No one would deny that the Christian exercise of conscience is a capacity requiring development. As a universal human capacity, conscience did not originate with man's fall into sin, but with his creation in the image of God. The believer's sin-affected conscience is renewed by God's Spirit through faith.

Just as in natural life, so too in spiritual and moral life there are stages of development to maturity. The first stage is one of newness and, therefore, of dependency and weakness.¹³⁷ This image of infancy appears in 1 Pet.2.2: '...as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, . . .' Believers need to grow beyond this stage. In fact, they are criticized for not doing so, as the writer to the Hebrews warns: 'For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are

¹³⁷J. van Andel, *De gemeenschap der heiligen*, 1.

of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil' (Heb.5.12-14). 'Discerning good and evil' involves skill in 'the word of righteousness' characteristic of those who are 'of full age.' Moreover, the offices ordained and given by Christ for the church should be equipping the saints for the works of service and of building up the church 'till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love' (Eph.4.13-16). The doctrinal and moral instability, susceptibility and immaturity of these Ephesian 'children' are contrasted with the coming unity, perfection and fullness of adulthood in Christ. Paul's discussion of glossolalia includes this exhortation to the Corinthians: 'Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature' (1 Cor.14.20).

Nevertheless, even if we grant that growth in the capacity and content of conscience is the biblical pattern for believers, we must still insist that the apostle's discussion in both 1 Cor.8-10 and Rom.14-15 of the conflict between strong and weak Christians nowhere *urges* that the weak be enlightened concerning the full dimension of Christian liberty *with the aim* of changing his convictions and behavior.

It might be helpful to describe weakness as a temporary disability of conscience, a condition which one *could*—but not necessarily *should*—outgrow. This is analogous to a temporary physical disability. When we were younger, many of us suffered from recurring bronchitis, a common childhood malady that people usually, but not always, outgrow.

Our point is that Scripture seems to recognize a limit here to the development and exercise of conscience. It's the kind of limit we've described as a disability that is usually temporary. As with the human body, growth—not now of the *individual member*, but of the *body*—can still continue as the strong believers heed Scripture's exhortations to compensate for and protect the weak.¹³⁸

¹³⁸Appealing to 1 Cor.8.13 ('Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.'), James Durham points out that there can

Does this mean, then, that within the church differences of moral conviction may continue to live alongside one another?

One recent discussion concludes with a negative answer to this question.¹³⁹ It contends that Paul himself identifies with the strong (Rom.15.1, 'we then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak'). The terms, tone and conclusion of Rom.14-15 would seem to aim toward dynamic growth rather than to settle for a static situation of continuing differences. The term 'weak' would suggest incompleteness and therefore contains an inducement to become 'strong.'¹⁴⁰ Similarly, Paul's conviction that 'nothing is unclean of itself' (Rom.14.14) is thought to signal the direction for the necessary growth of the weak. Finally, the apostolic prayer would expect believers to 'be like-minded among one another, according to Christ Jesus,' glorifying God 'with one mind and one mouth' (Rom.15.5-6).¹⁴¹ In the church, differences of conviction should not be final or permanent.

Another emphasis appears, however, when we consider the thread of the apostolic argument in these passages. To the Roman believers he writes, 'Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things' (Rom.14.1). Moreover, although Paul and others 'know' about idols and foods more fully than the weak (1 Cor.8.4,6; Rom.14.14), the apostle settles for the recognition that 'however, there is not in everyone that knowledge' (1 Cor.8.7).

Furthermore, the opinion that differences of conviction between the weak and strong may coexist in the church seems to be supported by the apostolic exhortation of Rom.14.5b: 'Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.' In the exegetical part of our study we disagreed with the notion that this requires the weak to reconsider their position out of a posture of open-mindedness. Paul's emphasis is on 'being fully con-

be no preassigned terminus to abstaining from an action having the potential of *scandalum infirmorum* (*A Treatise Concerning Scandal*, 25).

¹³⁹G. Gunnink, 'Vrij en verantwoordelijk,' *Wat is christelijke vrijheid?*, 26-27; also P.H.R. van Houwelingen, 'Dat is sterk!' *De Reformatie*, 58/35; 'Hoe sterk sta ik?' *De Reformatie*, 58/36; 'Steeds sterker worden,' *De Reformatie*, 58/37; and 'Samen sterk,' *De Reformatie*, 58/38.

¹⁴⁰Gunnink, 26; van Houwelingen, *De Reformatie*, 58:552, 'The apostle considers himself to be among the strong. . .and says of the others: they are still weak, they *must* still become stronger' (emphasis added).

¹⁴¹See van Houwelingen, *De Reformatie*, where he compares the church's unity to a choir with various voices; but when it begins to sing, 'then all those voices blend together into one.' That is to say, 'In the communal praise the differences of opinion fall away' (58:600).

vinced.' Although we agree that this verse does not mean 'permit each his own opinion,' whereby each individual is left to find his own way, we are not persuaded that differing convictions and practices among the weak and strong—differences arising from moral disability—necessarily constitute a *deviant* pluriformity in the church.¹⁴² After all, at issue is not the foundation, but the lifestyle based on the commonly held foundation.¹⁴³

In other words, it would be painfully cruel to say of those in the church whose consciences were weak—those with a moral disability—that it would be nice if only they were strong. Recognizing that the covenant-society called the church always contains such members is not to adopt a static view of 'the' strong and 'the' weak. This rightly feared static view arises, in our opinion, when 'strong' and 'weak' become ecclesiological categories describing the *status* of groups within the church. But when we recall that 'weak' and 'strong' are metaphorical terms whose meaning should be determined *per casum*, or situationally, we need not accede to the claim that, in the church, 'the' weak must become strong. Though described as being weak 'in the faith' and 'in conscience,' such believers are not characterized as being weak in their entire faith-life experience. Their weakness lies in a particular area, in terms of a particular moral question. There could well be areas in which the weak are strong.

But how then must we live in the church with differences of moral conviction and practice among believers? Though we intend to answer that question more fully in Chapter 3, we are prepared to make at least this claim: the key to communion among such believers lies not in (1) urging those with weaker consciences to grow toward the moral permissions of stronger consciences, nor in (2) permitting believers with such differences to live in moral isolation, but rather in improving the moral quality of their conduct and relationship. Not the *existence* of weaker and stronger in the church, but their *relationship*—the fraternal carelessness of the strong (Corinth) and the mutual recrimination of both parties (Rome)—drew the criticism of the apostle.

In summary, the *weakness* involved in *scandalum infirmorum* consists of an *incapacity for a particular moral undertaking caused by a knowledge deficient in applying certain elements of the Christian faith to life*. This weakness is not inherently culpable, although someone who is weak may

¹⁴²Contra van Houwelingen, *De Reformatie*, 58:567.

¹⁴³Cum van Houwelingen, *De Reformatie*, 58:567.

be inclined wrongly to condemn the strong for the permissions of his conscience. And this deficiency is usually only temporary, removed by acquiring a broader understanding of the Christian faith and its application to life.

EXCURSUS: Can *scandalum infirmorum* occur outside the church?

Up to this point our investigation of *scandalum infirmorum* has argued that (1) the role of conscience lies at the heart of offense of the weak, and (2) the consciences of believers and unbelievers are qualitatively different. If these are true, to what extent must Christians be concerned with what those outside the church think about their behavior? Are there biblical limits to modifying our behavior to avoid causing outsiders to stumble?

The relevance of these questions appears when we analyze, for example, the cultural involvement of Christians or modern missionary activities. When people are turned away from Christ and His church because Christians engage in practices viewed by outsiders with suspicion, or because missionaries align themselves and their indigenous churches with a political ideology or movement, are these examples of *scandalum infirmorum*? In modern post-Christian civilizations and foreign cultures, will not the church's life and testimony be paralyzed if she must be concerned about giving offense to outsiders?

Each of our representatives says a word about this. Aquinas seems to view unbelievers as those ignorant of the gospel, who must be treated with solicitude by temporarily avoiding those things not necessary to salvation. Calvin remarks that some are put off from the gospel by stupidity or timidity, others by the moral degeneracy of church leaders. Voetius is very explicit in distinguishing moral injury of co-believers from wounding those outside the faith. Of the four, Voetius provides the most explicit classification of offenses given to outsiders, which occur in four ways:

- (1) through quarrels about dogma;
- (2) through schism and division;
- (3) through the moral degeneracy of Christians; and
- (4) through accommodation to pagan rituals and blending them into Christian worship.

For Carl Henry, walking without reproach before the world is a NT principle of conduct, something unique to Christian ethics.

That believers can cause outsiders to stumble into sin is beyond question. David's adultery and murder gave occasion to the Lord's enemies to blaspheme (2 Sam. 12.14). And the ruthless severity of the armies of Israel, Judah and Edom incited Moab's king Mesha to the abominable sacrifice of his son to Chemosh (2 Ki. 3.13-27).

But are these to be characterized as offense of the weak?

A review of some terminology introduced in Chapter 1 discloses that, whereas Aquinas speaks of *scandalum pusillorum* (offense of the little ones), Calvin

describes *scandalum infirmorum* (offense of the weak), which is identical to *scandalum datum* (offense given). But in contrasting this with the offense of the Pharisees (identical to *scandalum acceptum*, offense taken), Calvin insists, 'We shall so temper the use of our freedom as to allow for the ignorance of our weak brothers, but for the rigor of the Pharisees, not at all!'¹⁴⁴ It seems, then, that Calvin, Voetius and Henry do indeed distinguish those outside the church from the weak.

We believe that in the face of latent or explicit universalism in modern theology, it is worth pausing to ask whether the Scripture (especially the NT) recognizes or employs the categories of 'insiders' and 'outsiders,' upon which basis we may distinguish, with Calvin, Voetius and Henry, between injuring those inside and those outside the church. That the people of Israel were taught to employ these classifications is evident from OT legislation concerning the sojourner and alien. But does this continue in the NT?

Well, the Lord Jesus Himself differentiates between those who are, and those who are not, among His disciples, when He says to His followers, 'To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, . . .' (Mk.4.11). His apostles function with similar categories. Paul reminds believers in Colossae, 'Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one' (Col.4.5-6). Concern for the opinion of outsiders induces Paul to exhort the Thessalonian Christians, 'But we urge you, brothers, that you increase more and more; that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing' (1 Thess.4.10b-12). And this distinction must operate in the practice of church discipline, as the apostle makes clear in 1 Cor.5.12-13: 'For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore put away from yourselves that wicked person.' This concluding exhortation was one of God's repeated commands to Israel (Deut.17.7; 19.19; 22.21,24; 24.7). One's standing among unbelievers serves as a criterion for holding office in Christ's church, as we learn from 1 Tim.3.7: 'Moreover, he [the bishop] must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.'¹⁴⁵

We contend, in agreement with Calvin, Voetius, and Henry, that it is confusing to view the offense of unbelievers in the same terms as the offense of the weak, since Scripture presumes that the weak have faith. Clarity is better served, however, by distinguishing *scandalum datum* into two kinds:

¹⁴⁴John Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xix.11 (emphasis ours): ' . . . ac sic libertatis nostrae usum temperabimus, ut fratrum infirmorum ignorantiae cedere debeat: Pharisaeorum austeritati nequaquam.'

¹⁴⁵For more information on $\xi\xi\omega$, consult Johannes Behm, ' $\xi\xi\omega$,' *TDNT*, 2:575-576.

- (1) *scandalum infirmorum*, offense of the weak; and
- (2) *scandalum externorum*, offense of outsiders.

Since each of these is a type of *scandalum datum*, in each case the agent is culpable. But this classification preserves the qualitative distinction between causing a co-believer to fall and causing an outsider to stumble, and thereby protects three significant factors. First, unlike *scandalum externorum*, offense of the weak involves the victim's conscience. Second, in distinction from *scandalum externorum*, offense of the weak presumes that agent and victim are walking together in the same direction when the stumbling occurs.

But what of the respective victims? Here we meet the third qualitative difference between offense of the weak and of outsiders. With *scandalum infirmorum*, the victim is not culpable for his weakness. By contrast, the victim of *scandalum externorum* is surely culpable for his infidelity. The scarce biblical evidence for believers leading outsiders into sin presumes that those led into sin by the behavior of David and by the conduct of the kings of Israel, Judah and Edom were, in fact, enemies of the Lord and idolaters. Two implications arising from this discussion have echoed down the corridors of church history.

First, in spite of the outsider's culpability, the church of Jesus Christ and individual believers may never excuse their complicity in leading him into sin or obstructing him from the cross, arguing that he's an outsider anyway! The *agent's* culpability for *scandalum externorum* is in no way diminished by that of the *victim*.

Second, the church of Jesus Christ and individual believers are obligated to inquire whether their conduct impedes outsiders' coming to Christ.

2.2 The process of *scandalum infirmorum*

The conflict between the strong and the weak in the church is much more than a clash between people. Because it involves the permissions of a conscience set free by Christ, and the responsibility toward fellow-believers in Christ, we could describe offense of the weak as a collision between Christian liberty and neighbor love in the church. Within *scandalum infirmorum*, love and liberty become competitors and antagonists, rather than partners and collaborators. Responsibility for others is viewed by many as freedom's limit.

From our analysis of 1 Cor.8-10 and Rom.14-15, we can identify a sequence of five distinct stages in this collision between the strong and the weak. We might compare the following to the frozen-frame snapshots of a slow-motion film capturing the collision:

Stage 1: There exist strong and weak believers who hold a basic confession in common but who differ about the gospel's life-applications or its moral permissions.

Stage 2: The strong believer acts contrary to the scruple(s) of the weak believer in the latter's absence.

Stage 3: The strong believer acts in the presence of the weak believer.

Stage 4: The strong believer's action generates a moral dissonance created by the contradiction of the weak believer's scruple(s), which often results in the weak's condemnation of the strong.

Stage 5: The strong believer's action induces the weak believer to imitate it while he himself lacks the justifying permissions, which constitutes his moral injury.

Stage 1: Common confession, different permissions

In Corinth and Rome the strong and the weak share a common bond to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the important starting point. Both belong to Christ and each will give account to God (1 Cor. 8.11; Rom.14.4,9-10,12). But equally important is the fact that strong and weak applied the gospel's permissions differently. The weak eat with consciousness of the reality of the idol-god (1 Cor.8.7) or with conviction that certain foods were unclean (Rom.14.2,14).

This fundamental unity exists in spite of the fact that in this phase both strong and weak often appeal to biblical teaching to justify or deny moral permissions. That was likely the case also among the believers in Corinth and Rome. Yet, it is important to observe that the need for apostolic exhortations in those instances arose precisely because *there were no explicit Scriptural commands or prohibitions by which to settle these disputes*.¹⁴⁶ With the benefit of the closed canon of Scripture we today might think that every Corinthian Christian ought to have known that enjoying sacrificial *meals* at the idol-temple was wrong, while enjoying sacrificial *food* in their own or their friends' homes was permissible, and that all believers in Rome ought to have known that eating meat and not observing select days were permissible. But we know these only from the progress of canonical revelation.

¹⁴⁶We will return to this matter below when we inquire about 'adiaphora' as the arena of *scandalum infirmorum*.

How is it possible, one may ask, that believers enjoy a united allegiance without uniform moral convictions?¹⁴⁷ The seed of the gospel, planted in chosen hearts by the Spirit through preaching (1 Pet.1.23,25b) and bearing faith's fruit (Gal.5.22), does not grow within every believer at a uniform rate or in an identical arrangement of stem, leaves and fruit. This is due not to the gospel, but to the soil and climate conditions. What is more, believers are not thereby rendered culpable, *except where these differences in growth develop into a difference of direction*. To prevent exactly this development and to protect their common direction, Paul repeatedly emphasizes the duty of both strong and weak to live *to the Lord* (1 Cor.8.6,8; 10.31; Rom.14.4,6-12,18; 15.5-7), and the obligation of the strong to succor the weak (1 Cor.8.9,11-13,24,32,33; Rom.14.1,3,10,13,15,19-21; 15.1-2,7). And precisely because this development had *not yet* taken place in the Roman congregation, Paul emphatically warns the weak not to judge the strong as if they had abandoned that common allegiance and direction (Rom.14.3-4,10,13; 15.7).

Stage 2: Acting without the weak's knowledge

This second phase is not yet the moment of impact or moral injury, nor yet the collision between liberty and love, but can become the occasion for such.

Although the apostle strictly forbade participation in idol-meals in the pagan temples of Corinth, he left the strong free to buy and eat idol-food privately, that is: as long as no one asked questions for the sake of conscience (1 Cor.10.25-28). Convictions about disputed practices are to be kept to oneself (Rom.14.22).

