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# What the Bible Says About Gray Areas

Cliff McManis

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*What the Bible Says About Gray Areas*  
is volume 3 of the  
**BIG TRUTH little books™** series.

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*What the Bible Says About Gray Areas*

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Dedicated to Dr. Bruce Blakey—  
faithful servant of Christ and pastor of Believers  
Fellowship in San Antonio, Texas, who taught me  
much about living biblically in the gray areas of life



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## SERIES PREFACE

Our mission with the *BIG TRUTH little books*<sup>™</sup> series is to provide edifying, accessible literature for Christian readers from all walks of life. We understand that it is often difficult to find time to read good books. But we also understand that reading is a valuable means of spiritual growth. The answer? Get some really big truth into some little books. Every book in this series is only 5" x 8" and around 120 pages. But each is full of Scripture, theological reflection, and pastoral insight. Our hope is that Christians young and old will benefit from these books as they grow in their knowledge of Christ through his Word.

Cliff McManis, General Editor  
Derek Brown, Series Editor



## INTRODUCTION

What does the Bible say about gray areas? There are many things about the Christian life—in terms of practical living—that are not explicitly stated in Scripture. Someone might ask, “I thought the Bible was sufficient for everything?” It is. “I thought truth was black and white?” It is. But the statement above is still true: There are many issues and situations Christians confront every day that are not explicitly handled in Scripture. For example, the Bible does not say we should start our church worship service at 11:00 am on Sunday mornings. The Bible does not say whether or not we should sit down in pews as opposed to folding chairs.

Generally, these are areas of liberty or Christian freedom, and we commonly refer to

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them as “gray areas.” And designating these issues as “gray areas” is appropriate because they involve questions that do not yield black or white answers. Gray area issues are also referred to as preferential matters, disputed matters, or secondary issues. These kinds of issues include the style of music we have in church, our choices of entertainment, and our methodologies of how we do ministry. And the list goes on. Sadly, I’ve seen churches split over those three issues.

Christians can become divisive with one another over gray area matters precisely because their convictions are so strong on a given issue. But being contentious on preferential matters is not the answer—it’s actually at odds with the Christian ethic. Divisive Christians grieve Christ and inhibit the work of God’s Spirit in the church (Titus 3:9-11). God’s Word, however, instructs us to pursue edification and mutual peace—especially in these gray areas (Phil 2:1-4).

To help us think concretely about this subject of gray areas I have provided a list of potential areas of Christian disagreement. These are issues I have encountered in over twenty years of working in the church as a pastor and lay servant. And I have seen first-hand many Christians squabble and argue over these preferential matters.

The list is divided into three areas: (1) gray areas in daily living or personal life; (2) gray areas regarding holidays; and (3) gray areas regarding church ministry and methodology. There are more, to be sure, but this list will suffice to help us gain a handle on what Scripture means when it speaks of “differing opinions” (Rom 14:1).

### **Daily Living or Personal Life**

1. Is smoking cigarettes a sin?
2. Is it wrong for women to wear pants instead of a skirt?

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3. Is it wrong to have your nose pierced as a Christian?
4. Is it wrong to drink alcohol?
5. Is it wrong for Christians to buy lottery tickets?
6. Is it wrong for Christians to gamble?
7. Is it wrong for Christians to dance?
8. Is it wrong for Christians to listen to secular music?
9. Is it wrong for Christians to go to movies?
10. Is it wrong for Christians to see rated R movies?
11. Is it wrong for Christians to let their kids watch *Star Wars*?
12. Is it wrong for Christians to let their kids read *Harry Potter*?
13. Is it wrong for Christians to listen to rap?

14. Is it wrong for Christians to play cards?
15. Is it wrong for Christians to own expensive cars?
16. Is it wrong for Christians to eat meat?
17. Is it wrong for Christians to let their kids play video games?
18. Is it wrong for Christians to watch anime?
19. Is it wrong for Christians to let their wives work outside of the home?
20. Is it wrong for Christians to have tattoos?

Again, I am not making these up. These questions reflect real-life scenarios that I've encountered. If you said yes to any of these questions, then you will find yourself at odds with other believers on some of these controversial topics. And those who disagree with you may think you have an illegitimate prohibitive conscience or that you are a legalist, like a Pharisee. We will discuss legalism later. For now we turn to the next category.

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### **Holidays**

1. Is it wrong for Christians to have a Christmas tree?
2. Is it wrong for Christians to dye Easter eggs?
3. Is it wrong for Christians to have a pumpkin in their house on Halloween?
4. Is it wrong for Christians to let their kids go trick-or-treating?
5. Is it wrong for Christians to let their kids dress up for Halloween?

Finally, there are multiple gray areas regarding church ministry and methodology. The issues in this category can even be more divisive than the areas in the first two categories. In fact, I remember when we started our church several years ago a friend and pastor at a local church was setting the vision and helping us plan and structure our leadership. One key thing he

warned me to keep in mind had to do with how our church was going to handle gray area issues. He said, “Before you start your church—if you want to be blessed by God and if you want to have and preserve unity—you need to form a position that will enable you to deal with gray areas when they arise. You need to develop a position ahead of time, especially in the area of methodology of ministry.”

He then gave specific examples of issues that have typically caused division in churches everywhere. Consider the following list.

### **Church Ministry or Church Methodology**

1. Should you have Sunday school classes or not?
2. Should Sunday school classes be age-segregated or not?
3. What kind of music and instrumentation will you have?

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4. Is the organ more appropriate than the electric guitar in church? Is it wrong to have drums in church?
5. Is singing from hymnals more spiritual than singing from the overhead or off the wall?
6. Are spontaneous prayers better than written prayers when you are up at the pulpit praying for the church?
7. Is it wrong for churches to have ministry “programs”? (I have encountered people in previous churches who essentially believed that the word “program” was worldly.)
8. Does children’s church break up the family unit?
9. Are age integration classes and groups more spiritual than same age groups?

10. Does having more than one worship service hour break up the unity of the church?
11. Is it wrong to have a soloist up front in the church? I worked at a church that believed this. They called it “exhibitionism.”
12. Is AWANA unspiritual?
13. Should Christians boycott public schools? (I know Christians who believe that to this day. I also know Christians who say that you should only send your kids to public school because you are supposed to be salt and light in the world. It is an issue that many Christians argue and squabble over.)
14. Are life groups better than Bible studies?
15. Are Christians supposed to honor the Sabbath day?

There was probably at least one issue from the

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above lists that resonated with you. Perhaps it is something with which you are wrestling right now. Or, maybe you have had to deal with one or more of these issues in the past.

My wife and I got married in 1989, and over time we have developed many convictions as a couple. As an exercise in preparation for this book, we decided to evaluate some of our own convictions in various gray areas. Where do we stand today? Interestingly, we found that on some issues we generally do not believe the same things today that we believed twenty-five years ago, or ten years ago, or even five years ago. In some areas, we have become less permissive; in other areas, we have become more permissive. I believe that in some of those areas change was good; in other areas we had become lax and the change was bad.

From our perspective, the good changes were that we had become more patient, merciful, gracious, and forgiving towards fellow sinners

and the differences we have with them. We also realized there were areas where we were shortsighted, myopic or just simply wrong. We believe that God has taught us much over the years. The Bible says we all stumble in many ways, so we need to be like Jesus and be gracious, patient, merciful and compassionate with fellow sinners. This is especially true when it comes to matters of preference, or gray areas. It was encouraging to reflect on those areas in which we have hopefully grown in the Lord.

There are other areas, however, in which we have changed that have not been necessarily healthy or beneficial. Unfortunately, one of these areas is parenting. We have multiple children who are spread years apart, and, upon evaluation, it was clear that there was a change in our parenting methods from the first child we raised to the later years with our youngest child.

In some areas, we have lowered our standard or compromised. We have grown weary

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of being consistent, to the point where it has become all too easy to think, “Man, this is hard work! Go ahead, do what you want! Come home at 12:30—I don’t care if you’re only seven years old!” I’m being facetious here, but I trust you get my point.

In the end, it was a good, healthy exercise for us to reflect on these questions and it served as a wonderful reminder that all of us as Christians need to evaluate that delicate balance of being too legalistic or too critical, especially in gray areas or areas of preference. There is a balance that needs to be maintained between being too permissive and flaunting your liberty versus being legalistic. Believers need to walk that fine line, and the only way to do that is by understanding biblical principles through prayer, seeking God’s face, accountability from godly counselors, and the dynamic relationship that we have with the indwelling Holy Spirit of God who leads believers. It’s hard work maintaining the

balance between license and legalism, but we must, by God's grace, learn to develop godly convictions on questions of preference. In order to cultivate clear thinking on gray areas, we must remain humble and, most importantly, remain sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

### **A Word of Caution**

Before going on to the next chapter we need to pause and consider an issue that muddies the waters when talking about gray areas. This has to do with defining which matters actually belong in the category of gray areas. I gave three suggested lists above. But not every Christian agrees on what constitutes a gray area. At times, one believer will be adamant that a certain issue is black and white and clearly taught in the Bible, while another Christian will assert that the same issue is not explicitly clear in Scripture.

For example, years ago a church-goer was adamant that Jesus died on Thursday and basically said I was teaching heresy for saying

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Jesus died on a Friday. For 2,000 years the church has taught that Jesus died on a Friday. None of the four Gospels explicitly say whether Jesus died on a Thursday or Friday. The question of, “On which day did Jesus die?” borders on a gray area because of the lack of information on the topic available, and due to the fact that Jews 2,000 years ago did not use the same calendar we do today nor did they designate their seven days in a week the same way we do. The Jews also did not regulate a twenty-four hour day exactly as we do either.

When working through controversies over gray areas between Christians, the first step to resolution or harmony is first establishing what topics are explicit in Scripture and which are only inferred or deduced. There can be no ultimate agreement until legitimate common ground is established on the issue of concern at the beginning of the dialogue. And many times

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finding that common ground may seem elusive  
between the two disagreeing parties.



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## THE BACKGROUND OF ROMANS 14

Over the past twenty years I have pastored in six different churches. And I have seen just about everything when it comes to squabbles and disagreements among Christians. I have lived through three church splits at three different churches, usually as a spectator. As I go back and evaluate those splits, I ask myself, “What caused that church split? What caused that small section of people to get mad and leave?” In those three cases the split was not over blatant, explicit sin issues. If I could narrow it down, it seemed like it always came from some preferential matters—gray areas that swelled out of control.

## **Church Splits Over Preferential Issues**

One church split had an entire faction leave solely over disagreement about the style of music in the church and the preaching style of their pastor. Despite all of the disagreement over preferences and styles, the preacher preached the truth. Some were critical of his delivery, yet this pastor was faithful to God's Word. The church finally split over these preferential issues. It was sad; it was ugly; it was terrible. It was the same with the other two churches—a small party left over preferential issues. But at the center of the problem there were usually two fellow Christians who just could not get along over things that weren't explicit sin issues. That grieves Christ and Christians must guard against this temptation to divide over matters of preference.

As a pastor, I love getting Bible questions from people and joining them in searching Scripture to see what God has to say in his Word. But the overwhelming amount and variety of

questions that I get from people are not the black and white questions like, “Should I pray more,” or “Should I trust God more.” No, the questions I get usually involve gray areas. And many times, these are very difficult questions that cannot be satisfied with a yes or no answer. These questions involve thinking through Scripture and biblical principles and then applying them to specific situations in our lives. That is the goal of this book—to give you a paradigm by which to think through these difficult issues and preferences.

### **Wise Counsel**

When our church was in its early stages, a dear pastor from a nearby church came to visit our elders. He had been a pastor for thirty years and was a wonderful man of God. He had worked with a team of elders for thirty years and during his tenure as pastor, he had seen a lot; he had gone through a church split and lived to tell about it.

He exhorted our elders, telling us, “One thing to keep in mind to preserve unity at the elder

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level is to make clear distinctions between preferences and biblical matters. Because if you are going to harp and gripe and whine and be divisive over non-biblical issues and issues of preference, you are going to grieve the Spirit of God and you are going to have a needless split on your hands. Do not do that!” He also reminded us that not every topic was an issue of right and wrong—many matters were merely preferential; and the better part of wisdom knows how to distinguish between the two. This was a timely exhortation, and it hit hard. That was several years ago, but I have never forgotten his exhortation. And this pastor’s counsel is true for all gray areas, whether you are in church leadership or not. We have to cut through the fog and determine what the biblical issues really are.

### **Threats to Unity**

In light of that, we are going to focus our attention in the remainder of this book on Romans 14:1-23. Paul wrote Romans 14 to deal with preferential issues in a local church setting. In the church at

Rome diversity and questions of “opinion” (Rom 14:1) among the members was threatening unity. There were believers who got saved out of different backgrounds; there were Christians with different sensibilities and different experiences. They were all thrown together as the Body of Christ and maintaining unity was becoming difficult.

Like the church Paul addresses in his letter to the Romans, we need guiding principles in our church to preserve unity. Our personal preferences can often inhibit unity, and our preferences often stem from our personal experiences and backgrounds because our experiences, upbringing, and backgrounds can be markedly different from other people. My wife and I, for example, have totally different backgrounds. Our different backgrounds affect our personalities, our convictions, our lifestyles, our worldview—everything—so that there are times when we have a disagreement in our marriage over issues of

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preference. That is what Paul is addressing in Romans 14.

The apostle Paul realized that the Body of Christ was very diverse. There were Jews and Gentiles, first of all, and there were men and women together as well. And then there were all those people who got saved out of paganism. Many of those pagans were saved out of idol worship and would have worshipped all kinds of Greek gods, Greek idols, and participated in gross immorality. They would partake in banquets and parties that were immoral (orgies), and would engage in the worship of some false god—and there was usually food that went along with this false worship.

After salvation, these former idolaters were given a revived conscience and had the new, Spirit-given ability to distinguish between truth and error. But at times, when they came across some elements of their old lifestyle—like the meat that was formally dedicated to idols during a worship service—their conscience became troubled. They

felt guilt. They had a prohibitive conscience toward this meat because they were associating former evil practices with that meat in light of their formerly sinful lifestyle. They concluded that the meat was inherently evil even though it was just really neutral, inanimate, lifeless food.

### **How Our Background Affects Our Conscience**

The Christian in Romans 14 who struggled with meat that was once associated to their former religious lifestyle is like somebody today who has grown up in the occult, who practiced séances and witchcraft to a very deep degree before they were saved by Christ and now that they are a Christian, they are exceptionally sensitive to any inkling of any occult belief—either in the public domain or even into Christianity. These Christians are sensitive to anything related to the occult in a way that others are not in light of their lifestyle before they knew Christ.

An example of this kind of hypersensitivity might be seen in a Christian's response to the

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original *Star Wars* films. There are overtones and undertones of the occult and Hinduism woven throughout these films. In fact, Hinduism and the occult compose the very ideology behind these movies, but many people are oblivious to this fact. Somebody with a sensitive conscience toward such things might think, “Wow, George Lucas was clearly influenced by Hinduism and the New Age.” He was, and it shows up in his work in *Star Wars*. Another example might be the *Harry Potter* movies. Somebody who came out of an occult background might be very sensitive to the witchcraft and sorcery that are a significant part of *Harry Potter*.