Our reason for isolating this second stage is to suggest that it is not simply the action itself that injures, but the action perceived, and the resulting dissonance, that leads to injury of the weak believer. Just as the loss of steering does not necessarily result in an automobile accident, so the commission of a certain act does not necessarily result in moral injury, though it can become the occasion.

This is seen still more clearly in the following stage.

¹⁴⁷Cf. Werner Schöllgen, *Soziologie und Ethik des religiösen Ärgernisses*, 64.

Stage 3: Acting in the presence of the weak believer

‘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?’ asks the apostle in 1 Cor.8.10. ‘Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves,’ he urges in Rom.14.22.

Recall that we are considering how the conscience functions in the situation where the weak believer is injured, destroyed, or made to stumble and fall. We are looking, in other words, at a moral process or movement. It should be plain that the weak conscience is not (and should not feel itself to be) injured by the mere existence of differing ethical opinions concerning matters about which Scripture is not explicit (Stage 1). Nor does its discomfort begin at Stage 2. It begins at Stage 3, when the strong believer acts in the presence of the weak. The old puzzle about whether or not a tree falling in a forest makes a sound if nobody hears its fall, is quite relevant to our discussion. Christian liberty can collide with neighbor love only where there is a neighbor! The action of the strong (Stage 2) does not create internal dissonance (Stage 4) unless the weak learns of it (Stage 3). Here begins the conflict between liberty and love in the church.

Must stronger Christians, then, abstain from doing in public what they permits themselves to do in private, in order to avoid harming weaker brothers and sisters? And does this not result in moral hypocrisy?

In our opinion, the distinction between public and private conduct must be maintained. Not everything that one performs privately is publicly permissible. It is better occasionally to abstain from doing in public what one permits in private.

Now, some might try to avoid conflict among believers with differing moral convictions by turning this *occasional* necessity into a general rule or moral style, keeping private as much of our morality as possible. Such privatized morality, like a quarantined virus, will likely help prevent infection, but it will effectively separate believers in unhealthy moral (and spiritual) isolation.

For this distinction between private and public behavior to function properly in resolving (or avoiding) conflict among church members, rather than simply ensuring the privacy of their conduct, believers must *always* consider the moral competence of their fellow-believers before acting. Only if one has reason to assume that his conduct may occasion

the weak's moral injury must he abstain in the presence of the weak.¹⁴⁸ And any *appearance* of moral hypocrisy, arising from an alleged double standard, disappears when intention or motive is understood as love for the weaker brother. This love requires a different use of Christian liberty at one time or another.

Stage 4: Moral dissonance

The weak believer, lacking knowledge about idols and idol-food (Corinth) or about meat (Rome), is confronted with the behavior of his knowledgeable brother. His weak conscience springs into action, evaluating and judging this conduct. In Rome the weak's conscience was inclined to render the verdict of 'guilty,' condemning the strong, while in Corinth the judgment of the weak's conscience was more likely to be 'not guilty,' inclining him to imitate the strong.

In other words, at this stage the weak's conscience is being enlisted to render a verdict. Until this moment, no judgment was needed or even summoned. But in Stage 4 he suffers an internal moral dissonance created by the discrepancy between his scruple(s) and the action of his co-believer (Stage 3), a dissonance that must be resolved.

If the conscience of the strong tends to universalize its permissions, that of the weak tends to universalize its restrictions. This impetus generates the weak's moral dissonance. He argues that if something is wrong for him, it's wrong for everybody. This in turn occasions the weak's condemnation of the strong, which the apostle Paul forbids (Rom.14.3,10,13).

Stage 5: Imitation and injury

Notice: *only at this stage can we speak of moral injury occurring.* It happens when the weak's internal dissonance induces external disobedience to his conscience (1 Cor.8.7,10-13). He does what he believes to be wrong, or said another way: he fails to act 'from faith' (Rom.14.23).

Notice also that Scripture does not condemn the strong simply for acting contrary to the scruple(s) of the weak (Stage 2), nor merely for

¹⁴⁸Calvin claims that 'Paul does not command us to calculate, whether there may be an occasion of offence in what we do, except when the danger is present to our view' (*Romans*, 286).

doing that in the presence of the weak (Stage 3), nor even because the weak suffers moral dissonance (Stage 4). That condemnation of the strong becomes appropriate only at Stage 5, where the weak's moral dissonance leads to *his own* active disobedience.

This move from internal dissonance to external disobedience is expressed clearly in 1 Cor.8.7: ' . . .some with the consciousness of the idol up until now eat it as food sacrificed to an idol, and their conscience, because it is weak, is polluted.' The weak. . .eat! A weak conscience acting in violation of its own judgment becomes a *defiled* conscience. 1 Cor.8.10 sheds more light: 'For if someone sees you—the one who has knowledge—reclining in an idol-temple, will not his conscience—being weak—be built up for the eating of sacrificial foods?' Again, Paul's fear is that the weak will eat. A weak conscience that discovers a fellow believer's violation of its judgment can become 'strong' enough to commit moral suicide!

We might summarize the apostle's teaching in terms of these stages by saying that Paul exhorts strong believers in Corinth and Rome to avoid Stage 3 (acting in the presence of the weak) in order to prevent Stage 5 (the weak's violation of his own conscience). These snapshots of the stages in the process of moral injury help us recognize the prevailing experience of 'offense' as no more than simply a difference of moral conviction. Often the 'weaker' Christian appears to be strongly *disinclined* to imitate his 'stronger' brother, so that the conflict between the strong and the weak *need not and sometimes does not move beyond Stage 4* where the weaker conscience pronounces condemnation of the stronger. Within North American fundamentalism, for example, this has frequently involved the social and recreational use of alcohol. Opponents recognize its potential destructiveness, but appear (and declare themselves to be) immune to any temptation to use alcohol themselves. In other words, the risk of their moving from dissonance to disobedience appears minimal. The conflict never reaches Stage 5!

This leads us to observe that a difference in moral judgment or verdict of conscience among believers does not thereby qualify as a conflict between weak and strong.

Put another way: *The moral injury which constitutes scandalum infirmorum occurs in a particular situation only when one believer's conduct (the 'strong'), although it contradicts another believer's convictions of conscience (the 'weak') and generates moral dissonance, induces the latter to violate the permissions or prohibitions of his conscience.*

This descriptive definition will become a very important tool for examining, at the end of this chapter, the examples presented in Chapter

1. We will need to pose questions like: Is there genuine moral dissonance in any of these illustrations? Is the weaker believer really being induced by the stronger believer's conduct to violate his conscience? Is there in these examples real potential for imitating conduct forbidden by one's conscience?

2.3 The arena of *scandalum infirmorum*

One essential feature characterizing disputes between the strong and the weak in the church is that they involve matters about which Scripture is not explicit, matters which God neither commands nor forbids. Throughout history this set of actions has been described with the term 'adiaphora,' things indifferent or non-essential.

Our interest in this section is to examine whether or not the concept of 'adiaphora' is useful in resolving disputes between the strong and the weak. Is there a better distinction? Is the distinction between a thing and its use suitable for our analysis, perhaps?

2.3.1 The concept of 'adiaphora'

Throughout history the notion of indifferent things, or adiaphora, has been employed in different ways.

The Stoics, for example, understood adiaphora to include 'those things neither good nor evil, which bring about neither advantage nor disadvantage, such as life, health, pleasure, physical beauty, strength, wealth, a good name, good ancestry; also their opposites are neither good nor evil: death, sickness, pain, physical ugliness, weakness, poverty, a bad name, a humble ancestry and everything that fits with these.'¹⁴⁹ The only standard for good or evil is nature or reason. But this position is guilty of abstractionism in at least three ways. (1) *Creation is abstracted from its Creator*. Viewing the person as little more than *ratio* and as unaffected by external forces, the ethic of Stoicism falls into

¹⁴⁹J. Douma, 'Zijn er adiaphora?,' *Almanak v. h. corpus studiosorum in academia campensi 'Fides Quadrat Intellectum,'* 102. *The Erlauthaler Confession* states: 'Adiaphora vocamus cum scriptura sacra et Patribus actiones medias legibus et autoritatibus sacris et obligantibus non mandatas, quae per se nec bonae nec malae sunt' (*Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche*, 325). See also Article 25 of the *Confessio helvetica prior* of 1536 (*Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche*, 108).

reductionism and individualism, because it fails to see the continuing, inherent and personal relationship between the creation and its Creator. (2) *The present is abstracted from the past.* The ethic of Stoicism is really an ahistorical ethic, since it knows no past perfection in Paradise, when sickness, death and poverty were not in principle equivalent to health, life and riches. (3) Finally, *the person is abstracted from the rest of creation and culture.* Because this ethic emphasizes the inner attitude toward the external world, it results in disengagement and disinterest in the world around us, whereas the Christian gospel seeks to engage that world unto repentance and conversion.¹⁵⁰

A different, but equally serious, kind of abstraction occurs among some heirs of the Reformation who have approved of the concept of 'adiaphora' in terms of a supposed arena of 'common grace.' Contrary to the intentions of the best known expositor of 'common grace,' Abraham Kuyper, this arena has come to be understood as involving practices that are purely natural and ethically neutral. For example, in considering matters like art, film, literature, dancing and science, the moral reasoning of some moves from the idea of 'common grace' to the abstract notion of 'products of culture' that are 'in themselves' neither good nor bad, so that the only moral judgment allowed pertains to the use of these 'products.'¹⁵¹ This abstract notion of 'products of culture' fails to acknowledge that moral values inhere in such practices and products. They are not neutral. The laxity this position yields is met, on the other hand, with a rigorous morality like that found in pietism, puritanism and methodism, where these 'things' are seen as being, if not sinful in themselves, certainly temptations to sin.¹⁵² Nevertheless, one valid criticism of both of these positions is that by framing the problem in terms associated with 'adiaphora,' each operates with a legalistic, juridical view of moral living. The only proper context for speaking of 'adiaphora' is jurisprudence, where the legal is bordered by the

¹⁵⁰See J. Douma, 'Zijn er adiaphora?,' 104-106; also Rousas John Rushdoony, *Adiaphorism and Totalitarianism*, Chalcedon Position Paper No. 17; for a discussion of moral questions from a Lutheran viewpoint which takes as its starting point Article 10 of *The Formula of Concord*, which bears the title 'Of Church Rites, Which are Commonly Called Adiaphora, or Matters of Indifference,' see Theodore Graebner, *The Borderland of Right and Wrong*.

¹⁵¹*Acts of Synod 1966*, 318, 331-332, 336, especially 339; for an evaluation of this view as applied to film and theater, see N.D. Kloosterman, *The Christian Reformed Church and Theater Attendance: A Case Study in Calvinistic Ethics*, especially 56-67. For the application of this and related abstractions to dancing, see *Acts of Synod 1982*, 87-91, 556-575.

¹⁵²G. Brillenburg-Wurth, *De christelijke vrijheid*, 76.

para-legal. Jurisprudence measures the moral minimum, whereas God's law requires (and Christian ethics describes) a full-time, total service to Him and our neighbor that never permits a vacation.¹⁵³

Both Aquinas and Calvin avoid abstractionism of these kinds.¹⁵⁴ Unlike the Stoics, Aquinas speaks of indifferent *actions* rather than of indifferent *things*. Both Aquinas and Calvin insist that every action must be evaluated in terms of intention and accompanying circumstances, not simply in terms of itself. Although the Reformers insisted, against Rome, on the moral neutrality of practices like eating certain foods and keeping certain festivals, they nevertheless argued that the law of love toward God and neighbor removes any neutrality from such practices.

We find one of the clearest descriptions of this ethical norm for indifferent things in the 1562 Erthauler Confession, which acknowledges that 'the norm of indifferent things is the freedom of the Spirit, so that the elect may do all things out of faith. Next is charity and edification, and avoiding scandal, as it says in 1 Cor.6, 8, 9 and 10.'¹⁵⁵ These are in fact three parallel modes of action: from faith (*ex fide*), with edification (*cum aedificatione*), and without offense (*sine scandalo*).

Because the concept of 'adiaphora' has led to various kinds of moral abstractionism, we find it unuseful in resolving the conflict between strong and weak known as *scandalum infirmorum*. While it is true that Scripture does not prescribe everything, the Bible nevertheless does teach that no human action or created thing is morally neutral. People stand, in the totality of their decisions, under the Word/law of God (Mt.22.37-40; 1 Cor.10.31); every decision is therefore inescapably moral. And created things are in themselves clean and good (Rom.14.14; 1 Tim.4.4-5)—that is: they have a moral quality.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³G. Brillenburg-Wurth, *De christelijke vrijheid*, 77-79.

¹⁵⁴See J. Douma, 'Zijn er adiaphora?', 113-115, 117.

¹⁵⁵Norma Adiaphorum est libertas spiritus, ut omnia electi ex fide faciant. Deinde charitas et aedificatio, et scandali devitatio, ut dicitur 1. Cor. 6. 8. 9. 10.,' *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche*, 326.

¹⁵⁶See also K. Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, 1:135ff; Schilder argues that from God's side, there are no adiaphora, and if from man's perspective they exist, that's 'only because people—also church people—are by no means always *equipped* for pure, and faithful, and spiritual *interpretation and concrete unfolding* or *analysis* of the law of the Lord; that is to say: for continually grasping the meaning of the Scriptures through the power of the Spirit' (135). It is due to the limitations of the human interpreter that there are, unfortunately, adiaphora. Schilder insists further that God 'has a particular,

But if the concept of 'adiaphora' is inadequate, there is another term we might choose, mentioned in the apostle's prayer in Phil.1.9-11: 'And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the excellent things [εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τὰ διαφέροντα], in order that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which are through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.'

Before considering the phrase δοκιμάζειν τὰ διαφέροντα, we must pause to observe that this prayer is filled with terms associated with moral evaluation. The 'discernment' (αἰσθῆσει) for which Paul prays refers to insight and experience; it denotes moral understanding. The word for 'approve' (δοκιμάζειν) refers elsewhere to testing, examining (Lk.14.19; 1 Cor.11.28; 2 Cor.13.5; Gal.6.4; etc.; for the entire phrase 'approve the excellent things,' see also Rom.2.18). The aim of this knowledge, discernment and moral evaluation is sincerity (εὐλκρινεῖς; cf. 2 Pet.3.1), indicating the most sparkling purity seen from a rigid examination in the clearest light, and blamelessness (ἀπρόσκοπος, used in Acts 24.16 to describe συνείδησις, and in 1 Cor.10.32!). 'Sincerity' is the internal quality of truthfulness, while 'blamelessness' is the outward manifestation in relation to others.¹⁵⁷ And this purity and perfection is evident in lives that correspond to God's will ('fruits of righteousness'). All of these words, then, involve moral responsibilities flowing from abounding love!

The opposite of 'adiaphora' is τὰ διαφέροντα,¹⁵⁸ an expression referring to things that 'differ,' 'excel,' 'distinguish themselves,' 'the things that really matter.' 'Here we have,' says Calvin, 'a definition of Christian wisdom—to know what is advantageous or expedient—not to torture the mind with empty subtleties and speculations.'¹⁵⁹ The believer does not automatically know everything necessary to make

well-defined demand for you and me in every particular connection of life: *thus and no different*' (136).

We would suggest, however, that 'adiaphora' appear to exist not simply because of the limitations of human interpretation, but also because of the variety of moral choices present in a situation. Whether or not to marry, for example, is not specified by divine command, but the apparent neutrality of this choice is not due to interpretative limitations. See J. Douma, 'Zijn er adiaphora?,' 129-130.

¹⁵⁷S. Greijdanus, *De brief van den Apostel Paulus aan de gemeente te Philippi*, 100-103.

¹⁵⁸BAGD, s.v.

¹⁵⁹John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thesalonians*, 32.

moral evaluations. Moral experience and sensitivity are required for discernment, something that comes with Christian maturity. It is precisely this desire for moral maturity on the part of many who use the term 'adiaphora' that is retained and honored with the idea of 'approving what is excellent.' Although not all moral decisions are on the same level, the examination of 'the things that really matter' must proceed from love.¹⁶⁰

2.3.2 The distinction between a thing and its use

We have seen that some who deal with the relationship between Christianity and culture appeal to the distinction between the creation or cultural products and their use. Their maxim is: 'The abuse of a thing does not disallow its proper use.'

At issue is the moral permissibility of that which the world abuses. This includes matters like specific occupations, styles of personal fashion (clothing, hair length, etc.), forms of entertainment, business associations, and social practices. Throughout church history, guilt by association has rendered some of these impermissible by virtue of their connection with the lifestyle and abuse of unbelievers. Not just a 'thing,' but a thing-in-its-context must always be the object of moral evaluation.