It is vital to keep in mind a simple truth we’ve already noted: people have different backgrounds. In the church at Rome, there were pagans (Greeks) who were saved out of idolatry and became Christians, and there were Jews who got saved in the Roman church. It is possible that many of these Jews used to practice the Old Testament laws that Moses gave to Israel, instructing God’s

people to abstain from certain kinds of food, such as pork.

Now that these Jews had become Christians there were some who still, in light of their religious upbringing, had a problem eating pork and saw it as inherently unclean. And so here they were having a fellowship meal in the Roman church and somebody has the gall to serve pork!

On the one hand, the Jew who recently became a Christian and had a sensitive conscience towards pork found that it violated his or her conscience to eat it or, perhaps, even be around it. On the other hand, there may have been other Jews who got saved but who came to understand what Jesus said to Peter: “Peter, rise, kill and eat” (Acts 10:13). They realized that all meat was clean and was not inherently evil. In essence, in Acts 10 Jesus told Peter: “You can eat the pig. Bacon is good because God made it. There is nothing wrong with it; there is a new era and the Mosaic law has been

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superseded by the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. You are free now to eat bacon again.”

Some Jews understood that truth because their conscience had been properly informed in accordance with biblical revelation. As a result, these Jews were not bothered when they ate pork or saw it. At the church of Rome, then, there was this mix of different sensibilities and sensitivities where people didn't always agree on gray areas. That is the context of Romans 14, and it is important because it is likely that every single one of us has areas where we are sensitive or hypersensitive about a certain convictions.

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## THE STRONG AND THE WEAK

So with the background we established in the last chapter, we will now examine Romans 14 in some detail, beginning in this chapter looking specifically at Romans 14:1-13. How do all these people from different religious backgrounds get along in their local church? How is the church today going to get along with all these different sensibilities and sensitivities about so many different topics? Paul helps us answer these complicated but relevant questions in this first section of chapter 14.

Romans 14:1-13 reads:

<sup>1</sup>Now accept the one who is weak in faith, *but* not for *the purpose of* passing judgment on his opinions. <sup>2</sup>One person

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has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables *only*.

<sup>3</sup>The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. <sup>4</sup>Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. <sup>5</sup>One person regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. <sup>6</sup>He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. <sup>7</sup>For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; <sup>8</sup>for if we live, we

live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. <sup>9</sup>For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. <sup>10</sup>But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. <sup>11</sup>For it is written, "AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD."  
<sup>12</sup>So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. <sup>13</sup>Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.

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Romans 14 starts with this command that Paul gives to *every* Christian: “Now accept the one [i.e., any fellow believer in your church] who is weak in faith” (14:1). Who is weak in faith? It is the person we discussed in the last chapter who was, due to his religious background, unable to eat pork. But we need to say a little more about what Paul means when he calls someone “weak in faith.”

### **What Weak in Faith Does *Not* Mean**

First, we must determine what this phrase does not mean. When Scripture refers to a believer who is weak in faith, it does not necessarily imply this person is a new Christian, because you can have a new Christian who has a well-informed conscience and is, as a result, strong in a particular area. Or you can have someone who has been a Christian for a long time who is weak in certain areas. It is important not to equate “weak in faith” to a new Christian—that may not always be the case. As a matter of fact, from my experience in various churches, those who were weak in faith in certain

gray areas were people who had been Christians for a long time. Weak in faith does not necessarily mean a new Christian.

Another thing to consider is that one who is weak in faith may not be weak in faith in every area of life. They might be weak in just one gray area. Indeed, they may be thinking correctly in many other areas. They might even serve as a resource or example to those who are weak in a particular area.

For instance, somebody might have a weak conscience regarding rock music because, prior to their salvation, they spent twenty years in a rock band, doing drugs and engaging in an immoral lifestyle before they got saved. And now, every time they see an electric guitar they panic because they associate the electric guitar with evil, Satan, the world and their former life of debauchery. I have a friend who came out of that kind of lifestyle. Even though he is gifted at the guitar, he refuses to even pick it up, in church or for his own personal pleasure, because it offends his conscience to do so.

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And I tell him, “That’s alright. You need to honor your conscience in that regard and not play the guitar.” But at the same time I remind him from Scripture that he is free to play again because the guitar is not inherently evil.

In our contemporary terminology we might say that this person has an “overly-sensitive conscience” or a “prohibitive conscience” in a certain area. That is the problem our passage is referring to. But Scripture commands us to avoid a condescending spirit or demeanor toward these weaker brothers and sisters. Do not look down on a fellow believer who has a prohibitive or hypersensitive conscience in a specific area, Paul tells us. Do not look down your nose at them saying, “Oh, well I’m mature and I understand that it’s okay to drink alcohol in certain circumstances, while this Christian who says you can never have alcohol is legalistic.” We are to pursue peace and avoid arguments about their convictions. We are to accept them. Note the latter half of verse 1: “Now

accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions” (14:1b).

### **Dealing with Differences of Opinion**

Now, consider Romans 14:2: “One person has faith that he may eat all things.” The person who has faith that he “may eat all things” is the strong Christian; he has a strong, well-informed, biblical conscience on that particular issue. “But he who is weak eats vegetables only.” The one who “eats vegetables only” is abstaining from pork because of Old Testament restrictions. But notice the attitude that both the strong and the weak are to have toward each other. “The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him” (14:4). The strong Christian must not look down on the weak Christian for their scruples over a particular issue, and the weak Christian cannot condemn the

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strong Christian for his or her freedom in a given area.

Because Paul mentions feast days and holidays (see v. 5), this principle would also apply to contemporary holidays. Paul writes, “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.” Some Christians celebrate Christmas as a time to rejoice over Jesus’ birth. But there are other Christians who believe that we should not celebrate Christmas because such a celebration is not commanded in the Bible.

Some Christians even argue that December 25<sup>th</sup> was originally the Roman pagan holiday, Saturnalia, and as such believers should have nothing to do with celebrating anything on December 25<sup>th</sup>. Christians will actually debate over this issue. I had a good friend who had this view and abhorred December 25<sup>th</sup>.

But according to Paul in Romans 14:5, when you celebrate a holiday needs to be your personal

conviction, and you cannot look down on another believer because their conviction conflicts with yours. Paul said in verse 4: “Who are you to judge the servant of another?” In other words, who are you to judge, in gray areas, matters before God and the conscience of another Christian? The overarching emphasis throughout this passage is toward the judgmental, critical Christians who condemn other Christians in gray areas and matters of preference. And it goes both ways: the legalist and the one who is permissive. Paul’s admonishment is clear: “Christians, stop judging one another in preferential matters!” Paul continues:

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind (vv. 4-5).

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Paul's statement here refers to Jews who were still making a big deal out of Jewish holidays in the Old Testament—the Passover and mandatory celebratory feast days for the Jews. Paul is telling the church that we do not need to make a big deal about these feast days anymore because Jesus Christ has fulfilled them. Now, every day is a day to celebrate the Lord Jesus Christ. Do not fight about holidays.

But notice Paul's emphasis on motives. "He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for He gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God" (v.6). Whatever you choose with regard to a particular gray area, you are to partake or celebrate to the glory of God. Furthermore, individual Christians should assume that those who partake and those who refrain are doing so out of their desire to please the Lord.