This distinction between a thing and its use clearly rests on Rom.14-15 and 1 Cor.8-11. Both weak and strong believers in Rome hear Paul's confession that something which is clean *of itself* may well be unclean for some. If weak Corinthian believers need to learn that idol-food can be de-contextualized (from idolatry) and re-contextualized (in service to God), the strong must realize that idol-meals cannot.

Additional biblical legitimacy for this distinction is provided by 1 Tim.4.4-5: 'For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.' But how broadly may we interpret the phrase 'every creature of God'? To be sure, everything is created (Acts 17.24; Eph.3.9; Col.1.16; Rev.4.11), that is: everything in heaven, on earth and in the sea (Acts 4.24; 14.15; cf. Jam.1.18; Rev.5.13; 8.9).¹⁶¹ But what does 'everything' include?

Surely we must distinguish between creation and culture, between what God made and what we make. God made the sand, but people

¹⁶⁰J. Douma, 'Zijn er adiaphora?', 130-131.

¹⁶¹Cf. Werner Foerster, 'Κτίσις, [κ.τ.λ.],' *TDNT*, 3:1000-1035.

manufacture silicon chips. God made sexuality, but people make pornography. Celluloid comes from the creation, but movies come from people. God enables physical movement, but people organize dances.

We must be very careful at this point to avoid speculative moral abstractions; for the danger exists that we will lump 'things' together which really ought to be differentiated. Employing the distinction between a thing and its use will require us, then, to mark off 'things' of creation from products of culture.

Another necessary and related restriction is provided by 1 Tim.4.4-5 itself, where the apostle assures us that 'nothing is to be refused *if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.*' This identifies the covenantal context for enjoying creation, and alerts us to the fact that 'things' can entail or exhibit a context of values both moral and religious. For this restriction implies that there may be 'things' which *cannot* be received with thanksgiving! One reason for this impossibility may be weakness of conscience. 'The use of food must be judged, partly from its substance, and partly from the person of him who eats it,' Calvin advises, explaining the second criterion to mean that 'the goodness of the creatures, which he [Paul] mentions, has relation to men, and that not with regard to the body or to health, but to the consciences.'¹⁶² Another reason why something cannot be received with thanksgiving may be the residual effects of its abuse by unbelievers. In other words, in terms of offense of the weak it matters greatly whether the 'thing' is a car or a movie, the ability to run or to dance.

We must be careful, then, when using the valid distinction between a thing and its use, of the dangers of moral abstractionism, of normlessness and of ignoring the ecclesial context of moral activity.

In summary, it is misdirected to try resolving the collision between Christian liberty and neighbor love by appealing to distinctions which imply a morally neutral creational realm ('adiaphora'). As we have seen, these appeals tend to yield either moral abstractionism or moral individualism.

2.4 The theological context of *scandalum infirmorum*

Back in Chapter 1 we observed that Aquinas, Calvin and Henry treat offense of the weak in quite different theological contexts.

¹⁶²John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 104.

For Aquinas, offense of the weak is one of several vices that contradict the virtue of love. Calvin handles the matter a bit differently, placing it in the context of the doctrine of faith, specifically justification by faith, of which Christian liberty is an appendage. For Calvin, then, offense is the abuse of Christian liberty. And for Carl Henry, Christian liberty enjoys the position of moral primacy, and is then qualified by other principles, among them God's glory, purity of conscience, and concern for one's co-believers (in terms of giving offense to the weak) and for unbelieving neighbors. Love for neighbor functions, then, as a negative limit to or restriction upon one's Christian liberty.

On the basis of our study of Rom.14-15 and 1 Cor.8-10, our judgment is that both Calvin and Henry provide a significant advance over Aquinas when they discuss offense of the weak within the context of *faith and conscience*. In terms of biblical adequacy, locating this conflict within the context of faith and conscience clearly emphasizes that the conflict between strong and weak is a church conflict, involving believers' *relationships*. This benefit results from drawing attention, not to the nature of the offensive act and of causality within offense (Aquinas), but to that threefold relationship, created within the context of *faith*, between the believer, his fellow-believer, and their Lord.

It is our view that, no matter what else it may be, offense of the weak is first of all *an ecclesial conflict*, a church matter.¹⁶³ Obviously, the collision between Christian liberty and neighbor love as that comes to expression in the conflict between the strong and the weak is by definition a social conflict. But because offense of the weak involves matters of faith and conscience it is also an ecclesial conflict. This is its characteristic dynamic, its genius: offense of the weak involves not simply the believer's walk with God, not merely his walk in the creation and among the world, but his walk *with* his co-believer. In its broadest possible terms, *scandalum infirmorum* involves the manner and direction in which the church, restored to its original mandate, collaborates—i.e., works and walks *together*—in obedience among the people of the world.

Perhaps some would suggest that, stripped of its abstract Aristotelian preoccupations, invigorated with ecclesiological imagery, Aquinas'

¹⁶³The term *ecclesiastical* connotes the church's organizational side, while the word *ecclesiological* describes either (1) that theological *locus* dealing comprehensively with the Bible's teaching about the church, or (2) that part of the theological curriculum concerned with the church's revelation-created form. We employ the term *ecclesial* to mean the *relational dimension of life among church members*.

placement of the problem in the context of love is closest to the biblical pattern. After all, the apostle does caution that 'love edifies' and love 'does not seek its own' (1 Cor.8.1; 13.5). The strong may not demand his own way, but must receive and forbear with the weak. And likewise the weak may not insist upon having his own way, but should cut the strong some moral slack while adhering to his own conscience.

There is no denying, of course, that both love and freedom are pivotal components in a biblical analysis of the offense of the weak. As the apostle John writes, 'He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him' (1 Jn.2.10; cf. Rom.14.15; 1 Cor.8.1). But we believe these must be combined within the *locus de ecclesia*, in order both to avoid and to resolve the conflict between the strong and the weak. This we hope to explain further in Chapter 3 below.

For if, as we shall argue presently, in this collision called *scandalum infirmorum* appealing just to freedom is not enough, neither is appealing only to love.

One might compare love to a compass and God's revealed will to a map.¹⁶⁴ But because offense of the weak involves areas which God has not charted, we are traversing unmapped terrain, so to speak. For pilgrims traveling in uncharted moral territory, the compass of love may well provide direction, but it can gauge neither distance nor danger nor *destination*. Love is not enough. One must look up from the compass to the surroundings—a tree here, a rock there—in order to gauge distance. One must cast his eyes about for dangerous impediments that may cause him or his companion to fall. That is: love is useful only when one is aware of the surrounding terrain of travel, the interpersonal context and intention of moral action.

Love has a goal; it isn't satisfied with its own exercise. 'Love edifies,' Paul tells the Corinthians, suggesting hereby that love is penultimate. That is: *love can tell us how, but not why* (whereunto, with what goal). This 'why' is found in the relationship between believers and their common Lord; Christ is Master of both strong and weak, and both eat and drink 'to the Lord' (Rom.14.4,8-12,18; cf. 1 Cor.8.11-12). This destination is located in the motive of edifying one another (Rom.14.19; 1 Cor.8.1; 10.23). This 'why' is discovered in the goal of pleasing one another (Rom.15.2; 1 Cor.10.24; 10.32-11.1). Belonging to Christ and His church, and being related in faith to God and one another, provide ecclesiology with a significant ethical dimension.

¹⁶⁴Cf. J. Douma, *Christian Morals and Ethics*, 60.

Unfortunately, by locating the entrance into the analysis of *scandalum infirmorum* within Christian liberty (Calvin and Henry) and soteriology or pneumatology (Calvin), the clash between liberty and love is threatened with moral individualism. This is so because, as Calvin says, Christian freedom is first of all freedom of conscience; and conscience is a *private* possession.

But the *exercise* of conscience occurs within a community—in terms of our discussion, the faith-community or church. In 1 Cor.8-10 and Rom.14-15 the apostle's point of departure is *the interrelation, under Christ, in the church, of believers who in certain situations may be 'weak' or 'strong,' more or less morally knowledgeable and skillful.* It is especially this datum, this ecclesial component, that permits a proper definition (problemstelling) and resolution of *scandalum infirmorum*, for it (1) exposes the communal character of faith, of the exercise of conscience, and therefore of offense of the weak; (2) diagnoses the universalizing (communalist) impulse among both weak and strong which occasions their conflict; and (3) illuminates the church's itinerant, that is: eschatological, character.

With ecclesiology as the doorway into our analysis of *scandalum infirmorum*, we have a clearer view of the nature of weakness. We willingly admit that weakness denotes incompleteness, but it describes an incompleteness that will reappear in the church until Christ returns. Far from legitimating a static situation by permitting differences of moral judgment to continue in the church, this admission assumes that *travel will continue* while within Christ's church believers with differing moral abilities collaborate τῷ Κυρίῳ, unto the Lord (Rom.14.5-9).

2.5 The examples

Let's pause a moment to summarize our descriptions of weakness and of *scandalum infirmorum*.

We have said that the *weakness* involved in *scandalum infirmorum* consists of an incapacity for a particular moral undertaking caused by a knowledge deficient in applying certain elements of the Christian faith to life. This weakness is not inherently culpable, although someone who is weak may be inclined wrongly to condemn the strong for the permissions of his conscience. And this deficiency is often only temporary, removed by acquiring a broader understanding of the Christian faith and its application to life.

The moral injury which constitutes *scandalum infirmorum* occurs in a particular situation only when one believer's conduct (the 'strong'), because it contradicts another believer's convictions of conscience (the 'weak') and generates moral dissonance, induces him to violate the permissions or prohibitions of his conscience.

At this point one might well ask: After so much clearing away and clarifying of mistaken notions about things like weakness and adiaphora, moral injury and offense, what is left over to apply to Christian living today? Does *scandalum infirmorum* ever occur today?

You will recall from Chapter 1 that we introduced the examples explained there with the caution that we must still determine whether any, some, or all of them properly involve *scandalum infirmorum*. Let's turn now to that analysis in light of our synthesis and critique.

Example 1 involves conflicts arising from superstitious practices which are recognizable as such after conversion. This kind of conflict can occur in cultures steeped in primitive nature religions, where the powers of evil, sickness and death are personified. Church bells are rung during a funeral procession to scare away the evil spirits; travel plans are kept secret to prevent an enemy from 'witching' the vehicle and thereby causing certain death.

In such situations, *if* the classifications of 'strong' and 'weak' apply, the 'strong' convert would be free of such fears and superstitions. He would be inclined not only to ignore such practices, but to view them as unnecessary and overcome by the Christian faith. The Holy Spirit is stronger than all other spirits, protecting God's child from injury and relieving him of fear. The 'weak' convert, by contrast, might 'know' biblical teaching about the Holy Spirit and evil spirits, but his knowledge is deficient in its life-application. That constitutes his weakness.

It is generally true, however, that in such a situation, the weak one does not criticize the strong for ignoring fearful practices (unlike the situation in Rom.14-15), nor is he inclined to imitate the strong (unlike the situation in 1 Cor.8-10). Rather, it is the strong who is more likely to criticize the weak for continuing to indulge his primitive superstitions. This example illustrates, then, that there can be *infirmi* where there is no *scandalum*.

Example 2 is an extension of this, in the sense that customs retained from non-Christian cultural folklore and combined with the celebration of events on the Christian calendar, can generate differences of moral judgment within the church. Should believers have a Christmas tree in their homes, or permit their children to enjoy Halloween festivities?

But here, the inclination to reject such practices does not arise from weakness, that is: from a knowledge deficient in applying certain elements of the Christian faith to life. In fact, it is quite doubtful that we should speak of weakness or of moral disability at all in this situation. Again, this illustration points up the truth that a difference of moral judgment does not thereby constitute *scandalum*.

With *Example 3* (Sunday-observance) and *Example 5* (contact between believers and surrounding culture) we illustrate a process of change which includes revision of moral judgment. This process inevitably generates differences of opinion, whereby some believers permit themselves greater liberty than others. These examples differ, though, in that *Example 3* moves from the commandment to the activity, while *Example 5* proceeds from the activity to the biblical direction.¹⁶⁵

Moving from ecclesial rejection to ecclesial acceptance of a cultural practice often involves ecclesial conflict, as individual believers begin to reevaluate the once-prohibited practice and arrive at a judgment differing from the communal consensus. This transition is characterized by the tendencies and tensions addressed in 1 Cor.8-10 and Rom.14-15, in at least three ways.

First, the terms 'strong' and 'weak' can apply to believers who hold differing judgments about the moral permissibility of a given cultural activity.

Second, this transition is frequently marked by the *process* of stumbling, with its stages, personal dynamics and consequent injury among co-believers. Especially young believers (either physically or spiritually young) face a higher risk of moral injury, being more likely to imitate the actions of others, contrary to the permissions of their own consciences. It is more than mere coincidence, therefore, that disagreements about matters of lifestyle usually involve the church's youth. In a real sense, the issue is the prevention of their moral suicide.

And third, the biblical, pastoral *resolution* of the conflict illustrated

¹⁶⁵The discerning student of church history realizes, however, that the move from ecclesial rejection to ecclesial acceptance of a cultural practice was frequently occasioned by change surrounding the practice itself. The early church's prohibition of military service was replaced with approval when serving in the army no longer meant worshipping the emperor. Some Sunday activities formerly frowned upon became more acceptable as they became culturally prevalent. It is quite inaccurate, therefore, to characterize revisions of ecclesial moral judgment with statements attempting wry humor, like 'Our parents were not allowed to do such and such, but now we may.' Frequently these activities were not the same back then!

by *Example 3* and *Example 5* is found in the very passages we have investigated. Of all our examples, these two seem to correspond most closely to the cases treated in 1 Corinthians and Romans.

What, then, of *Example 4*, where grape juice is substituted for wine at the Lord's Supper, in deference to the alcoholic? It seems clear to us that no one diagnoses an alcoholic as someone disabled for a particular moral undertaking because of his deficient moral knowledge. We observed earlier, when we distinguished various kinds of 'weakness,' that the situations in Corinth and Rome involved not the weak's fear of moral enslavement, but the danger of the weak's moral injury by violating his own conscience through imitating the permissions enjoyed by the strong. In other words: the alcoholic's condition doesn't fit Scripture's description of 'weakness.'¹⁶⁶ Although the alcoholic does indeed live with a moral disability, that handicap derives not from inadequate *knowledge*, but from inadequate *self-control*.¹⁶⁷

Whether or not grape juice ought to be substituted for wine at the Lord's Supper will have to be settled on grounds other than the presumed 'weakness' of the alcoholic. We chose this example precisely because people persistently—and in our opinion, incorrectly—attempt to resolve it in terms of *scandalum infirmorum*.

2.6 Summarizing observations

It would be a mistake to think that dismissing most of our examples, because they do not fall within the parameters of *scandalum infirmorum*, leaves us with nothing more to say about offense of the weak today. To the contrary, our evaluation of these examples yields two summarizing observations.

First, among the most useful benefits of this study may be the realization that we must carefully avoid classifying all sorts of moral disagreements among believers by using the terms, categories and resolutions appropriate only to *scandalum infirmorum*. Perhaps the greatest danger in such classification is that believers are inappropriately designated by the labels 'weak' and 'strong.' Our study has shown that

¹⁶⁶For a similar opinion, see John Murray, *Romans*, 260-261; and 'The Weak and the Strong,' *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4:147-150.

¹⁶⁷For an excellent and provocative discussion of this point, see *Heavy Drinking: The Myth of Alcoholism as a Disease*, by Herbert Fingarette.

'weakness' refers primarily to the condition of conscience whose deficiency of knowledge prevents guilt-free participation in a given practice. Appropriate usage requires that terms like 'weak' and 'strong,' 'weakness' and 'strength,' along with phrases like 'giving offense' and 'causing someone to stumble,' remain case-specific designations. Otherwise, such terms and phrases can be used to camouflage lack of self-control (cf. Example 5), or to eradicate every difference of moral conviction (cf. Example 2), or to assert the danger of *scandalum* merely because there are *infirmi* (cf. Example 1).

Second, we have seen that *scandalum infirmorum* arises especially in the church's missionary context, in that zone of transition from old habits and convictions to new teaching and life-applications. Contact between the church and the world, between faith and life, between new and mature believers, generates the kind of conflict we've been studying. Conversion to Christ, surprisingly enough, can arouse tensions not only in marriage (see 1 Cor.7.10-16), but in the church as well.

Although the church should always retain her missionary character, she doesn't necessarily continue living in a missionary context. As people mature in the faith, and cultures come to be shaped by Christianity, instructions from Scripture that were given initially to new, young congregations often obtain broader application. In terms of our study, 1 Cor.8-10 and Rom.14-15 can be best applied *per analogiam*. This use of Scripture is illustrated by Voetius, when he applies 1 Cor.7.10-16 to cases of marital desertion on non-religious grounds. He argues that this passage permits, by analogy, releasing the deserted party from the marriage vow on the basis of *any* illegitimate desertion.¹⁶⁸ In line with Voetius, J. Douma insists that in cases of desertion among

¹⁶⁸For a discussion of this passage, and of Voetius' argument, see J. Douma, *Echtscheiding*, 74-77; Douma notes that with this line of reasoning, 'Voetius works more indirectly [than Beza]. Naturally, for him too the second ground for divorce [desertion] is based on Scripture. But not every wilful desertion needs to be a desertion on account of religion, in order to grant the abandoned party the right to enter a subsequent marriage. Voetius reasons *by analogy*: if one who is (illegitimately) deserted on account of religion is released from the marriage bond, then by analogy that applies to every deserted party, for whatever reason he or she may have been (illegitimately) deserted. Voetius points in this connection to what he calls the 'absurd consequence,' should this not apply: in that case a guilty husband could arbitrarily burden a young woman, or a guilty wife a young man, with the lifelong status of widow or widower, and could thus rob her or him of the use and fruits of marriage. In this manner one could separate at will what God has joined together!' (76).

Subsequent synods used this line of reasoning as well, often leaving it an open question precisely which conditions needed to obtain for there to be wilful desertion.

two believing partners, the deserter behaves culpably, just like the unbelieving partner in 1 Cor.7, by abandoning his or her spouse. 'Isn't that to a similar degree an unchristian action which *by analogy to* 1 Cor. 7 can lead to a complete break?' Douma asks. The deserter behaves like an unbeliever, and acts *in opposition to* true religion.¹⁶⁹

If we applied this line of reasoning to our present study, we would then need to describe the conditions which ought to obtain, under which one could determine that the danger of *scandalum infirmorum* exists.

Minimally, such a danger exists only where a difference of practice among believers has the potential for inducing someone who is convinced of the inherent impermissibility of an act, to act contrary to the permissions or prohibitions of his conscience by imitating another's behavior. Without this potential, the danger of *scandalum infirmorum* does *not* exist, and the terms and appeals appropriate to 'offense of the weak' are unsuitable.

It's one thing to identify the dangerous conditions surrounding potential moral injury, but quite another to specify how we must escape or avoid them. Where is the pathway that circumvents the danger of *scandalum infirmorum*? What does it look like? Why, and how, is it the only route to pursuing the other's moral well-being and preventing his moral injury? Our investigation would remain incomplete if we failed to describe, albeit briefly, this positive calling.

¹⁶⁹Douma, *Echtscheidung*, 103-104.

CHAPTER 3

COMMUNIO SANCTORUM: CHRISTIAN LIBERTY *servi*ng NEIGHBOR LOVE

3.1 Introduction: Love as limit to liberty?

Our study of *scandalum infirmorum* may have seemed finished at the end of Chapter 2, with our evaluation of supposed examples of offense of the weak. But we would like briefly in this final chapter to analyze this moral conflict in terms of the confession and practice of *communio sanctorum*, or the communion of the saints.

Why should we look for some positive help in this part of the *Apostolicum*?

Well, we have been describing *scandalum infirmorum* as an ecclesiastical conflict, involving the manner and direction in which the church, restored to its original mandate, collaborates—i.e., works and walks *together*—in obedience among the people of the world. The obvious solution for any conflict in the church is for believers to love one another; the second great commandment, 'love your neighbor as yourself,' points both weak and strong to the norm for freedom.

But the inadequacy of this formulation becomes evident when we pay attention to the language people use to describe the relationship between love and freedom. It is quite common for authors who discuss the exercise of Christian liberty to view obligations to fellow-believers as a *restraint* upon that freedom.

One moralist maintains, for example, that Christian liberty is *restricted* by the duties of love.¹⁷⁰ Another argues that the command to love can *suspend the right* to use our freedom.¹⁷¹ Still others hear the apostle Paul teaching that the neighbor is an important *limit* upon

¹⁷⁰W. Geesink, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 2:196, 198, 204.

¹⁷¹W. Trillhaas, *Ethiek*, 80-82.

the freedoms of conscience.¹⁷²

We learned already that for Carl Henry, Christian liberty is the primary principle of Christian living, and all other considerations serve to qualify that principle. Nevertheless, though he too argues that liberty is limited by expediency, his choice of words is quite sensitive to the relationship between freedom and these other qualifications. He speaks of the virtues of love and sacrifice 'taking their place alongside' liberty, of accompanying circumstances serving to 'condition the direction' of freedom, and of liberty 'conforming to' the higher law of love.¹⁷³

Perhaps Henry has sensed the fundamental inadequacy of the negative formulation that uses words like 'limit' or 'restrict' to describe the relationship between Christian freedom and love for neighbor. For when viewed in this way, love and liberty come to exist in tension with each other. And in the conflict between the strong and the weak, obligations toward fellow-believers constitute a *negative* qualification of freedom.

Is there, then, another approach to the question, a positive formulation of the relationship between liberty and love?

One helpful clue arises from the comparison of Christian liberty with its counterfeit, human autonomy. After noting how modern humanist freedom is essentially destructive, W.G. de Vries observes that, in line with the harmonizing unity of the fruit of the Spirit, Christian freedom consists of 'fellowship with God, but then also fellowship with one another, for since [believers] now live by the Spirit of freedom, they also travel together in tight formation. In contrast to the arrogant isolation of the Stoics, existentialists, and others who destroy fellowship, Christian liberty leads to genuine fellowship. For walking in liberty is

¹⁷²Kurt Niederwimmer, *Der Begriff der Freiheit im Neuen Testament*, 205; Wolfgang Schrage, *Ethics of the New Testament*, 196. Others who formulate the matter this way include P.H.R. van Houwelingen, 'Steeds sterker worden,' *De Reformatie* 58/37:584; Edward T. Horn, 'Adiaphorism,' *Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 1:92; and Henry Stob, *Ethical Reflections: Essays on Moral Themes*, 161.

When he discusses the two values of freedom and love, Allen Verhey puts it this way: 'If freedom is the most fundamental value, love is the most important. They are related to each other because they are both related to God's eschatological action in the cross and resurrection. Christ frees us from our bondage to the powers of the old age to an eschatological existence whose distinguishing characteristic is love. . .' (*The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament*, 108). According to Verhey, Christian ethics reflects on the situational applications of these eschatological values, which in his treatment seem never to *intersect*, but run alongside each other like the rails of a train track.

¹⁷³Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 428.

walking by the kind of love which seeks God and the neighbor.¹⁷⁴

Genuine freedom aims at fellowship!

The same is true of neighbor love, of course. Such love is nothing less than 'a concern for the well-being and life of the neighbor, which moves us to put ourselves and our wherewithal in the service of his interest, of his happiness.'¹⁷⁵ Love impels us toward union with our neighbor, an impulse fulfilled only among believers, only in the congregation of Jesus Christ, where people are moved by divine love to genuine neighbor love.

Identifying fellowship with the co-believer as the goal of *both* freedom and love opens to us a world in which liberty and love dwell in *communio* rather than competition.

Moreover, this notion of communion provides a helpful framework for resolving the ecclesiastical conflict between the strong and the weak. In fact, this context is furnished by the church's own confession, 'I believe a holy catholic church, *the communion of saints*.'¹⁷⁶ The Heidelberg Catechism explains this confession to mean 'first, that believers, all and every one, as members of Christ, are partakers of Him and of all His treasures and gifts; second, that every one must know himself bound to employ his gifts readily and cheerfully for the advantage and salvation of other members.'¹⁷⁷

Rather than conducting a doctrinal-historical survey of this dogma, we will summarize it by saying that Christian *communio* is twofold. Just as the Decalog structures vertical as well as horizontal relationships, love toward God and toward the neighbor, so *communio sanctorum* describes the quality and purpose of those Godward and manward

¹⁷⁴W.G. de Vries, *De gereformeerde levenswandel: Enkele aspecten van 'onze wandel in Christus*, 166-167; emphasis added. Unfortunately, de Vries later says, 'That is the first limit: love toward the brother' (168; emphasis added). For a similar description of freedom as fellowship, see G. Brillenburg-Wurth, *Het christelijk leven: Grondlijnen der ethiek*, 233-234, 246.

¹⁷⁵J. van Anandel, *De gemeenschap der heiligen*, 40.

¹⁷⁶For the history of this confession, see Henry Barclay Swete, *The Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints: A Study in the Apostles' Creed*; Paul Althaus, *Communio Sanctorum: Die Gemeinde im lutherischen Kirchengedanken*, vol. 1, Luther; W. Elert, 'Die Herkunft der Formel Sanctorum Communio,' *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 78 (1949) 577-586; F.J. Badcock, 'Sanctorum Communio as an Article in the Creed,' *The Journal of Theological Studies* 21 (1920) 106-126; and E. Kähler, 'Gemeinschaft der Heiligen,' *RGK*, 2:1348-1349.

¹⁷⁷Lord's Day 21, Question and Answer 55; this translation is found in the *Doctrinal Standards of the Christian Reformed Church*, found in *The Psalter Hymnal* (1959 edition).

relationships. This *communio* is a fellowship first with Christ Himself and, second, with other Christians. The first is origin and measure of the second,¹⁷⁸ while the second is the necessary fruit and demonstration of the first.

Moreover, it should be evident that since faith issues in good works and is expressed in deeds of love, *communio sanctorum* possesses an inherently ethical dimension.¹⁷⁹ Since our interest at the moment is in the moral dimension of our relationship as believers, as *sanctorum*, we may distinguish two aspects of this moral *communio*: (1) that among the gifts bestowed are particular *moral* gifts (such as wisdom, discernment, spiritual perception); and (2) that the *use* of any gift bestowed in Christ is subject to ethical review.

A complete list of spiritual gifts whose employment constitutes *communio sanctorum* would be large.¹⁸⁰ But it would surely include a unique brother-love and *correlative* Christian freedom. Rather than regarding love as the *limit* to liberty, we prefer to speak intentionally of freedom and love as *correlative*. The analogy of a family may be helpful: 'parents' and 'children' are correlative, since one cannot exist without the other; and though some may be inclined to view parenting as 'limiting' or 'restricting' children (an essentially negative formulation),

¹⁷⁸Gijsbert Voetius, *Voetius' Catechisatie over den Heidelbergschen Catechismus*, 562.

¹⁷⁹Cf. Benno Gassmann's similar claim that 'The fellowship of faith necessarily externalizes itself in visible fellowship, which is the genuine expression of love' (*Ecclesia Reformata: Die Kirche in den Reformierten Bekenntnisschriften*, 68).

W. Geesink treats this ethical dimension of *communio sanctorum* in his *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, where he explains the communion of the saints to require, negatively, not giving offense and a bad example and, positively, showing love through instructing, comforting and building up one another in word and deed (2:430-431). Later he identifies *communio sanctorum* as the primary duty of the *ecclesia localis*; in fact, ethics appraises the communal life of the local church in terms of that aspect called *exercitio sanctorum*, whose duty is fulfilled in worship, edification, personal reformation, preserving unity, expanding the church and providing its material support (2:425-435).

Concerning this ethical dimension of *communio sanctorum*, K. Schilder complains that 'the communion of saints is . . . viewed *simply* as proceeding from themselves; the theme is dragged from the doctrinal to the ethical sphere. 'The saints' must construct a fellowship-house on the empirical foundation of their own holiness, or on the presumption thereof.' He rightly insists that one must begin with the sovereign, covenantal, gathering work of God the Father through Jesus Christ ('Iets over de gemeenschap der heiligen,' *De kerk*, 2:379; emphasis added).

For a helpful biblical-theological study of *communio sanctorum*, consult Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, especially Chapter 5, 'The Fellowship in Faith' (136-172) and Chapter 6, 'The Body of Christ' (173-220).

¹⁸⁰For such a list, see Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4:324.

nevertheless, God's purpose for family relationships is met when children submit to their parents, and parents guide and nurture their offspring. Similarly, love and liberty belong and function together, depend upon and are defined by one another.¹⁸¹ Regarding love as the limit to freedom will inevitably yield tension and competition between them. But if liberty is called to serve love, and love commissioned to guide liberty, then God's purpose for both will be realized. How that should occur in the conflict between the strong and weak will occupy our attention for the rest of this chapter.

3.2 Christian liberty as ecclesial gift

The second great commandment teaches us that love is inherently other-directed, an obligation that has echoed from the very beginning, from Adam's creation onward. Even Cain's cynical question, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' provides a negative evidence of love's other-directedness.

But can the same be said of freedom, that it too is inherently other-directed, essentially social?

Today many define freedom as *choice*. Such freedom can be the property only of the sovereign individual. Even the phrase 'a free society' employs liberty as an individualized and individualizing concept, and identifies a collection of free individuals.

In our judgment, this notion of freedom contributes significantly to any tension perceived between love and liberty in the church, and heightens the conflict between the strong and the weak. The correction of this defective understanding lies in recognizing that, like love, *genuine freedom is inherently other-directed, that freedom aims at fellowship.*

Whenever people study the Scripture concerning the subject of Christian liberty, they customarily begin with those NT passages that have formed such an important part of our study already.¹⁸² But this overlooks the fact that Christian liberty is a *recovered* treasure. To

¹⁸¹An important but slightly different emphasis on the connection between *divine* love and human freedom is found in E.W. Schaeffer-de Wal, 'De weg naar menselijke vrijheid,' *Wat is christelijke vrijheid?*, 70-73.

¹⁸²For example, in his article on ελευθερος, H. Schlier ignores the OT, to begin his discussion of freedom in Scripture with the NT teaching about freedom *from* sin, the law and death (*TDNT*, 2:487-502, esp. 496).

grasp its real character, we'll have to go back to the OT, to Paradise, to the creation of freedom.¹⁸³

3.2.1 Freedom in fellowship at creation

When God made people in Paradise, He created no sovereign individuals, but children-in-communion.

God's act of creating man arose from, proceeded by, and resulted in *communio*: 'Let us make mankind [*people!*] in our image, according to our likeness, . . . male and female He created them' (Gen.1.26-27). This was followed immediately by God's communion-creating dominion donation: after blessing them, God told Adam and Eve to 'be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.' Also subject to man's dominion were every herb and tree (Gen.1.28-29). The expression and consummation of human fellowship were to find form in fruitfulness and offspring; the goal and destiny of that fellowship were to be realized in dominion.

At creation, then, human freedom was a freedom-*in*-fellowship, not a human achievement, but a divine donation.¹⁸⁴

But it was also a freedom-*for*-fellowship. By virtue of creation, the existence of the other is a summons, an invitation, to fellowship. Rather than being restricted, freedom is *conditioned* by the relationships in which God placed humankind. Genuine freedom can exist and grow only in fellowship with God and neighbor. In Paradise, fellowship was nurtured by freedom serving the other according to love's direction. We may say that the love of God and neighbor is the path along which freedom is enjoyed.¹⁸⁵ *Love is the form of freedom's fellowship, the harnessing of its power.*

Another way of saying this is to observe that whereas fallen, 'autonomous' freedom is essentially a negative concept (free 'from'), created liberty was positive: people were created free *for*, since in Paradise there was as yet nothing to be free *from!* Fallen freedom is

¹⁸³In what follows we've made extensive use of material in J. Kamphuis, 'Goddelijke bevrijding en christelijke vrijheid,' *Wat is christelijke vrijheid?*, 33-67.

¹⁸⁴On freedom as divine gift, see also H.G. Geertsema, 'Vrijheid als antwoord. In de lijn van de Reformatie,' *Vrijheid: Een onderzoek naar de betekenis van vrijheid voor de methodologie van de mensenwetenschappen*, 261.