What is the basis of this assumption? Verse

7: “For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are Lord’s.” To be a Christian is to live for Christ. If you are faced with a decision over a matter of preference, make your choice for the glory of Christ. If you encounter a Christian who has a different opinion in a gray area or preferential area, assume that he is making his decision for the glory of Christ.

Paul goes on: “For to this end Christ died and lived again” (v. 9a). That is the answer to gray area issues—being Christ-centered. It is all about the Lord Jesus Christ, his glory and his priorities. “For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living. But you, why do you judge your brother” (vv. 9a-10). There it is again: quit judging your fellow Christians because their convictions are different than yours in gray areas. “Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before

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the judgment seat of God” (v. 10).

That was the one thing that helped my wife and I over the years of our married life—to evaluate all of our convictions on gray areas and to mark changes. As I mentioned in chapter 1, we hope that we have grown in showing mercy and being slow to criticize because God has exposed sin and defects in our own lives. We all stumble in many ways, and we have to stand before the Lord Jesus Christ who is the only Judge that matters. He knows everything perfectly and fully and we have to give an account to him. That is a fearful judgment, and it helps sanctify our life and mollify our views.

The pastor I mentioned in chapter 1 actually wrote a book in which he uses himself as an illustration. When he looks back at himself a couple decades earlier when he was a young man in his thirties, he realizes now that he had an overly critical spirit. He shares how God has changed him over time through the hardships of life, exposing his own sin and cultivating humility in his life,

making him a more gracious pastor today. And God will do the same for us through his Spirit in changing us over time as we consider the future judgment.

### **Gray Areas and the Final Judgment**

Romans 14:11-13 speaks specifically of how the final judgment should guide our thinking on gray issues. “For it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.’ So then each one of us will give account of himself to God. Therefore, let us not judge one another anymore.” This is the third time Paul says this—are you getting the point? In light of the coming judgment and the fact that we will all someday stand before the Judge of the universe, one thing Christians cannot do in gray areas and matters of preference in the church is to judge other believers. Rather, instead of passing judgment upon other believers over issues of preference, we should resolve, out of love, not to place a stumbling block before our brothers and sisters in Christ:

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“Therefore, let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this, not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.” We have to evaluate our own life, and our hearts need to be set on edifying our fellow believers. We might ask ourselves: “Okay, I’m interacting with the corporate body, what can I do—what will I say—that builds up my other brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ? Is there anything I will do or say that will tear them down or offend them?”

We are called to live a life that is *other-oriented*. The biblical ethic entails living to serve and honor others above ourselves. Jesus said that is the highest priority (Matt 22:37-39). As a matter of fact, as Christians we are supposed to “deny” ourselves, and even “die to self” (Luke 9:23). It’s not all about me. It’s about the other saints in Jesus Christ. As you think about attending your regular place of worship each week, you should, especially on Saturday, try to prepare your heart by praying: “Okay God, it’s the Lord’s Day tomorrow, and

that's awesome. I get to interact with the saints. Lead me by your Word, by your truth, by your Spirit. How can I be a blessing and a servant to the sheep?" Many of us, however, usually approach Sunday in the opposite fashion: how can I get my needs met? When self is our starting point, we are likely to be critical and self-centered and judgmental. We need God's help in that regard, and that is what he says right here. You need to refrain from putting needless stumbling blocks in front of people.



~3~

## CLEAN AND UNCLEAN

In this chapter we will look at Romans 14:14-21 to see some important theological concepts that Paul addresses which will help guide our thinking on matters of preference. The passage reads as follows:

<sup>14</sup>I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. <sup>15</sup>For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. <sup>16</sup>Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; <sup>17</sup>for the kingdom

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of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup>For he who in this *way* serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. <sup>19</sup>So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. <sup>20</sup>Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. <sup>21</sup>It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or *to do anything* by which your brother stumbles.

Paul begins with verse 14 saying, “I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.” Here the apostle is talking about meat that was dedicated to an idol during a pagan worship service. But he is talking specifically to a stronger brother here and the stronger brother knows that it is fine to eat meat that was at some point dedicated

to an idol at some pagan temple before it ended up in the market place. The Christian who is strong in faith does not have a problem eating this meat previously sacrificed to idols. He knows that food is neither inherently evil nor spiritual.

### **Unclean Cheerios?**

When I was in college at Westmont in Santa Barbara, I had a good friend, a fellow student, that I looked up to—he was my mentor and an ex-Mormon. He had been a Mormon for sixteen years. While we were at this Evangelical college, he found out that the cafeteria food service company that catered our food at this Christian institution was owned by the Mormon Church. This troubled his conscience terribly. All of a sudden, he decided one day that he was not going to eat their cheerios or milk anymore, or anything else that was served in the cafeteria by this “unclean food service company.” I was baffled and I would ask him, as I slurped my honey-nut Cheerios, “Dude, aren’t you on the meal plan here? Three meals a day, seven

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days a week... where are you going to eat?”

“I’ll just eat at taco bell,” was his reply. And he wanted me to join him in his boycotting crusade. But I could not afford Taco Bell *and* the meal plan. Plus I liked the Cheerios and the *Ramblin’ Rootbeer*. And there seemed to be an inconsistency in his thinking. So I asked him, “Well, isn’t Taco Bell owned by Satanists or something? So Mormons versus Satanists? Man, I’m going with the Mormon cheerios!”

We never saw eye to eye on that issue. But he had a hypersensitive conscience about food in light of his Mormon upbringing and his new relation to unbelievers. That is a very specific example that is actually parallel to what Paul is talking about. Paul’s point, as we will see in a moment is this: Do not make an issue about food. The meat is not the issue. Meat is inherently neutral. It is not evil or spiritual.

## **Halloween Party or Harvest Festival?**

We see in verse 14 that Paul gives the theological basis for his conviction about the inherent acceptability of the meat despite its connection with idol worship: “I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.” Remember the question I posed in the introduction about whether or not it was evil for Christians to have a pumpkin at Halloween? Well, in and of itself, a pumpkin is not evil. God made pumpkins...and cucumbers and every other vegetable (see 1 Tim 4:4-5). So we need to go a little deeper. “But to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.” What does this mean?

I had a very good friend at a previous church where I was a pastor and elder who did not like Halloween and he let me know his feelings about it. Do you know what I did? I did not dismiss him and criticize his family by saying, “Oh, you’re weak in faith! How pathetic! You’re not invited to my

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Halloween party and my kids aren't going to go trick-or-treating with you!"

Rather, I honored the conscience of this fellow believer. "Praise God," I thought, "you have spent time really thinking this through." He even went to Scripture and pointed out some very convicting passages from the Old Testament. I even responded, "Wow, yeah, I hear what you're saying. I can see that. You know what you need to do? You must not violate your conscience. And you know what? I'm not going to be an accomplice to violating your conscience in the church and we're not going to have a church sponsored Halloween party." So, what do Christians do on Halloween? They call it Harvest Day, or Reformation Day. That is what Paul is talking about here: being sensitive to another brother or sister in light of a given conviction.

### **Walk in Love**

We are to handle our convictions in love, Paul tells us: "For if because of food your [weaker or

sensitive] brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love” (v. 15). That’s the bottom line. Do you want to flaunt your liberty at the risk of offending another brother who has a conviction in that area? Consider again my good friend who was a guitarist in a rock band prior to his conversion. Because I know what he believes, I’m probably not going to play Steven Curtis Chapman in my car when he is with me, because he has a problem with the electric guitar. And that’s fine. We’ll listen to opera music or whatever his preference is. That’s walking in love.