¹⁸⁵Kamphuis, 'Goddelijke bevrijding,' 36-37. See below for further expansion of this.

realized essentially as *isolation*, but creational liberty as *participation*. It is a freedom for others, for living in submission to others. Consistent with his identity as a relational being, man's freedom is essentially *relational*. 'Every concept of freedom which would describe man's essence ontologically, apart from his relation to God, must end with the 'freedom' of autonomy and self-determination. Such an abstract ontology of essences can give no true perspective on freedom; it must always designate as the earmark of freedom, being 'free from'—however the concept is further elaborated. . . . This freedom leaves man to himself, and he chooses so to be, as over against the world of the other, which limits him and threatens him. . . . Freedom is thus formally qualified, and from this point of view any limit or responsibility will be seen as relativizing of absolute freedom.'¹⁸⁶

Such a relational, rather than ontological, description of freedom overcomes any tension between freedom and authority, autonomy and heteronomy, and between the individual and the community. According to this view, the self is realized in service to the other.¹⁸⁷ Man's humanness 'reveals itself not in an obscure 'free from,' but in a love-filled 'free for' and fulfills also the following of the law of Christ.'¹⁸⁸

3.2.2 Freedom for fellowship through redemption

As we said, Christian liberty is *recovered* treasure. When people in Paradise decided to use their freedom autonomously, they and their offspring became isolated together, unfree, slaves to sin, to hatred and to death. The entire purpose of divine redemption may be summarized as restoring people to that original pattern of freedom serving others in love.

The clearest expression of this we find in Galatians 5.13-14.

In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul was contending against Judaizers who, out of fear of persecution (6.12), were compelling Gentile converts to adhere to Jewish ceremonies. At stake was the very

¹⁸⁶G.C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 327.

¹⁸⁷Geertsema, 'Vrijheid als antwoord,' 276; Niederwimmer, *Der Begriff der Freiheit*, 84.

¹⁸⁸G.C. Berkouwer, *Man*, 329. Another dilemma overcome is that of nomism/antinomianism. Both are cut off by the recognition that living in freedom is living in love. Love rescues us from both despising the law and being enslaved to the law (Niederwimmer, *Der Begriff der Freiheit*, 211).

gospel of grace proclaimed by Paul and the other apostles, whose central message was that the OT law served as Israel's custodian to tutor them unto Christ; but now that Christ has come, the reality behind those shadows has appeared, and believers are free from the ceremonies and rituals once required. But this freedom could be abused, so the apostle reminds the Galatians, 'For you, brothers, have been called to freedom; only do not apply freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (5.13-14).

Here believers are called to employ their internal freedom of conscience in external relationships with God and neighbor, *negatively*, not as a beachhead for the old habits of sin, and *positively*, through love in service to others.¹⁸⁹ Love is an instrument: Christians must be dominated and driven by love in all their conduct toward fellow-believers.¹⁹⁰ 'The call to freedom, then, is a call to oneness in Christ and to loving service within the believing community. The liberty of the gospel is not to be exercised in isolated independence.'¹⁹¹

Genuine freedom (ἐλευθερία) is exercised in the servitude (δουλεία) of neighbor love arising from faith (Gal.5.13). Redemption moves believers, not from freedom into bondage, but from one bondage into another: from the bondage to sin and death into the service of Christ and others. The present question, Calvin insists, is not 'in what manner we are freed before God, but in what manner we may use our liberty in our intercourse with men.'¹⁹² Freedom is real-ized (made real) only in love, and only freedom that serves love real-izes (fulfills) the law (5.14). This is what God intended by the law, as the goal of the law.

Liberty serving love real-izes the law. This three-dimensional unity was fashioned at creation and restored through redemption: the law (moral *structure*) is real-ized in liberty (moral *power*) by love (moral *direction*). Significantly, this tri-unity proceeds from another, that of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and embraces still another, that of the

¹⁸⁹Commenting on this passage, Calvin remarks that liberty is one thing, its use quite another. 'Liberty lies in the conscience, and looks to God; the use of it lies in outward matters, and deals not with God only, but with men' (*Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 158; cf. Ronald Y.K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 244). If in Gal.5.1 Christian liberty is defended against legal bondage, here it is defended against libertinism (F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 240).

¹⁹⁰S. Greijdanus, *De brief van den apostel Paulus aan de gemeenten in Galatie*, 323.

¹⁹¹Bruce, *Galatians*, 241.

¹⁹²Calvin, *Galatians*, 159.

strong, the weak, and their God. If redemption through Jesus Christ aims at overcoming sin's perversions of creation, including perversions of freedom, then genuine *human* freedom is realized only as *Christian* liberty, which is well described as 'serving God as Father, from the heart, in Christ, with a good conscience, in fellowship with His people who are traveling toward complete deliverance.'¹⁹³

EXCURSUS: Liberty 'conditioned' by love?

The description of the relationship between Christian liberty and neighbor love is as difficult as it is important. Negative formulations suggesting that love 'limits' or 'restricts' freedom are inadequate. We've heard Carl Henry suggest, almost cautiously, that love 'conditions the direction' of liberty.

But such vocabulary is used by others as well.

In his book, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty: The Origin and Nature of Paul's Christianity*, Richard N. Longenecker offers a treatment of the 'law-freedom dialectic' so prominent in the writings of the apostle. Three kinds of freedom can be distinguished: forensic, personal and social liberty. It is the third that interests us here.

Perhaps because of its mistaken assumption that of all three, social liberty 'is least spoken of in the letters of Paul' (173), Longenecker's investigation proves less helpful to our study than its title suggests.

Our hopes are raised specifically by his section entitled, 'The Conditioning of Liberty' (202-208). Earlier he identified the external and internal aspects of guidance in the Christian life as the Law of Christ (Gal.6.2; 1 Cor.9.21) and the Mind of Christ (1 Cor.2.16), respectively. These constitute the objective and subjective factors in the direction of Christian liberty (191, 195-196), which factors Longenecker equates with 'the will of God' and 'the love of God' (203). Concerning the integration of law, liberty and love, he offers the following: 'He [i.e., Paul] does not speak of love so much as directing the Christian's liberty as of conditioning it. It is not that love is primary in giving guidance to the believer, for actions stemming from the best of motives and intentions can at times result in turmoil, harm, and anything but the will of God. Rather, love stands as the qualifying factor to that ethic which has received its guidance from Christ. . . . As the will of God, expressed through the interaction of the Law of Christ and the Mind of Christ, is central in the guidance of liberty, so the love of God, both His love to us and our response, is central in its conditioning. It is this conditioning factor of love together with the pneumatic guidance of the Mind of Christ that

¹⁹³Kamphuis, 'Godelijke bevrijding,' 47: 'Onder christelijke vrijheid verstaan we: in Christus met een goed geweten God als Vader van harte dienen in gemeenschap met zijn volk, dat op weg is naar de volkomen verlossing.' Each of these phrases is explained further in the rest of his essay (47-62).

makes operative in the particular situation the principles and example of the Law of Christ, and it is the union of these factors that results in the will of God being done in specific and differing situations' (203). He concludes by saying, 'That same love which motivated God to give the gift of freedom in Jesus Christ must likewise motivate the Christian to waive his given rights of liberty wherever necessary for the sake of the corporate ideal' (206). Appealing to 1 Cor.9.12-23, he writes: 'In spiritual matters, one way in which this love is manifested to the world is in a willingness to restrict one's personal liberty in matters which are of secondary importance for the sake of the Gospel' (206).

Several things disappoint us. (1) Throughout his discussion of freedom and love, Longenecker seems to equate the love which conditions liberty with love *for God*. He seems unaware that the *neighbor* love of Gal.5.14 explains liberty's service to love, exhorted in 5.13. As Calvin puts it, because love of God (*pietas*) is invisible, 'God therefore chooses to make trial of our love to himself by that love of our brother, which he enjoins us to cultivate.'¹⁹⁴ (2) Speaking of the believer 'waiving his given rights of liberty' seems to suggest that 'conditioning' means 'limiting,' a suspicion confirmed when Longenecker identifies liberty's *restriction* as one of love's manifestations. (3) Liberty appears, after all, to be an *individual* possession, to be suspended on occasion for the *corporate* ideal.

Having said this, we wish neither to equate Henry's view that love 'conditions' liberty with Longenecker's, nor to suffice with Henry's description. Far better, we think, is the phrase 'liberty *serv*ing love.'

Liberty serves love *in fellowship with God's people*. When we call Christian liberty an *ecclesial* gift, we understand that each of Christ's spiritual gifts is ecclesial in the sense that each is given to the church and each is to be used for the church. But liberty is uniquely ecclesial in that it constitutes the power, the authority or *ἐξουσία* by which all other gifts are employed.

The notion of Christian liberty as *authority* or *power* derives from Paul's statement in 1 Cor.6.12, which we might paraphrase this way: 'I have moral power¹⁹⁵ in regard to all things, but all things are not helpful. I have moral power in regard to all things, but I will not be overpowered¹⁹⁶ by anything.' This freedom-as-power employed in Corinth by the strong believers for enjoying temple meals is described

¹⁹⁴ Calvin, *Galatians*, 160.

¹⁹⁵ The word used here is *ἐξουσία*, related to *ἐξεστιν*, it is permitted, it is possible, proper.

¹⁹⁶ Here Paul uses *ἐξουσιασθήσομαι*. Synonymous with moral power is moral ability; the verse describes, in fact, the anomaly of being morally disabled through the wrong use of one's moral ability.

bitingly in 1 Cor.8.9 as 'this ἐξουσία of yours.' Similarly, in 1 Cor.9.3-18 the apostle defends his ἐξουσία to eat and drink, to take along a spouse, and not to work, and puts forth his example of renouncing that freedom for the sake of the church.

The believer's moral power is modulated by the needs of others. Unveiling God's purpose in Christ to create a new people, 'Scripture reveals something of the deep mystery of our humanness when it pictures the position of man not as submission in contrast to freedom, but shows in very real and penetrating fashion man's freedom precisely in his submission.'¹⁹⁷ Submission or enslavement to Christ and His law, and for His sake to fellow-believers (Eph.5.21), is the route toward actualizing genuine freedom. In Christ believers recover their status and position in creation as divine image-bearers, and are restored to true humanness and genuine freedom. And in the church as *communio sanctorum*, liberty reaches its creational purpose as it is placed in service to love according to the law.

On the other hand, as a communion of *sancti* (ἅγιοι, 'saints,' holy ones), the redeemed, set-apart (not *isolated!*) individual 'does not disappear behind the group or become absorbed into the mass, but in the community he is assigned a place and there he fulfills an important function.'¹⁹⁸ *Communio sanctorum* entails the personal responsibility of sanctified believers for the growth, well-being and continuation of the community (Eph.4.12,14,16).

3.3 Christian liberty as ecclesial calling

Every divine gift (Gabe) is also a calling (Aufgabe). So too Christian liberty. Because freedom is an ecclesial gift, how, and to what end, we employ it is left neither to individual discovery nor to individual tastes.

3.3.1 Weakness as a summons to *communio sanctorum*

In Chapter 2 it became apparent how careful we must be in equating modern examples of conflict in the church with those discussed in 1 Cor.8-10 and Rom.14-15. Our evaluation of suggested parallels

¹⁹⁷Berkouwer, *Man*, 325.

¹⁹⁸J.A. Heyns, *The Church*, 86.

concluded with the observation that genuine weakness occurs most frequently, though not exclusively, among those who've come from a pagan past into the Christian faith. From this observation a corollary may be derived, namely, that in every age the church will have some members who are weak, so long as the church continues pursuing her missionary calling. Although the precise content of weakness may vary from one period of time to another, and from one culture to another, the presence of weak believers is a permanent feature of the church's composition.

Acknowledging this is not to adopt a static view of the strong and the weak, for the weak can still contribute to the body's functioning. Though described as being weak 'in the faith' and 'in conscience,' such believers are not characterized as being weak in their *entire* faith-life experience. Their weakness lies in a particular area, in terms of a particular moral application of faith to life. There could well be areas in which the weak are quite strong.

An analogy to this continuing presence in the church of weak members is found in modern society, where lawmakers are being confronted by the needs and rights of the disabled. Nowadays city sidewalks, buildings, vehicles, school curricula and home appliances are being designed with consideration for the physically impaired. The very presence in society of people with disabilities constitutes a continuing challenge and summons to open up ways of social, political and economic integration.

The same could be said about those in the church whose 'weakness' provides the occasion for moral caution and courtesy. Apostolic teaching recognizes their continuing presence in the church as an implicit summons to forbearance and harmony. Their integration into the life of the church is the aim of Paul's series of exhortations to the Roman congregation: 'Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. . . . Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. . . . We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. . . . Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received you, to the glory of God' (Rom. 14.1,19; 15.1,7). To the Corinthians, ecclesial integration is described, in a context dealing with spiritual gifts, in terms of 'body language': 'The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. . . . But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no

schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another' (1 Cor.12.21-22,25). Belonging to one body involves reciprocal loyalty and responsibility. Body-members not only act *with* one another, but *for* each other as well.

This mutuality has various dimensions in Scripture. It has, for example, a *christological* root and pattern: 'as I have loved you,' Christ tells His disciples, 'so you also love one another' (Jn.13.34; 15.12). From this flows naturally an *ecclesiological* motive: 'so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another' (Rom.12.5), which at one point serves as the basis for proper use of the tongue: 'Therefore, putting away lying, each one speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another' (Eph.4.25). Because Christ died for the weaker brother (1 Cor.8.11; Rom.14.15), and because the strong stands alongside the weak before the same Lord and Master (Rom.14.8-10), both must live and walk together in the church in mutual acceptance and love. As the apostle John says, such love is incompatible with leading another into sin: 'He that loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no occasion of stumbling in him' (1 Jn.2.10).

The *pneumatic* character surfaces clearly in Gal.6.1-2, a passage worth looking at more closely. The apostle had been discussing the glorious liberty earned by Christ (5.1), a liberty that provides opportunities for loving service to one another (5.13) in fulfilling the law of neighbor love (5.14). Then follows a description of walking in the Spirit (5.16-25), and the exhortation to avoid spiritual conceit and mutual envy (5.26). Instead, with spiritual meekness, believers are to bear one another's burdens. 'Brothers,' the apostle writes, 'if any man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual [οἱ πνευματικοί] restore such a one in a spirit [ἐν πνεύματι] of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ' (6.1-2).

Presumably the apostle refers to a fellow church member who, through weakness, inexperience or inattention, falls into a sin.¹⁹⁹ He is overtaken or caught in a culpable mistake, as if in a snare. Those around him who are more experienced and advanced in Christian excellence (the πνευματικοί),²⁰⁰ must gently show him his error, and thereby

¹⁹⁹A παράπτωμα is not a settled course of action but an isolated action which may make the person who does it feel guilty' (F.F. Bruce, *Galatians*, 260).

²⁰⁰John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, 433.

bring him back on the path of righteousness. The specific exhortation of v.1 is generalized in v.2; this spirit of gentle restoration should pervade ordinary Christian relations.²⁰¹ In the call to bear each other's burdens, *βοηθάτε* denotes lending a hand to help by lifting heavy loads, without including transference of the burden, for v.5 adds that each will have his own pack to bear.²⁰² Burden-bearing fulfills the law of Christ, since it harmonizes in every way with what Christ taught by word and deed. Genuine love fulfills the law (cf. Gal.5.14) also by lifting the *moral* burdens of others. Even as the apostle reminded his Roman readers, 'We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak and not to please ourselves' (Rom.15.1).

In a certain sense we have returned to the question: Who are the weak? Clarity about their identity was necessary, we saw, for analyzing *scandalum infirmorum*. But it is equally necessary for practicing *communio sanctorum*. With the former, we had to emphasize the *difference* between strong and weak, but with the latter we must stress the *similarity* between them.

In the church of Christ the strong and the weak share a common standing before the same Judge, a common loyalty to one Lord, a common thanksgiving to the same God, and a common status as property of the same Master (Rom.14.1-21).²⁰³ Strong and weak together are believers, slaves, disciples, friends, children of God and living stones. Their common identity as *sancti*, holy ones in Christ, must determine their *communio*.

3.3.2 Ecclesial edification as the purpose of Christian liberty

Love points liberty in the proper direction. And its destination is edification: 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up' (1 Cor.8.1). And though all things may be lawful, they are not thereby edifying (1 Cor.10.23). Lawfulness (freedom) doesn't become edification automatically; it requires love.

If *ἀγάπη* describes the *how* of Christian moral conduct, *οἰκοδομέω* describes the *why* or *whereunto*. According to 1 Cor.8-10, one 'builds another up' in the good sense by employing liberty with consideration

²⁰¹Eadie, 435.

²⁰²Frederic Rendall, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 189.

²⁰³Miner, *Images*, 141.

of the fellow-believer's conscience and aiming at his advantage and benefit, even his salvation (1 Cor.9.19; 10.33). Edification occurs when strong believers receive the weak (Rom.14.1; 15.7), pursue the things of peace (Rom.14.19), bear with the scruples of the weak (Rom.15.1), and please their neighbor for his good unto edification (Rom.15.2).

This powerful effect of Christian conduct may come as a surprise to us. Our capacity for morally injuring another through our example and conduct tends to be obscured by the modern emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility. The capacity for morally injuring our neighbor points up the inherently *social* character of moral conduct. But we may go one step further: the *social* character of *Christian* morality is especially *ecclesial*, since the 'neighbor' is a co-believer whose advancement we are called to seek for the edification of *the church*. Without question the target of 'edification' is the individual fellow-believer *as member of the body of Christ*.²⁰⁴ This edification of *the church* is the goal and manifestation of *communio sanctorum*: 'every one must know himself bound to employ his gifts readily and cheerfully for the advantage and salvation of other members' (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 21, QA 55). Here is the 'assembly of those who are saved' which 'all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with. . .and as mutual members of the same body' be committed to 'serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them' (*Belgic Confession*, Article XXVIII).

But the church's edification envisions a broader goal, made clear in Eph.4.11-16. Here we learn that behind the divine gift of office lies the goal of the church's edification, to be sure. But the proper functioning of office aims at the saints' 'work of ministry' and their attaining 'to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.'²⁰⁵ In a description looking very much like a 'well-trained body,' Ephesians 4.16 subsumes all of these proximate goals under one ultimate purpose:

²⁰⁴Philipp Vielhauer, *Oikodome: Das Bild vom Bau in der christlichen Literatur vom Neuen Testament bis Clemens Alexandrinus*, 96, 114. The goal of congregational edification is in contrast to the modern understanding, which sees the individual and his Christian experience to be the goal, and church membership the means. 'Building up' is measured strictly in terms of personal individualistic criteria. Scripture turns that around: the individual is built up as member of the body so that the body may function better as a unit(y). Vielhauer traces this individualizing notion of edification to the early church fathers, where the 'Gemeindegedanke' was first lost from view (162-174).

²⁰⁵On this relationship, see Vielhauer, *Oikodome*, 129-143.

'...the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.' *Communio sanctorum* (Lord's Day 21, QA 55) describes, then, how the *ecclesia* (Lord's Day 21, QA 54), the body, lives and functions in the world.

By contrast, freedom outside of love destroys a fellow-believer, causes a brother to perish (1 Cor.8.11), wounds him (1 Cor.8.12), and makes him stumble (1 Cor.8.13). Enticement is the opposite of edification. Similar expressions are used in Rom.14-15, where Paul warns against destroying one for whom Christ died, the work of God (Rom.14.15,20).

EXCURSUS: The Seven Deadly Sins as the contradiction of freedom serving love

Framed first in the cloisters of the Eastern church, the classification of seven deadly sins was essentially and originally a list of vices afflicting monastic life. Later, Gregory the Great (540-604) so defined these in terms of the normal conditions of everyday life. During the Middle Ages the dangers of these sins were expounded rigorously, and came to be the subject of great and enduring literature (Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Dante's *Purgatory*).

In his penetrating book *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, Henry Fairlie explains that 'sin is the destruction of one's self as well as the destruction of one's relationships with others' (4). Speaking of public life in general, he contends that 'the relationship of the individual to his society has seldom been less harmonious than now.' Not only do people lack personal satisfaction in performing social responsibilities, but the relationship has become thoroughly utilitarian: the individual uses society and society uses the individual. We are facing, in other words, a breakdown of any sense of mutuality.

This could have been written with equal validity about the church. One component of this breakdown in the church involves the relationship between the strong and the weak. The fabric of *ecclesial* obligation has been ripped apart by the forces of spiritual individualism.

The sin of pride (*superbia*), for example, denies one's need for community and refuses the obligation of community with others (40). Envy (*invidia*) destroys fellowship not merely because the envious person grieves over another's good, but because he views another's good as the reduction of his own (64). Mutuality is displaced by competition. Sloth (*acedia*) is too weary to invest in relationships with others, believing that the individual can find fulfillment and redemption in nothing but his or her own self, denying that we are members of one another (117). Avarice (*avaritia*) treats others as objects to be possessed, dominated or manipulated. Gluttony (*gula*) and lust (*luxuria*) seek pleasure without fellowship,

always in pursuit, always walking away empty.

Although Fairlie's analysis is deficient at significant points, its benefit lies in the underscored realization that sin, freedom, and love are *social* realities. The core of each of these seven deadly sins, and all of them together, is their negative answer to Cain's question, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' In the public arena, these sins yield a *social* dysfunction of one sort or another. Similarly, among believers they produce *ecclesial* dysfunction.

All of this may be applied to the process of stumbling described in Chapter 2, where we distinguished five stages in the collision between the strong and the weak:

- Stage 1:* common confession, but differing permissions
- Stage 2:* acting without the weak's knowledge
- Stage 3:* acting in the presence of the weak believer
- Stage 4:* moral dissonance in the weak
- Stage 5:* imitation and injury

In terms of these stages, we might say that Paul exhorts strong believers in Corinth and Rome to avoid Stage 3 (acting in the presence of the weak) in order to prevent Stage 5 (the weak's violation of his own conscience). The kind of edification resulting from freedom serving love requires that the strong avoid exercising their moral permissions in front of the weak, to prevent harmful imitation. Here is where the title of Voetius' treatment of offense fits: 'Concerning the Good Example.'

You may recall that in Chapter 2 we also suggested that the conflict between the strong and the weak need not, and sometimes does not, move beyond Stage 4. This is due to the fact that the weak's conviction may override his dissonance, in a situation where, for example, the believer who, while condemning another's actions, would *not* be induced to imitate it. Must the strong in that case alter his conduct? In other words, must the strong avoid Stage 3 *when there is little likelihood that a weak believer will move from Stage 4 to Stage 5*? Does not the conscience of the weak then dominate the behavior of the strong?

Here the distinction between Stage 2, where the strong acts without the knowledge of the weak, and Stage 3, where he acts in the presence of the weak, is useful. It seems to us that in many conflicts where some invoke the privilege accorded to the weak merely because the conduct of others generates moral dissonance, the 'weak' tend to universalize and apply their moral restriction in such a way that *already at Stage 2* the 'strong' are thought to be culpable. *This* is the domination by the weak so often feared, but it is a tendency that has no biblical legitimacy.

Nevertheless, the requirements of ecclesial edification, on the other hand, seem to oblige the strong to avoid those otherwise permissible actions in the presence of the weak which may generate moral dissonance, even if there is little likelihood of imitation. Christian liberty aims at the edification of the individual as member of the congregation, and thus cultivates fellowship in the midst of differing moral convictions. Christian liberty is not *provocative* freedom; it *cultivates* the other with patience, forbearance, and humility. Genuine freedom suffers long and is kind; Christian liberty does not envy, does not parade itself, is not puffed up, does not behave rudely, does not seek its own (1 Cor.10.24; cf. 13.4-5).

'The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,' writes the apostle Paul to believers (Rom.14.17; cf. 14.19). If we may view that coming kingdom, with its divine rule and all its redemptive fruits, as the goal and destination toward which believers travel together, then we have here, finally, the criteria for evaluating our use of Christian liberty, arranged in a particular order of importance. We must ask first: Does our liberty serve both God's and our *righteousness* in the world? Second, does it preserve *peace* among believers? And third, will it occasion *joy* in the Holy Spirit?²⁰⁶ These are not three separate tests, but integrated components of an ecclesial ethic. In the church, through Christ, righteousness yields peace (Rom.5.1), and both righteousness and peace produce joy (Rom.5.2-3).

²⁰⁶When J.A. Bengel comments on this verse that God's kingdom 'does not consist in the bold and careless use of liberty, for instance, in meat and drink,' he is correct in seeing our *use of liberty* as the issue; we see no warrant, then, for his description of the apostle's subsequent series, namely, righteousness in respect of God, peace with regard to neighbor, and joy as respects ourselves (*Bengel's New Testament Commentary*, 2:150). S. Greijdanus reminds us that righteousness, peace and joy are to be understood first of all as benefits of salvation (*heilsweldaden*), which then include, produce, and come to expression as, these Christian virtues or behaviors (*Aan de gemeente te Rome*, 609).

EPILOGUE:

THE ECCLESIAL DIMENSION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

As the natural outcome of this study concerning the strong and the weak, about the relationship between Christian liberty and neighbor love, we would like to make an application to Christian ethics in general.

If freedom gives form to love, then that form is an *ecclesial* form, since *Christian* liberty is essentially social in character, and its aim is ecclesial edification. The context of liberty is the ecclesial pilgrimage heading toward ecclesial perfection.

All of this suggests an important connection between *Christian* ethics and the church. What is that connection, and how should it function?

The connection between the ἐκκλησία and Christian ethics can be made in several ways.

One way is to describe the church as *moral agent*. This description proceeds in two directions at least.

Paul Lehmann, for example, provides an ecclesial definition of ethics: '*Christian ethics, as a theological discipline, is the reflection upon the question, and its answer: What am I, as a believer in Jesus Christ and as a member of his church, to do?* To undertake the reflection upon and analysis of this question and its answer—this is Christian ethics.'²⁰⁷

The connection between ethics and ἐκκλησία comes into view with the identity of the moral agent as church member. Lehmann's view of the church, however, appears to be an activist view, for the *koinonia* (Christ's fellowship-creating presence in the world) exists 'in the

²⁰⁷Paul Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context*, 25; emphasis his. Several have attempted to explain Lehmann's position: M.M. Thomas, 'The New Humanity,' *International Review of Missions*, vol. 54, 110-112; James M. Gustafson, review in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, 263-264; Gordon D. Kaufman, review in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, vol. 28, no. 3, 97-99; and Hendrik van Oyen, review in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, vol. 93, no. 9, 700-703.

community of faith where prophetic-apostolic *witness* to revelation and *response* of the fellowship in the Spirit coincide.²⁰⁸ Moreover, he seems to fall into the (false) dilemma of a static or a dynamic ethic, of principle or person, when he insists that '*a koinonia ethic is concerned with relations and functions, not with principles and precepts.*'²⁰⁹ The burden of our study has been to show that *communio sanctorum* consists, in fact, of relationships within the church that are subject to norms and precepts.

By contrast, the church member as moral agent can also be described in what is often called 'social ethics,' dealing with institutional relationships ordained by God at creation. These include marriage and family, labor, the state, art, and the church. W. Geesink argues, for example, that Christian ethics must be 'ecclesially determined,' that is: it must bear a clearly ecclesial character as it presents 'an ordered arrangement of the rules according to which a member of the Christian church ought to form his life.'²¹⁰

In addition to viewing the church as *moral agent*, a second way to relate ἐκκλησία and Christian ethics is by viewing the church as a *morally nurturing community*.

At several points in his book, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament*, Allen Verhey repeats the claim that 'by tradition and vocation Christian churches are communities of moral discourse and discernment.'²¹¹ Verhey reminds us that the church's moral discernment was from the very beginning governed by the memory of the Lord Jesus Christ and the expectation of His return. Presuming that this formed the theological *basis* for the early church's moral discernment, the *manner* of discourse becomes clear when we recall that the apostle Paul 'appeals' to his readers' moral judgment, rather than 'commands' their obedience. Moreover, Verhey maintains that in Scripture, every member of the congregation, whether slave or free, male or female, Jew or Gentile, had an equal share in discernment.²¹² Now then, this all becomes paradigmatic for the Christian community today; what seems, in our judgment, to be of primary importance to Verhey is not necessarily the *what* of the Bible's moral content, but the *how*—that is:

²⁰⁸Lehmann, 50-51; emphasis his.

²⁰⁹Lehmann, 124; emphasis his.

²¹⁰Geesink, *Gereformeerde ethiek*, 1:176; the word we've translated with 'ecclesial' is *kerkelijk*.

²¹¹Verhey, *The Great Reversal*, 1, 197.

²¹²Verhey, *The Great Reversal*, 115.

its *manner or mode or process*. The ἐκκλησία and Christian ethics intersect precisely at this point. The church ought to be the kind of community that nurtures moral discernment, following the example—and thereby standing in the line of—the apostolic church, the precipitate of whose moral discernment we find in Scripture.

These two emphases that we are describing in this Epilogue are not only compatible, but also comprehensive. For the ἐκκλησία is not one segment or topic treated in Christian ethics, but *pervades* the whole of Christian ethics. Considering Christian moral agents as *church members* is eminently biblical and thoroughly apostolic: 'Paul knows nothing of the ethical *autonomy* of the individual, because the modern process of individualization set in for the first time many centuries later. Indeed, the Christian must and can act, love, suffer wrong, etc., as an individual—Paul is no collectivist—but he does these all as member of the community. Modern contrasts like 'Christian v. church' or 'individual v. society' are entirely foreign to Paul. Every one of his declarations about the community shows this. Because the Spirit of God dwells in and permeates the community, there is no such thing as the heteronomy (external authority) of the group over the individual; thus, he is also not the slave of a hierarchy, and if Paul can demand very resolute submission from his communities, he does that as apostle of Christ and for the sake of obedience toward Christ (2 Cor.). The community-ethic therefore does not know the modern distinction between an individual ethics and a social ethics.'²¹³

Without question, this characterization of *Paul's* writings must be extended to the rest of Scripture. A similar extension ought to be made of Wendland's observation that '. . . both the fact of the church as well as the pauline concept of the church became the foundation of and prerequisite for Paul's ethic. *Every directive serves the edifying of the community.*'²¹⁴

This last sentence identifies the inadequacy of the relation between the ἐκκλησία and Christian ethics outlined thus far. True enough, the church may be viewed as moral *agent*, even as moral *teacher*, but beyond these, she must also be seen as moral *goal and motive*. That is to say: for conduct to be Christian, it must aim at and intend, among other things, *the church's well-being*. The edification of the church is to function as one of the intended consequences, or motives, of Christian

²¹³H.-D. Wendland, *Ethik des Neuen Testaments*, 65.

²¹⁴Wendland, 67; emphasis added.

conduct. *The characteristic goal of Christian freedom—ecclesial edification—may be extended to all moral conduct.* This is the thrust of apostolic exhortations in the passages examined in our study: don't judge one another anymore; don't put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way; pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another; neither eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak; each please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification (Rom.14.13,19,21; 15.2). If food makes a brother stumble, never again eat meat, lest the brother stumble; all things, though lawful, do not edify; each one seek the other's well-being (1 Cor.8.13; 10.23b-24). And one more: 'Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just as I please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved' (1 Cor.10.32-33).

Nowadays it is customary in the realm of politics that those who draft legislation also draw up, in defense of a proposed bill or law, an 'environmental impact statement' detailing the effects of the new law on the natural environment. The need and desire to protect natural habitat for wildlife, to maintain the subtle and delicate balances of nature's beauty and biology, require lawmakers, industries and city planners to assess as carefully as possible consequences of present decisions. Similar care and intentionality ought to be devoted, in product development, city planning and social engineering, to the needs of society's disabled persons. A 'disability impact statement' demonstrates concern for the well-being of the whole through strengthening the weak.

Similarly, Christian moral thinkers must commit themselves, as they analyze moral problems and recommend solutions, to factoring into their efforts an 'ecclesial impact statement.' The church is, for believers, the moral stimulus and context of many decisions. Considering the impact on fellow members of Christ's body, of our moral choices, is constitutive for *Christian* morality. Which of the Ten Commandments does not involve the church of Jesus Christ? Many contemporary moral problems touch upon the church's identity and well-being. Situations involving marriage and family (whether to marry or not, family planning and child rearing, divorce, and such) may rightly be termed 'church questions' in the sense that the church's well-being is directly affected. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a moral problem with no connection to or effect upon 'the people of God.'

The primary aim of our study has been to show that Christian moral responsibility includes intending, as one consequence of our actions, that others are not morally injured (negative), but protected from moral harm and assisted in their moral progress (positive). Here, consequence and motive merge to form a partnership; considering, as best one can, the negative and positive effects of one's action upon another person ought to shape one's motive for committing or omitting that action.

Our trek began with a look at the relation between 'strong' and 'weak' in the church. This relation, fractured in *scandalum infirmorum*, is repaired and restored in Christ, and respected in *communio sanctorum*. Moral harm and injury gives way to moral compassion and edification. When the divine gifts of Christian liberty and neighbor love are employed and understood not as competitors, but as collaborators, the church can live as a band of ordinary pilgrims on its way to the coming kingdom of God. On *this* trek, all Christ's followers—no matter what their moral ability—must travel together, rest together, and arrive together.