Love is the issue, isn’t it? Love is the fulfillment of the Law—love for your fellow man, love for your fellow Christian, love for the Body of Christ. But Paul pushes us even further when he says, “Do not destroy with your food him for who Christ died” (v. 15). Do not destroy a fellow brother or sister with your freedom. Do not destroy other Christians with your food. In your exercise of

your Christian liberty, do not destroy him for whom Christ died.

### **True Spirituality**

Paul continues in 14:17: “For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking.” Here Paul is instructing us to make a clear distinction between *biblical matters* and *matters of preference*. In other words, true spirituality is about clearly delineated, scripturally-defined issues of right and wrong, sin and holiness. A Christian who wants to debate and argue and be divisive about issues of preference reveals that he is an immature Christian. Elsewhere Paul explicitly commands Christians to refrain from debating about “foolish controversies” for they are “unprofitable and worthless” (Titus 3:9). In other words, don’t waste your time squabbling about what color carpet you want in the nursery, or if hymnals are more spiritual than overheads, or if you should have communion every week or once a month, if you should have one worship service or three, and on and on. Keep real biblical issues front

and center—don't be distracted with tangential matters.

This distinction is very helpful when you are trying to muddle your way through the often challenging and confusing matter of gray areas. Scripture helps us keep the right perspective: “For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace.” True spirituality is about maintaining peace between yourself and God, and maintaining peace with other believers, while keeping a good conscience by not violating your conscience over a gray area. True spirituality is also expressed toward other believers with whom you disagree in areas of preference when you live peacefully with them. So, quit the squabbling. The fruit of the Spirit is peace (Gal 5:22), so when you fight with other Christians over matters of opinion, you grieve the Spirit of God and rob yourself of another fruit of the Spirit; namely, joy.

### **Pursue Peace**

What is the result of this kind of living? The kind of

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living that pursues peace and righteousness in the face of gray areas? Paul tells us: “For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men” (Rom 14:18). When we maintain a good conscience before God and peace with man over matters of preference, we will find that both relationships remain intact. This fact leads to only one possible action on our part: “So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another” (v. 20). Paul is telling us to make it a priority to pursue issues and topics that make for peace. In other words, be a peacemaker. Don’t be distractive or divisive or nit-picky or petty. Instead, Paul tells us to focus our energy on edifying one another; to commit ourselves to building up other believers. We are called to be encouraging to one another and to live selflessly towards our brothers and sisters in Christ, making an effort to understand their sensibilities and sensitivities. Where do they stumble? Am I putting any unnecessary temptation before them? These are

the questions we might ask as we seek to live at peace with our church family.

### **Care for the Conscience**

The opposite of mutual edification is mutual destruction, so Paul commands us in 14:20: “Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food.” The implication is that we must not live in such a way that our actions cause a fellow believer to sin or stumble over preferential matters. Although it is true that “all things indeed are clean” it is “evil for the man who eats and gives offense” (v. 20). In other words, although the strong Christian knows that pork, for example, is clean and perfectly good for eating, it is *wrong* to eat that meat if it offends the conscience of the weaker brother. The conscience matters. One of the golden rules for discerning between matters of opinion or preference is that every single Christian—whether you are weak in faith or strong in faith—should never, ever violate their own conscience. Nor should they act in a way that would violate a fellow

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Christian's conscience. That is one of Paul's main exhortations in this entire passage.

In fact, there are times when it is good to refrain from legitimate activities and liberties if such refraining keeps a brother or sister from stumbling. Paul continues, "It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble" (v. 21). And this exhortation is not just for strong Christians and it is not just for weak Christians; it is for *every believer in the church*. Everybody has a part to play.

~4~

## THE KEY PRINCIPLE

In this chapter we will survey Romans 14:22-23 as Paul further develops his thoughts on preserving peace amidst controversial gray area issues. We begin with a key piece of instruction in verse 22; a statement that relates to something Paul already said much earlier in the passage in verse 5. Let's look at these passages together.

Verse 5: "One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind."

Verse 22: "The faith that you have,

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keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.”

### **Be Fully Convinced in Your Own Mind**

When it comes to matters of preference, you have to start by being fully convinced in your own mind, not wavering on what is right or wrong in a given situation. You have to search the Scriptures, pray to God, and seek his wisdom through godly counsel on the matter in question. And you have to become convinced in your own mind on that issue before you can act. For example, abstaining from alcohol 100% of the time might be the right thing for you to do before God. And that is why Paul says you need to be fully convinced in your own mind. Another way to say it is how Paul says it in verse 22: “The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God.” You have to settle this matter between you and God first. This is where

your thinking must start when it comes to gray areas.

Another common example: Is it wrong to watch television? Knowing my lifestyle—the way I think, the distraction it can be, the temptation it can be—it might be. Actually, my wife and I came to the conclusion early in our marriage that we were not going to have a TV. We banished the television for years. Then we ended up with a television because someone gave us one. And so after a few years of not watching television, we turned it on and we were shocked. You talk about offended sensibilities—we were like, “Whoa, I can’t believe that explicitly carnal and raunchy commercial!” But then you watch enough of those crude commercials and you become numb to it, don’t you? Sin, worldliness, crudity and smut become normal with time through over-exposure. And that’s the danger. Your conscience becomes dull. You’ve got to think through all of these issues in your own personal life, starting with yourself and your home. What are

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your convictions before God going to be? You have to settle these matters in your own mind.

Why exercise such rigor over these issues of preference? Paul tells us in the latter part of verse 22: “Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.” What does this mean? It simply means that the Christian who doesn’t violate his own conscience over matters of preference will be spiritually happy. He or she will have true joy and a peaceful conscience. So, I’ll say it again: Don’t violate your conscience. Don’t act against guilt you feel in any given moment.

Now, it might be that your conscience is ill informed. You might be ignorant or naïve, or you don’t have proper biblical theology on a given issue. In these cases it is possible to feel guilty inappropriately. You might think something is sinful when it isn’t. This happens when your conscience has not been properly programmed or informed with biblical truth. You might have a terrible background and you haven’t been able to

land on the biblical position yet. And now you can't partake in a particular activity without violating your conscience. But Paul still says, "Don't violate your conscience!" God may, in time, bring you to a point where you have the freedom to partake in that activity without violating your conscience. But for the time being, don't violate your conscience.

### **"Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide?"**

As we discuss this issue of the conscience, you might be reminded of the movie *Pinocchio* and one of the main characters, Jiminy Cricket. He sings a song in that movie that contains the phrase, "Always let your conscience be your guide." You might think highly of the cricket's counsel. Actually, that is a rather pathetic theological statement. Personally, I don't trust my conscience half the time; and an unbeliever has a depraved conscience, so Jiminy is really giving people terrible advice. But that's not what Paul is telling us here. He's not saying, "Let your conscience be your guide." He's saying: "Do not violate your conscience." There is

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an important difference between these two bits of counsel. Our conscience might be uninformed or ill informed, so it can't be our ultimate guide. But if we come across something in which we cannot partake because it will violate our conscience, then we must abstain from that activity. In the latter sense our conscience doesn't serve as a guide to *what is right*, but as an indicator to *what might be wrong*. The conscience has a limited function so it cannot serve as our ultimate guide.

This is an important principle because Paul makes the command to not violate one's conscience central to his counsel in Romans 14. Note verse 23: "But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." The phrase "he who doubts" refers to when you begin to violate your conscience and the decision that you made. Any decision with which we are confronted must be decided *in faith* without any doubting whether or not it is the right thing to do. Why is

this so important? Because whatever we do without faith—without believing that God approves of what we are doing—is sin.

Let's make this concrete. What about a decision to join some friends at a local club? You don't plan to drink, but they might, and you will be in a place where there will be a lot of people drinking. Here's Paul's answer: If there is even an inkling of hesitation or doubt on your part that joining your friends is the right thing to do, you cannot go. Gray areas are gray areas, but what you are called to do when confronted with a gray area is black and white. Scripture is clear: Do not violate your conscience. Do not go. A useful phrase that crystalizes Paul's principle in verse 23 is this: "If you doubt, then don't!"

### **What About Alcohol?**

Let me conclude this chapter with a word about alcohol. Applying Paul's principles of gray areas can be tricky when it comes to alcohol. The reason it's tricky is because some Christians say the issue of

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alcohol is a gray area and there are other Christians who adamantly say alcohol is not a gray area. Many who say alcohol is not a gray area contend that Scripture clearly condemns any consumption of alcohol. Those who say it's a gray area usually say the Bible only condemns drunkenness. Which is it? It either is or it isn't a gray area. In this case it has become a disputed matter and still needs to be treated with the principles outlined by Paul in Romans 14. Namely, the stronger in faith needs to defer to the weaker in faith. There are some issues related to alcohol that are black and white, like drunkenness is wrong (Eph 5:18); underage drinking is wrong; driving and drinking is wrong; places where alcohol is forbidden is to be honored; if parents tell their dependent 21 year old, "No drinking in our house while you live here," and the 21 year old drinks, then that is wrong. So there are black and white matters related to alcohol.

But to say the Bible condemns all drinking of alcohol is highly questionable. Jesus made wine

in John 2. In Greek the wine he made is called *oinos*, which means wine. There's no way to get around that. There are times the Bible recommends drinking alcohol (Gen 27:28; Ps 104:15; Prov 3:10; 1 Tim 5:23).

There are times you should not drink alcohol; that's clear. But some Christians have a prohibitive conscience towards any alcohol at all. How might we handle this issue? Well, if I was in a local restaurant with my wife, and I'm a pastor at a church and I have a glass of wine with my meal, that could actually offend some believers if they happen to see us there. Because I don't know everybody's personal conviction about alcohol and wine, and because I am not aware of all people who have struggled with alcoholism, I have to be sensitive to them and walk in love. I need to refrain from drinking alcohol so I don't cause another believer to stumble. I need to keep my personal convictions private where I won't needlessly offend fellow believers. That's what Paul is talking about in

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this passage. The Christian life is about being other-oriented and fulfilling the law of love.

~5~

## CONCLUSION

In this concluding chapter I want to summarize what we've learned from Romans 14, address the issues of legalism and libertarianism, and provide each of the principles we gleaned from our study of Romans 14 in a convenient numbered list. As you think through the gray areas in your life, the following criteria will be helpful as a kind of litmus test of Scriptural truths to help you think through decisions where the solution is not immediately black and white. These principles have been helpful for me and they're all from Scripture. Before we look at these principles, let me summarize what we've established so far in this book.

First, we have seen that *the Bible is sufficient for*

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*all of life.* The Bible has all the answers. The Bible has answers even in gray areas because it gives us principles with which to deal with gray areas, like “Don’t violate your conscience.” Second, *some areas of Christian living are not explicitly addressed by Scripture.* These are the gray areas—issues that require thought, prayer, Bible study, and even godly counsel before we are able to make a decision. Third, *the Bible delineates specific principles for addressing grey areas.* We’ve examined those principles from Romans 14:1-23 throughout this book. Finally, the goal in all our decision-making is to *preserve unity in the Body of Christ and to honor God with our lives.* As a matter of fact, that great statement in 1 Corinthians 10:31—“Whether then you eat or drink”—those are the mundane grey areas—“do it all to the glory of God.”

### **A Word about Legalism**

Frequently when there is a dispute between Christians over a gray area issue, one of the parties involved may have legalistic tendencies. When that

is the case, the dispute is really over the difference between one believer's conscience versus another believer's conscience. Or it's a dispute over how one Christian views Christian liberty versus the other believer's understanding of Christian liberty. The real solution then would be to move both parties toward the true biblical teaching on the matter.

To move toward the true biblical position, the legalist first needs to know he has legalistic tendencies. This is difficult to do because it requires objective self-evaluation. And most of us have blind spots regarding our weaknesses. Nevertheless, the legalistic tendencies need to be exposed. The best way to do that is to know what legalism is.

At its core, legalism is when someone raises human opinion, man-made tradition, or an issue of preference to the level of authority equal to that of the Bible. So they smother out biblical truth and supplant it with human standards. That is what the Pharisees did routinely. And Jesus castigated them

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for it saying, “Neglecting the commandment of God, you [legalistic Pharisees] hold to the tradition of men....You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition” (Mark 7:8-9).

Also at the core of religious legalism is the idea that we can earn God’s approval, favor, forgiveness, or a higher spiritual status through human works. So legalists are strongly performance-based in approaching the Christian life and many times put undue weight into external and behavioral matters over the unseen issues of the heart.

This explains why the common Christian areas of gray area disputes are usually related to externals, performance, appearance, or “how-to” matters. Things we can’t “do.” Should a Christian “do this” or “do that?” The Holy Spirit condemns this shallow performance-based approach to Christianity. Paul wrote in Colossians 2:20-22, “If you have died with Christ to the elementary

principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?”

If you noticed carefully, the three lists of disputed matters listed in chapter one mostly deal with “proscriptive” matters, emphasizing things we can’t do, should not do, things to abstain from and refrain from. That is a negative approach to behavior. A positive approach emphasizes the things we should do. This distinction is also helpful to keep in mind to make sure you have a balance as you live the Christian life—are you thinking mostly of things you should not do (negative/prohibitive, self-oriented) or are you thinking of things you can do (positive, proactive, service-oriented, other-oriented) for God, Christ and your fellow man?

In light of the preceding, in your ongoing self-evaluation always keep 1 Samuel 16:7 in mind:

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“The LORD said... ‘Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature...for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.’”

### **A Word to Libertarians**

A libertarian is someone who extols the virtue of freedom and liberty. This can be a good thing if such liberties are biblical, wholesome and honorable. Liberties can at times be abused or taken to an extreme. Just as disputes over gray area matters may involve those with legalistic tendencies, it's also possible one of the parties involved has a tendency to push the envelope on Christian liberties.

Some Christians abuse their freedom in Christ. That's why Peter and Paul both warned believers, “do not use your freedom as a covering for evil” (1 Pet 2:16; cf. Gal 5:13). So if you are in a dispute over a gray area with another believer, ask yourself if you are trying to push your rights too much. Do you find yourself arguing, “But this is

not explicitly condemned by the Bible?” What is permissible in a given situation is not always the best choice (1 Cor 6:12). What is lawful is not always profitable. What is not explicitly forbidden is not always what can honor God and others in a given scenario. If you can choose the best, don’t settle for tolerable or even good.

### **Biblical Principles for Assessing Gray Areas**

We conclude our study by delineating several practical biblical principles to serve as guideposts for decision-making and living in harmony when it comes to dealing with gray areas:

1. Recognize people are all on different places of the sanctification spectrum, so we need to be sensitive and careful with how we evaluate another’s spirituality. Every believer is different. Believers are strong in areas and they are weak in other areas.
2. Do not judge each other. We are a family, so be patient, longsuffering, and slow to make

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judgments about your brothers and sisters in Christ.