SUMMARY

We began in *Chapter 1* by identifying as the primary aim of our study to show that Christian moral responsibility includes intending, as one consequence of our actions, that others are not morally injured (negative), but protected from moral harm and assisted in their moral progress (positive). Considering, as best we can, the negative and positive effects of our action upon another person ought shape our motive for committing or omitting that action.

With this as our delimited field of inquiry, we proceeded to consider two specific cases of moral injury addressed by the apostle Paul (1 Cor.8-10 and Rom.14-15), cases involving the relation between the 'strong' and the 'weak.' The moral injury of the 'weak' consisted of inducing him to act, in imitation of the 'strong,' against his conscience. The moral permissions exercised by the 'strong' contradicted the duties of love for the 'weak.'

In the Corinthian congregation the occasion for this moral stumbling was the use of idol-food at idol-meals, in the market, and at another's home. While the apostle clearly agrees with the position of the 'strong' that idols are nothing and idol-food is permissible in itself, he nevertheless turns his attention to a problem deeper than the question of food. The question whether it was right or wrong to enjoy idol-food was to be settled, finally, with reference to the brother and not to divine permissions. Paul is concerned about the effects of actions on fellow-believers (and possibly unbelievers) and on the church as a whole. All claims to knowledge and freedom must be placed in service to love. The 'weak' believer is in danger of sinning by acting against his settled moral convictions, and the 'strong' by misusing Christian liberty in disregard for the effects of his action on others.

The 'strong' and the 'weak' in the missionary congregation in Rome, by contrast, are defined in terms of their attitude toward the use of and abstinence from certain foods (meat). This attitude arises from the content and confidence of faith: the weak one is weak 'in the faith,' unable to exercise the freedom born of the faith which knows that nothing is unclean of itself. Clearly, weakness has a religious origin and character, since the one who abstains from meat does so 'to the Lord'

(14.6) and is to be fully persuaded in his own mind (14.5).

Both weak and strong are called to act on the basis of firm conviction (14.5,22-23). Each is answerable to his Master and Lord (14.4,12). Yet, both positions must be tolerated in the church. This diversity must be practiced without mutual recrimination or scorn, each welcoming the other for the building up of the church. For the strong to impose their convictions upon the weak would lead the latter astray, to their eternal, spiritual and moral destruction. And to impose the view of the weak on the strong would be to prescribe a law for him which the Master, Jesus Christ, has not.

But where the practice of the strong might provide a negative example to the weak, love requires from the strong a voluntary 'accommodation' and renunciation of 'rights' for the sake of the weak.

Turning from Scripture to the history of Christian ethics, we selected four representative spokesmen who have dealt at some length with the terms, classifications and biblical insights involved in what is called *scandalum infirmorum* (offense of the weak). From their own writings the views of Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, Gisbert Voetius and Carl Henry were explained in detail.

On the basis of the material presented thus far, we framed four questions to guide our evaluation of these positions: (1) What is the nature of weakness? (2) What is the process of *scandalum infirmorum*? (3) What is the arena of *scandalum infirmorum*? (4) What is the theological context of *scandalum infirmorum*?

In an attempt to lend concreteness and liveliness to our study, we offered five examples of alleged *scandalum infirmorum*, organized according to the conflict's point of origin, whether from a believer's pre-Christian past, from potential transgression of God's law, or from the contact between believers and their culture.

In *Chapter 2* we continued to analyze and evaluate the nature and dynamics of *scandalum infirmorum*, using the four questions and five examples just mentioned.

In the light of 1 Cor.8-10 and Rom.14-15, we summarized the *weakness* involved in *scandalum infirmorum* as an incapacity for a particular moral undertaking caused by a knowledge deficient in applying certain elements of the Christian faith to life. Unlike other kinds of 'weakness' commonly spoken of, wherein conscience should function as either a moral roadblock or a moral stop sign, this condition of weakness requires that conscience signal the need for a moral detour. This kind of weakness is not inherently culpable, since Scripture nowhere urges the 'weak' to repent because of his weakness, and this 'weakness' is

nowhere described or chastised as irresoluteness or vacillation. In fact, the tendency of the weak in Rome to judge the strong suggests anything but moral indecision. One can be both weak in the faith (Rom.14.1) and yet 'fully convinced in his own mind' (Rom.14.5). This weakness has a religious origin and character, since the Roman believer who abstained from meat did so 'to the Lord' (Rom.14.6).

But even if weakness is not culpable, should it be overcome through education and moral growth? Aquinas, Calvin and Henry each spoke of weakness as ignorance, as an undesirable (if not culpable) condition requiring education and enlightenment. Aquinas insisted that rejecting this enlightenment of conscience can turn *scandalum pusillorum* (offense of the little ones) into *scandalum Pharisaeorum* (proceeding from malice). Henry argued that if one wishes to continue a practice contrary to another's conscience, one must simultaneously seek to enlighten the other about the correctness of moral permissions being exercised. In our judgment, the thread of the apostolic argument suggests the continued coexistence in the church of those who, in terms of a given situation, are weaker and those who are stronger. Far from calling the weak in Corinth or Rome to reconsider their position, the apostle acknowledges that not everyone possesses such knowledge (Corinth) and insists that each must be fully convinced (Rome). Particular care must be taken to avoid a static view of 'the' weak and 'the' strong in the church. 'Weak' and 'strong' are metaphorical terms whose meaning should be determined *per casum*. These terms do not cover the entire faith-life of any group within the church, but are situational, and therefore partial, metaphors.

In the next section we identified five stages in the process of offending the weak. The first is that both strong and weak share a common confession, but enjoy differing moral permissions, resulting in part from a different growth in the Christian faith. Stage 2 involves the strong acting without the weak's knowledge, while Stage 3 occurs exactly when the strong acts contrary to the weak's scruples in his presence. The moral dissonance issuing from the judgment of the weak's conscience is Stage 4. But the actual moral injury occurs in Stage 5, where the weak imitates the strong, though he lacks the faith (Rom.14.23) or acts out of a weak conscience (1 Cor.8.7,10-13). Our conclusion was that the point of the apostle's teaching was to exhort strong believers in Rome and Corinth to avoid Stage 3 (acting in the presence of the weak) in order to prevent Stage 5 (the weak's violation of his own conscience). The moral injury which constitutes *scandalum infirmorum* occurs in a particular situation only when one believer's conduct (the 'strong'), although it contradicts another believer's convictions of

conscience (the 'weak') and generates moral dissonance, induces the latter to violate the permissions or prohibitions of his conscience.

Throughout the history of this question, people have identified the arena of offending the weak as 'adiaphora,' or indifferent things. As an idea coming to us from the Stoics, we observed that it is a very abstract notion. The creation is abstracted from its Creator, the present from the past, and the individual person from the rest of creation. And 'cultural products' are viewed as morally neutral because they result from 'common grace.' Aquinas and Calvin avoided these kinds of abstractionism by directing attention to indifferent *actions* rather than indifferent *things*, and by insisting that everything could be evaluated in terms of a proper moral *use*. In spite of this, we preferred to abandon the term 'adiaphora,' since Scripture indicates that people stand before the face of God in all of their decisions and actions. Every human decision, and every created thing, has a moral quality. It is the search for this moral quality that forms the content of the apostle's prayer in Phil.1.9-11, where he speaks of approving 'the excellent things,' or the things that excel or really matter. Moreover, the distinction between a thing and its use, though valid, is dangerous if employed to obscure the fact that 'things' can entail or exhibit a context of values both moral and religious. The key to using anything is whether or not it can be 'received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer' (1 Tim.4.4-5).

We had noticed in Chapter 1 that Aquinas treated *scandalum infirmorum* as a vice contradicting the virtue of love. For Calvin, it is the abuse of Christian liberty, which is an appendage of justification by faith. Carl Henry saw avoiding offense of the weak as a necessary qualification of the primary moral principle of Christian freedom. In our judgment, the best theological context or point of entrance into the analysis and resolution of *scandalum infirmorum* in the *locus de ecclesia*. This helps to avoid the moral individualism which threatens if we place it in the context of Christian freedom and the exercise of Christian conscience. This also helps to expose the impulse driving both strong and weak, namely, to universalize either the permissions or restrictions of conscience among others of like faith. Finally, by discussing offense of the weak as a church problem, we see more clearly the church's itinerant, pilgrim character—emphasizing the need for strong and weak to walk together toward the coming kingdom.

Concerning the five examples presented at the end of Chapter 1, we learned that although Examples 3 and 5 were the closest to *scandalum infirmorum*, the others helped show us what offense was not. There need be no offense where there are 'weak' and 'strong' who practice (or

omit practicing) in each other's presence certain customs deriving from a pre-Christian past. Not every difference of moral judgment proceeds from weakness, nor does variety in moral behavior in such situations constitute offense. Moral disability can result from lack of self-control, which may require others to modify their behavior, but for reasons other than avoiding offense to the weak. Matters like Sunday-observance and contact between believers and their surrounding culture can be occasions for genuine *scandalum infirmorum*. This is so because ecclesial judgments about cultural practices change from one generation to another. During such periods of transition, the terms, process and resolution of the conflict can be relevant.

Perhaps the most useful application of our study is its conclusion that we must understand, and use, terms like 'weak' and 'strong,' phrases like 'giving offense' and 'causing others to stumble' as case-specific designations. Following the example of moralists and historic church synods, who have applied the apostle's permission to remarry after desertion (1 Cor.7.10-16) to instances of desertion by a believing spouse, we recommend that the insights of 1 Cor.8-10 and Rom.14-15 be used *per analogiam*, whereby we conclude that minimally, the danger of offending the weak exists only where a difference of practice among believers has the potential for inducing someone who is convinced of the inherent impermissibility of an act, to act contrary to the permissions or prohibitions of his conscience by imitating another's behavior. Without this potential, the danger of *scandalum infirmorum* does not exist, and the terms and appeals appropriate to 'offense of the weak' are unsuitable.

In *Chapter 3* we offered a brief description of the opposite of *scandalum infirmorum*, or the positive calling embodied in the confession and practice of *communio sanctorum* as the context for Christian liberty serving neighbor love. In our judgment, the frequent description of love as the *limit* or restriction upon Christian freedom is quite mistaken. Such a construction puts the two at odds with one another; love and liberty remain competitors, rather than becoming collaborators. They are in fact gifts of divine grace, coming to believers through Christ. This unique brother-love and spiritual freedom are correlative. The one cannot exist meaningfully without the other.

This is seen most clearly perhaps in the fellowship-impulse of freedom. This impulse originated at creation, where the Triune God created people in His image, in fellowship and for fellowship. The freedom was to have been made real (or real-ized) along the path of love for God and neighbor. Human freedom is essentially relational.

Gal.5.13 teaches us that genuine freedom is exercised in the servitude of love for neighbor, which in turn fulfills the law (Gal.5.14). In the church as *communio sanctorum*, liberty reaches this creational purpose. The 'communion of the saints' entails a personal responsibility of sanctified believers for the growth, well-being and continuation of the community (Eph.4.12,14,16).

The divine gift of liberty is accompanied with a calling to employ it properly. In every age the church will have some members who are weak, as long as the church continues pursuing her missionary calling. This permanent feature of the church's composition provides the occasion for moral caution and courtesy. The mutual forbearance and ecclesial harmony urged by Scripture has a christological root and pattern, an ecclesiological motive, and a pneumatic or Spirit-determined character. The existence of the weak is, then, a summons to employ Christian liberty for the edification of the church. This edification of Christ's body unto completion, perfection, and maturity is the goal and manifestation of *communio sanctorum*.

In terms of resolving the conflict between 'strong' and 'weak' in the church, ecclesial edification obliges the strong to avoid those actions in the presence of the weak which may generate moral dissonance, even if there is little likelihood of imitation. Christian liberty must be employed, according to Rom.14.17, in service to righteousness, peace and Spirit-induced joy—which are nothing but the redemptive benefits of Christ's work, and the reigning blessings of His coming kingdom.

In the *Epilogue* we sought to describe the important connection between Christian ethics and the church. That connection is seen by some in terms of the church as moral agent (P. Lehmann and W. Geesink), by others in terms of the church as the morally nurturing community and teacher (A. Verhey). Beyond these, however, the church should also be viewed as the goal and motive of Christian ethics. That is to say: for conduct to be Christian, it must aim at and intend, among other things, the church's well-being. The characteristic goal of Christian liberty—ecclesial edification—must be the aim of all moral conduct.

As in the realm of politics and civil legislation, lawmakers fashion policy in the light of 'environmental impact statements' and 'disability impact reports,' so too Christian moral thinkers must pay attention to the ecclesial impact of moral choices. Such consideration is constitutive for *Christian* morality.

SAMENVATTING

In *Hoofdstuk 1* beginnen wij met het primaire doel van onze studie te formuleren. Wij willen aantonen wat in christelijke morele verantwoordelijkheid als één van de gevolgen van ons handelen ligt opgesloten, n.l. (negatief geformuleerd) dat anderen moreel niet geschaad mogen worden, maar (positief geformuleerd) tegen morele schade beschermd moeten worden en in hun morele ontwikkelingen bijgestaan. Het zo goed mogelijk afwegen van de negatieve en positieve gevolgen van ons handelen tegenover een andere persoon, moet onze motivering vormen om een handeling te doen of na te laten.

Binnen dit door ons omschreven gebied van onderzoek vervolgen wij met het overwegen van twee specifieke gevallen waarin morele schade toegebracht wordt. Ze worden behandeld door de apostel Paulus (1 Kor. 8-10 en Rom. 14-15) en hebben te maken met de relatie tussen de 'sterke' en de 'zwakke'. Het moreel schade toebrengen aan de 'zwakke' wordt veroorzaakt door hem ertoe te bewegen tegen zijn geweten in te handelen door het gedrag van de 'sterke' na te volgen. Wat moreel toegestaan is en door de 'sterke' in praktijk gebracht wordt, is in strijd met de verplichtingen van de liefde die hij tegenover de 'zwakke' heeft.

In de gemeente van Korinte was de aanleiding voor dit morele struikelblok het gebruik van offervlees tijdens offermaaltijden, op de markt en bij iemand thuis. Terwijl de apostel het duidelijk eens is met de houding van de 'sterke', dat de afgoden niets zijn en offervlees als zodanig toegestaan is, richt hij niettemin zijn aandacht op een probleem dat verder reikt dan het vraagstuk van het offervlees. Het vraagstuk of het goed of verkeerd is offervlees te eten, moet tenslotte niet beslecht worden met een beroep op wat van Godswege toegestaan is, maar met aandacht voor de broeder. Paulus is bezorgd voor de gevolgen van handelingen ten opzichte van medegelovigen (en mogelijk ongelovigen) en van de kerk als geheel. Elk beroep op kennis en vrijheid moet in dienst van de liefde gesteld worden. De 'zwakken' lopen het gevaar te zondigen door tegen hun gevestigde morele overtuiging in te handelen, en de 'sterken' door misbruik van de christelijke vrijheid te maken in het negeren van de gevolgen die hun handelen op anderen hebben.

In onderscheid tot de gemeente van Korinte gaat het bij de 'sterke'

en de 'zwakke' in de zendingsgemeente van Rome om hun houding ten opzichte van het gebruik of onthouding van bepaalde voedingsmiddelen (vlees). Deze houding hangt samen met de inhoud en vrijmoedigheid van hun geloof: de zwakke is zwak 'in het geloof', omdat hij niet in staat is de vrijheid te benutten, die geboren wordt uit het geloof dat weet heeft van het feit dat niets in zichzelf onrein is. Wel is duidelijk dat deze zwakheid van oorsprong en karakter religieus is, omdat de zwakke die zich onthoudt van vlees, dat doet 'om de Here' (Rom. 14, 6) en ten volle overtuigd dient te zijn in zijn eigen geweten (14, 5).

Zowel de zwakke als de sterke worden geroepen te handelen op grond van een vaste overtuiging (Rom. 14, 5.22-23). Ieder is verantwoordelijk tegenover zijn Meester en Here (Rom. 14, 4-12). Beide houdingen moeten in de kerk getolereerd worden. Deze verscheidenheid moet zonder wederzijdse beschuldiging of minachting kunnen bestaan, waarbij de een de ander graag accepteert voor de opbouw van de kerk. Als de sterken hun overtuiging zouden opleggen aan de zwakken, zou dat de laatsten op het verkeerde pad brengen en hun eeuwige, geestelijke en morele ondergang tot gevolg hebben. En als het standpunt van de zwakke aan de sterke opgelegd zou worden, zou dit betekenen, dat hem een wet voorgeschreven wordt, iets wat zijn Meester, Jezus Christus, niet gedaan heeft.

Maar waar het handelen van de sterke een negatief voorbeeld voor de zwakke zou kunnen zijn, vereist de liefde een vrijwillige 'aanpassing' en 'afzien van rechten' van de sterke ten bate van de zwakke.

Vervolgens hebben wij ons van de Schriftgegevens naar de geschiedenis van de ethiek gewend om daaruit vier representatieve woordvoerders te kiezen, die zich min of meer uitvoerig hebben bezig gehouden met terminologie, classificaties en bijbelse inzichten met betrekking tot het zogenaamd *scandalum infirmorum* (ergernis van de zwakken). De standpunten van Thomas van Aquino, Johannes Calvijn, Gijsbertus Voetius en Carl Henry worden aan de hand van hun eigen geschriften gedetailleerd uiteengezet.

Op basis van het bij hen gevonden materiaal, geven wij onze evaluatie van hun opvattingen aan de hand van vier vragen: (1) Wat is de aard van zwakheid? (2) Wat is het proces van *scandalum infirmorum*? (3) Wat is het terrein waarop het *scandalum infirmorum* zich afspeelt? (4) In welke theologische context staat *scandalum infirmorum*?

In een poging onze studie meer concreet en levendig te maken, hebben wij vijf voorbeelden gegeven van wat als *scandalum infirmorum* vaak wordt gekwalificeerd, geordend naar de oorsprong van het conflict, voortkomend uit hetzij het niet-christelijke verleden van een gelovige,

hetzij een mogelijke overtreding van Gods wet, hetzij het contact tussen de gelovigen en de hen omringende cultuur.

In *Hoofdstuk 2* vervolgen wij onze analyse en evaluatie van de aard en dynamiek van *scandalum infirmorum*, waarbij we de zojuist genoemde vier vragen en vijf voorbeelden hebben gebruikt. In het licht van 1 Kor. 8-10 en Rom. 14-15, vatten wij de zwakheid die gelegen is in *scandalum infirmorum* samen als een vorm van onvermogen om een bepaalde morele handeling te verrichten tengevolge van kennis die onbekwaam is bepaalde beginselen van het christelijk geloof toe te passen. In tegenstelling tot andere soorten van 'zwakheid' waarover men gewoonlijk spreekt, en waarin het geweten moet functioneren hetzij als een morele wegversperring, hetzij als een moreel stopbord, vereist deze vorm van zwakheid dat het geweten het signaal geeft moreel een andere weg in te slaan. Dit soort zwakheid stelt niet inherent schuldig, daar de Bijbel nergens de 'zwakke' tot berouw over zijn zwakheid maant. Deze zwakheid wordt ook nergens aangeduid of bestraft als besluiteloosheid of weifeling. Integendeel, de neiging van de zwakke in Rome om de sterke te veroordelen, wijst allesbehalve op morele besluiteloosheid. Iemand kan tegelijk zwak in het geloof zijn (Rom. 14, 1) en toch 'ten volle overtuigd zijn voor eigen besef' (Rom. 14, 5). Deze zwakheid is religieus van oorsprong en karakter, omdat de gelovige in Rome die zich van vlees onthield, dat deed 'om de Here' (Rom. 14, 6).

Maar zelfs als zwakheid niet schuldig stelt, behoort zij dan niet overwonnen te worden door onderwijs en morele groei? Thomas, Calvin en Henry spraken ieder over zwakheid als onwetendheid, als ongewenste (zo niet schuldige) toestand, die vraagt om onderricht en een beter inzicht vereist. Thomas legde er de nadruk op, dat bij verwerping van dit inzicht *scandalum pusillorum* (ergernis van de kleinen) kan overgaan in *scandalum pharisaeorum* (ergernis die voortkomt uit kwaadwilligheid). Henry betoogde dat als iemand een manier van handelen wenst voort te zetten tegen het geweten van een ander in, hij tegelijkertijd moet proberen de ander tot het inzicht te brengen van de juistheid van wat moreel toelaatbaar is en daarom gepraktiseerd wordt. Naar ons oordeel geeft de rode draad door het apostolisch betoog aan dat zij, die in een gegeven situatie zwakker en sterker zijn, in de kerk voortdurend op elkaar zijn aangewezen. Het is er verre van, dat de apostel in Rome en Korinte de gelovigen oproept hun stellingname te herzien; want de apostel benadrukt dat 'niet iedereen dezelfde kennis heeft' (Korinte), en dat ieder 'ten volle overtuigd moet zijn' (Rome). Bijzondere zorg moet in acht genomen worden om een statische visie op 'de' zwakke en 'de' sterke in de kerk

te vermijden. 'Zwak' en 'sterk' zijn metaforen, waarvan de betekenis *per casum* moet worden bepaald. Deze uitdrukkingen slaan niet op het totale geloofsleven van welke groep dan ook binnen de kerk, maar zijn metaforen die op een specifieke toestand en op een aspect van het geloofsleven betrekking hebben.

In het daaropvolgende gedeelte hebben we vijf stadia onderscheiden in het proces van het aanstoot geven aan de zwakken. Het eerste stadium is dat beiden, sterk en zwak, delen in dezelfde belijdenis, maar verschillen op het punt van wat moreel toelaatbaar is, als gevolg van een verschillende groei in christelijk geloof. Stadium 2 omvat het handelen van de sterke zonder dat de zwakke daarvan kennis heeft, terwijl stadium 3 juist intreedt wanneer de sterke in aanwezigheid van de zwakke tegen diens gewetensbezwaren in handelt. De morele botsing, die voortkomt uit het oordeel van het geweten van de zwakke, vormt stadium 4. Maar de eigenlijke morele beschadiging vindt plaats in stadium 5, waar de zwakke de sterke navolgt, hoewel het hem aan geloof ontbreekt (Rom. 14, 23), of waar hij vanuit een zwak geweten handelt (1 Kor. 8, 7.10-13). Onze conclusie luidt, dat het onderricht van de apostel toegespitst is op de vermaning aan de sterkere gelovigen om stadium 3 te vermijden (het handelen in het bijzijn van de zwakken) om zo stadium 5 te voorkomen (het schenden door de zwakke van zijn eigen geweten). Het morele letsel waarin *scandalum infirmorum* bestaat, ontstaat in een bijzondere situatie alleen wanneer het gedrag van de ene gelovige (de 'sterke')- dat ingaat tegen het geweten van de andere gelovige (de 'zwakke') en een morele botsing veroorzaakt -laatstgenoemde ertoe brengt in te gaan tegen dat wat zijn geweten toelaatbaar acht, of juist verbiedt.

Door de hele geschiedenis van dit vraagstuk heen, heeft men het terrein van het aanstoot-geven van de zwakke laten samenvallen met dat van de 'adiaphora' of 'middelmatige dingen'. We constateren dat het idee, afkomstig van de Stoïci, een zeer abstract begrip is. De schepping wordt geabstraheerd van zijn Schepper, het heden van het verleden, en de individuele persoon van het overige van de schepping. 'Cultuurproducten' worden beschouwd als moreel neutraal, omdat ze het resultaat zijn van 'algemene genade'. Thomas en Calvijn vermeden zulk soort abstracties door eerder de aandacht te vestigen op middelmatige *handelingen* dan op middelmatige *dingen*, en door erop aan te dringen alles te beoordelen naar het juiste morele *gebruik*. Desondanks geven we er de voorkeur aan, de uitdrukking 'adiaphora' te laten varen, omdat de Schrift er op wijst, dat mensen voor het aangezicht van God staan in al hun beslissingen en handelingen. Elk menselijk besluit en elk geschapen ding heeft een morele kwaliteit. Het is het zoeken naar deze

morele kwaliteit, die de inhoud vormt van het gebed van de apostel in Fil. 1, 9-11, waar hij spreekt van een goedkeuren van 'the excellent things' (King James Version e.a.), of de dingen die uitmunten of werkelijk van betekenis zijn. Bovendien is het onderscheid tussen een ding en het gebruik ervan gevaarlijk -hoewel geldig-, als het gebruikt wordt om het feit te camoufleren dat 'dingen' een samenhang van morele en religieuze waarden kunnen vormen of vertonen. De sleutel tot het gebruik van alles bestaat hierin, dat iets al dan niet 'met dankzegging aanvaard wordt; want het wordt geheiligd door het Woord Gods en door gebed' (1 Tim. 4, 4-5).

We merkten in hoofdstuk 1 dat Thomas *scandalum infirmorum* behandelde als een ondeugd die de deugd van de liefde tegenspreekt. Voor Calvijn is er sprake van misbruik maken van de christelijke vrijheid, die meekomt met de rechtvaardigmaking door het geloof. Carl Henry zag het vermijden van aanstoot-geven aan de zwakken als een noodzaak die verbonden is aan het eerste morele principe van de christelijke vrijheid. Naar ons oordeel vormt de *locus de ecclesia* de beste theologische context, of het beste startpunt om van daaruit *scandalum infirmorum* te analyseren en tot een oplossing te brengen. Dit helpt ons het morele individualisme te vermijden, dat dreigt als we *scandalum infirmorum* in de context van de christelijke vrijheid en de oefening van het christelijk geweten plaatsen. Dit helpt ook de neiging te ontmaskeren, die zowel de sterke als de zwakke stuwt. Zij houden namelijk aan de anderen die hetzelfde geloof bezitten, als algemeen geldig voor wat men zelf toelaatbaar of ontoelaatbaar acht. Tenslotte, door de aanstoot van de zwakken te bespreken als een kerkelijk probleem, zien we duidelijker wat het betekent dat de kerk onderweg is en een pelgrimage-karakter heeft. We leggen immers de nadruk op de noodzaak voor sterken en zwakken om samen te wandelen op weg naar het komende koninkrijk.

Wat betreft de vijf voorbeelden, die wij aan het einde van hoofdstuk 1 gaven, zien we dat, terwijl voorbeeld 3 en 5 het dichtst bij *scandalum infirmorum* staan, de andere ons juist helpen om te laten zien wat aanstoot niet is. Er hoeft geen aanstoot te zijn waar 'sterken' en 'zwakken' in elkaars aanwezigheid bepaalde gewoonten in praktijk brengen (of dat nalaten te doen) die overblijfselen zijn uit een voor-christelijk verleden. Niet elk verschil in moreel oordeel komt uit zwakheid voort, en ook hoeft in zulke situaties variatie in moreel gedrag geen aanstoot te geven. Moreel onvermogen kan het gevolg zijn van gebrek aan zelfbeheersing. In dat geval zouden misschien anderen hun gedrag moeten veranderen, maar dan om andere redenen dan het vermijden van aanstoot-geven aan de zwakken. Zaken als

zondags-heiliging en contact tussen gelovigen en de hen omringende cultuur kunnen aanleiding geven tot een echt *scandalum infirmorum*. En wel omdat het kerkelijk oordeel over culturele praktijken verandert van generatie op generatie. Gedurende zulke overgangsfases kunnen de terminologie, het verloop en de oplossing van het conflict relevant zijn.

Misschien vloeit de meest nuttige toepassing van onze studie voort uit haar conclusie, dat we termen als 'zwak' en 'sterk', zinsneden als 'aanstoot geven' en 'anderen doen struikelen', moeten verstaan en gebruiken als aanduidingen voor een zeer bepaalde (zendings-) situatie. Ethici en belangrijke kerkelijke synodes pasten met betrekking tot de toestemming die de apostel gaf tot hertrouwen na verlating (vgl. 1 Kor. 7, 12-16), deze toestemming *per analogiam* ook toe op gevallen van verlating door een gelovige echtgenoot (echtgenote). Zo vinden wij het raadzaam de inzichten van 1 Kor. 8-10 en Rom. 14-15 *per analogiam* te gebruiken. We concluderen daarbij op z'n minst, dat de gevaren om aanstoot te geven aan de zwakke slechts daar bestaan, waar verschil in praktijk onder gelovigen aanleiding kan zijn iemand, die overtuigd is van de wezenlijke ontoelaatbaarheid van een handeling, tegen de vrijheden of beperkingen van z'n geweten in, ertoe te brengen het gedrag van een ander na te volgen. Zonder deze mogelijkheid is er geen sprake van het gevaar van *scandalum infirmorum*. De terminologie en het beroep op 'aanstoot-geven aan de zwakke' gaat dan niet op.

In *Hoofdstuk 3* geven wij een korte beschrijving van het tegenovergestelde van *scandalum infirmorum*, of van de positieve roeping die ligt opgesloten in de belijdenis en praktijk van *communio sanctorum*, als context voor de christelijke vrijheid die de naastenliefde dient. Naar ons oordeel is de vaak voorkomende omschrijving van liefde als *grens* of beperking van christelijke vrijheid geheel onjuist. Een dergelijke tekening plaatst de twee tegenover elkaar; liefde en vrijheid blijven concurrenten in plaats dat zij compagnons worden. In werkelijkheid zijn het gaven van de goddelijke genade, die de gelovigen ontvangen door Christus. Deze unieke broederliefde en de geestelijke vrijheid staan in correlatie tot elkaar. Het bestaan van het een heeft geen zin zonder dat van het ander.

Dit is misschien het duidelijkst zichtbaar in de gemeenschapsgerichtheid van de vrijheid. Deze gerichtheid vond haar oorsprong bij de schepping, waar de drieënige God mensen schiep naar Zijn beeld, in gemeenschap en voor gemeenschap. De vrijheid moest verwerkelijkt worden langs het pad van de liefde voor God en de naaste. Menselijke vrijheid is in haar kern relationeel. Gal. 5, 13 leert ons, dat ware vrijheid wordt uitgeoefend in de dienst van de naastenliefde, die op haar

beurt de wet vervult (Gal. 5, 14). In de kerk als *communio sanctorum* bereikt de vrijheid dit scheppingsdoel. De 'gemeenschap der heiligen' brengt een persoonlijke verantwoordelijkheid van de geheiligde gelovigen met zich mee voor de groei, het welzijn en het voortbestaan van de gemeenschap (Ef. 4, 12.14.16).

De genade-gave van de vrijheid gaat gepaard met de roeping deze op juiste wijze te gebruiken. De kerk zal altijd sommige leden hebben die zwak zijn, zo lang zij haar zendingsroeping blijft najagen. Deze permanente trek in de samenstelling van de kerk biedt de gelegenheid om moreel voorzichtig en voorkomend te zijn. Het elkaar wederzijds verdragen en de eenheid binnen de kerk, waartoe de Schriit de kerk aanspoort, is christologisch in wortel en patroon, heeft een kerkelijke beweegreden en een pneumatisch, of door de Geest bepaald, karakter. De aanwezigheid van de zwakken is dus een oproep, de christelijke vrijheid te gebruiken voor de opbouw van de kerk. Die opbouw van het lichaam van Christus tot voltooiing, volmaaktheid en volwassenheid, is het doel en de onthulling van de *communio sanctorum*.

Met betrekking tot het oplossen van het conflict tussen de 'sterken' en de 'zwakken' binnen de kerk, ligt in kerkelijke opbouw opgesloten dat de sterken die handelingen in aanwezigheid van de zwakken vermijden, die een morele botsing kunnen veroorzaken, ook al is de kans gering dat zij het gedrag van de sterken navolgen. Christelijke vrijheid moet volgens Rom. 14, 17 gebruikt worden in dienst van rechtvaardigheid, vrede en van door de Geest aangespoorde vreugde - die niets anders zijn dan de verlossende weldaden van Christus' werk en de vorstelijke zegeningen van zijn komende koninkrijk.

In de *Epiloog* trachten wij het belangrijke verband tussen de christelijke ethiek en de kerk te beschrijven. Dat verband wordt door sommigen beschreven in termen van de kerk als morele actor (P. Lehmann en W. Geesink), en door anderen in termen van de kerk als een gemeenschap en leraar die moreel opvoedt (A. Verhey). Maar de kerk moet ook worden beschouwd als het doel en de beweegreden van christelijke ethiek. Dat wil zeggen: om gedrag christelijk te kunnen noemen, moet het in z'n doelstelling o.a. gericht zijn op het welzijn van de kerk. Het karakteristieke doel van christelijke vrijheid -namelijk kerkelijke opbouw- moet het doel zijn van alle moreel gedrag.

Zoals op het gebied van politiek en van burgerlijke wetgeving, waar wetgevers de politiek vorm geven in het licht van 'environmental impact statements' (die de effecten van de nieuwe wet op het milieu aangeven) en 'disability impact reports' (die de effecten op de gehandicapten in de samenleving aangeven) - zo moeten ook christelijke morele denkers

letten op de kerkelijke effecten van morele keuzes. Deze aandacht is grondslag voor *christelijke* moraliteit.

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