3. Labor to distinguish between personal preferences and biblical mandates on sin issues (Rom 14:5).
4. When dealing with gray areas of life and your attitude towards other believers, examine your motives. What's driving your concern in this particular issue? If you want to honor Christ in all things, you will want to love your fellow brother and build him up and edify him, not merely expose his sin and immaturity. Examine your motives (Rom 14:6-8).
5. Remember that every Christian will be judged by Christ. We all stumble or sin and we do it in many ways (James 3:2). None of us are perfect; only God is.

6. Never cause another Christian to violate their conscience if you can knowingly avoid it.
7. Pursue joy, righteousness, and peace, not debating over preferential matters. Focus on clearly defined right and wrong issues (Rom 14:17-19). Don't prolong debates over gray areas. Don't quibble about tangential issues. Don't argue about theoretical, impractical matters.
8. Edify each other. Edify means build them up. Help other Christians grow. Be a peacemaker, not someone who causes division.
9. Prefer one another (Rom 14:20-21). Consider the good and interests of others before your own (see also Phil 2:4). Deny yourself.
10. Don't violate your conscience (Rom 14:5, 22).

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11. Regularly evaluate yourself with respect to areas of weakness on gray area issues. Do you know where you are the weak brother and in what areas you might be the stronger believer? Know thyself! One of the highest levels of spiritual maturity is the rare ability to honestly and objectively evaluate your own spiritual status—knowing where you are weak, and owning up to those areas. This requires great humility and discernment.
  
12. Renew your mind with Scripture. We need to inform our minds and how we think with biblical truth or our consciences will remain weak and ill informed. When our consciences are weak it means that we're operating on wrong biblical principles. Paul tells us in Romans 12:2 to be “transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Spiritual growth begins with informing our minds with biblical truth. So renew your mind with

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Scripture; inform your conscience with biblical truth. That's how you go from weak to strong and deepen your personal convictions before God.

Finally, as you wrestle thorough particular gray areas, consider these few questions.

1. Will it benefit me spiritually?
2. Will it bring me into bondage? “Mom, how much video game can I play right now? Can I play for the next four hours?” Well, playing some video games isn't sinful, but it can become addictive. There are a lot of things we do that aren't inherently sinful that can become addictive. Food, shopping, spending money, video games—they become addictive. We should avoid those things that have a tendency to bring us into bondage.

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3. Will it defile God's temple? This refers to what we put in our body or how we use or misuse our body. Never do anything to go against the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is your body. Do all things in moderation.
4. Will it cause a brother to stumble? We've mentioned that one. Will it hinder evangelism? If it will, then don't do it. Refrain from it.
5. Will it violate my conscience?
6. And then, finally, that great summary statement in 1 Corinthians 10:31: Will it bring glory to God? Because that needs to be our greatest motivation. All for his glory.

**APPENDIX**  
A CASE STUDY IN THINKING  
THROUGH CONTROVERSIAL  
GRAY AREAS: TATTOOS

What does the Bible say about tattoos? Fifty years ago, tattoos were not a frequent topic of discussion in the American church and rarely were they seen. Tattoos were not even prominent in the secular world. They were reserved for the tough-guy sailor or bartender, and even those occurrences were the exception. And they typically had only one tattoo, branded on their shoulder, hidden under the shirt—a tattoo of a heart or a phrase like “mom.” The 1930’s popular cartoon, Popeye the sailor-man, mainstreamed the idea to our culture in a subtle and acceptable way, as Popeye sported two small, simple images of anchors on his burly forearms. And Popeye was a good guy, keeping us always safe

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from Brutus, the bully, who did not sport tattoos. In the 1980's tattoos were then thrown in the face of the culture, as the highly popular rock group, KISS, had tattoos on the face.

Times have changed. Tattoos are now everywhere. On a recent summer trip to the heart of Oregon, I noticed the majority of folks in the supermarket and walking around town had tattoos. In the NBA, you stand out like a dinosaur if you don't shine with the sheen of many colors on your epidermis. NBA all-stars, Klay Thompson of the Warriors and Tony Parker of the Spurs, are members of an elite, shrinking club of "no-inkers." In the church there are now plenty of high profile pastors at high profile churches who wield the Bible in hand, upheld by an arm with a tattoo sleeve extending from wrist to pit. Christian schools and organizations that once outright banned tattoos now allow them. Times have changed.

Does the Bible address tattoos? Not explicitly—at least not in the New Testament. In the Old Testament there is one verse that is used frequently by those opposed to tattoos—“Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the LORD” (Lev 19:28, KJV). The interpretation and application of this verse is highly challenging. The main issue to determine is what did Moses mean when he wrote this as God revealed it to him in 1400 BC? And what did this verse originally mean in the context of Leviticus chapter 19, the whole book of Leviticus and the whole Mosaic Law? Was Moses saying in this verse that believers could not have a small tattoo of Tweety Bird on the insole of their left foot?

Context comes first in determining meaning in the Bible. The context of Leviticus 19 is God’s call for his people to not be idol worshippers like the pagans around them (Lev 19:1-4). There are about forty commands in chapter 19, some

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prescriptive and some proscriptive. About fifteen times in this chapter God reminds his people with the refrain, “I am the LORD.” This refrain is the foundation and motive for obeying the forty commands—we obey because God deserves our obedience; how we live for him is an act of worship. He is the main audience of how we live. What he thinks about what we do is priority number one. We belong to him; we are accountable to him; we will be judged by him; we live for him. We are to be different and live different than unbelievers around us. With these forty commands God is establishing a clear demarcation between holy people and unholy people; separated people and unseparated; called out people and those not called; sanctified versus those not sanctified. That’s the point of chapter 19.

As for the translation of the relevant phrase in 19:28, the King James says to not, “print any marks,” while the NASB says not to “make any tattoo marks.” The Hebrew phrase, “print any

marks” is found only in this verse in the Old Testament, adding to the difficulty in coming up with an exacting translation and interpretation. One Hebrew scholar is justified when he comments on this phrase: “The wording translated *tattoo marks* (*ḵeṯōvet qa<sup>u</sup>qa<sup>a</sup>*), used only here, is problematic. It may refer to painting oneself or making inscriptions on one’s body. Painting the body was a pagan practice” [*Leviticus*, Robert Vasholz, Christian Focus Publ.: Great Britain, 2007; p. 233]. Despite the difficulty in translation, it is clear what God was saying: “Don’t mark your body with images” like the pagans do—your body belongs to God. Verse 19:28 ends with the phrase, “I am YHWH.”

So how does this verse apply to believers today? That is difficult to determine. There are many variables to consider. As such, it is justified to put the matter of tattoos in the “gray area” category for Christians, especially in light of the following considerations:

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1. Leviticus 19:28 is subject to debate regarding its translation and interpretation of the Hebrew text.
2. If this one obscure phrase in Leviticus 19:28 did not exist, then there is no other verse in the Bible directly addressing the topic of tattoos.
3. Several of the commands and prohibitions in Leviticus 19 are not binding on Christians today (i.e., 19:19).
4. Most of the condemned practices in Leviticus 19 are associated with false religious worship of the pagans around Israel.
5. Jesus, the Apostles and the New Testament never talk about tattoos directly.

Nevertheless, even though the above five points are true, there are plenty of clear biblical principles that intersect with the relevance of tattoos that can give

guidance and wisdom for the believer on this matter. Consider some of the following principles.

First, for the anti-tattoo Christians out there:

1. *Be consistent*—Many who want to use 19:28 to categorically condemn all tattoos today are not willing to live by all of God’s commands in Leviticus 19. In the same chapter is this prohibition: “you shall not...wear a garment upon you of two kinds of material mixed together” (19:19). Many anti-tattooers no doubt own plenty of T-shirts that are a mix of cotton and wool, or polyester. This is a problem. You can’t pick and choose which Bible verses you want to accentuate and enforce others to live by. Or how about the verse right before the tattoo prohibition that says, “You shall not round off the side growth of your heads nor harm the edges of your beard” (19:27). Christians are not held to that prohibition. Do you eat pork today? Do you like bacon? Christians are allowed to eat

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pork (Acts 10), but eating pork was prohibited under the same Mosaic Law that delineated the prohibition of Leviticus 19:28 (cf. Deut 14:8).

2. *Be careful not to overemphasize externals*—This is what the Pharisees did. Jesus condemned them for being hypocrites, for they were more concerned with outward appearance than what was going on in the heart: “Woe to you, scribes, and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt 23:27-28).
3. *Don’t judge based on outward appearance only*—We should judge sin, but we can’t judge motives and we have to be cautious about premature judgments when it comes to gray areas. We

need to get all the facts before rendering a verdict. Being one-dimensional, making judgments based on external appearance only is hasty and dangerous. God said in 1 Samuel 16:7, “Do not look at his appearance...for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” Also, James is clear about the danger of being overly critical of other believers: “He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the Law and judges the Law....who are you who judge your neighbor?” (4:11-12).

4. *Remember the inner man is the priority*—The Bible says the outer man is dying daily; but the inner man is being renewed day by day (2 Cor 4:16). The Holy Spirit allows us to spiritually mature “in the inner man” (Eph 3:16). As a pastor, my priority is focusing on the spiritual development of the inner man—the soul, the heart, the mind, the conscience, the thinking,

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beliefs and worldviews of believers—not on the details of the externals. Hebrews 13:17 reminds believers that church leaders, or pastors, “watch over your souls,” and have to give account for that. Pastors are not the fashion police, being preoccupied with micro-managing the length of a man’s hairline in back, a woman’s dress-line in front, or the ink line on someone’s arm.

Now, second, some biblical food for thought for tattoo advocates:

1. *Consider your motives*—Others can’t judge your motives, but you can evaluate them. Scripture exhorts believers to “examine yourselves!” (2 Cor 13:5). A basic Christian discipline is self-examination. One of the most difficult things for anyone to do honestly and objectively is self-examination. Ask yourself the following questions:

Why do you have a tattoo?

What is the biblical basis for getting one?

Who influenced you to get a tattoo?

How is your tattoo advancing your personal spiritual development of the inner man?

What is the impact of your tattoos on other believers around you?

Is paying for tattoos the best use of your money?

2. *Be careful not to overemphasize externals*—This is what the pagans did. Notice the parallel of this point with point 2 above for the Pharisee. The question here is, do you get tattoos to draw attention to yourself? Or, do tattoos somehow give you identity through self-expression? If so, they shouldn't. Exhibitionism, flaunting your fashion, and being ostentatious in outward appearance is clearly condemned by God as being self-centered, distracting and having the wrong focus. It is illegitimately putting too much focus on your outward appearance. Being

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showy is a lack of humility and a lack of modesty—two of the highest Christian values. Consider 1 Peter 3:3-4: “Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.” And Proverbs 31 extols the virtue of pursuing quiet, inner beauty over external beautification and adornment: “Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD, shall be praised” (vs. 30).

3. *Remember your true identity*—This is closely related to the preceding point.

I had a Christian brother once tell me, “People question why I have tattoos, but I tell them, ‘It’s a part of who I am’.” That kind of thinking is categorically unbiblical and short-sighted. Christians are NOT identified

by their outward appearance. First Peter 3 said God is concerned with the “hidden person of the heart.” All Christians are “in Christ” (Eph 1:1). That is our true and only identity; we have no identity apart from or outside of Christ. Nothing external defines who we are as children of God who have been adopted into his family through the atonement of Christ. Our home is in heaven (Phil 3:20), not here on earth (1 Pet 2:11). We will take nothing from this earth to heaven with us. You won’t have any tattoos from this world in heaven for eternity. The only man-made marks from this world that carry over into eternity are the wounds that sinners put on the hands and feet of Jesus the Savior (John 20:27; Rev 5:6; Zech 12:10).

4. *Deny yourself*—Jesus said a true disciple must “deny himself” (Luke 9:23). Many Christians who lobby for tattoos often invoke the

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“liberty” doctrine, saying, “Tattoos are not specifically forbidden so it’s my Christian liberty to have one.” That attitude needs to be balanced by the higher ethical call of being other-oriented...we live first for Christ and others and not ourselves. It’s not always about exercising our freedoms. Many times the higher road to holiness and witness is about denying self. Mature Christians are willing to deprive themselves of their liberties in deference to other believers (1 Cor 8:9).

5. *All things in moderation*—How many tattoos are enough? More and more proponents of “body art” are getting more and more tattoos without any end in sight of showing restraint. Arm sleeve; leg sleeve; neck sleeve; body sleeve; total face tattoos...where does it end? A basic Christian virtue is showing moderation and balance in all areas of life. Consider Paul debating the Christian who pushes his liberties to the limit: “I have the

right to do anything,' you say—but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything'—but I will not be mastered by anything" (1 Cor 6:12). Paul goes on to say that "your body is not your own" (6:19-20), so "glorify God in your body." Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit and a mark of spiritual maturity (Gal 5:22).

6. *Be sober in your thinking*—Because tattoos are permanent and openly visible, those who get tattoos need to be wise by considering several other considerations. Scripture tells Christians to be "sober" in thinking (1 Pet 5:8). What if you change your mind about a tattoo later on in life? What about long-term? Was getting a tattoo a rash decision done on the spur of the moment or was it carefully thought through, considering all the implications? I have several Christian friends, all men, who got tattoos earlier in life and as they got older they regretted it. Two of the men now try to

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hide their arm tattoos by wearing long sleeve shirts or big stick-on bandages. They say they are embarrassed by their tattoos now. One of them was a Christian when he got his tattoo and it's a huge cross on his shoulder. Another brother has spent lots of money to date getting several of his tattoos removed from his legs and arms. He said it's painful and expensive. He wished he had thought long-term before deciding to get the tattoos. Think long-term about your walk with God: "be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise" (Eph 5:15).

There are actually more biblical principles that could be mentioned in light of the gray area of tattoos. But the above ten points are the main ones that can guide the conversation and enable believers to think and act biblically. The preceding discussion illustrates how complex assessing gray areas can be. There are no canned, pat, superficial answers for gray area issues. On these complicated, and

sometimes controversial matters of practical living, we need to take the time to examine all that the Bible has to say that is related to each topic. The above serves as an example of how one of these tough questions that believers grapple with can be thought through and discussed.

In conclusion, it is also important to depend upon the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, the power of prayer, the wise counsel of others and the illuminating lamp of the Word of God in Scripture when studying gray areas. Left unto ourselves we are short-sighted, myopic, finite, fallen and prejudiced toward self. Thank God for his many resources to help us. “Whether, then, you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God”! (1 Cor 10:31).



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Rev. Cliff McManis has been in pastoral ministry since 1989. He graduated from The Master's University with a B.A. in Biblical Studies and earned an M.Div. from The Master's Seminary. He went on to earn his Th.M. and his Ph.D. in Ecclesiology from the Bible Seminary in Independence, Missouri. He is the author of *Christian Living Beyond Belief*, *Biblical Apologetics*, and *What the Bible Says About Israel*, and editor and contributing author of *Rescued by Grace*. He has served in churches in southern California, Utah, Texas, and the San Francisco Bay Area, and is an elder and the teaching pastor of Creekside Bible Church in Cupertino, California. He and his family currently reside in the San Francisco Bay Area.



