

# Christian Brotherhood

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Bible quotes are from English Standard Version Anglicised.

## **ABOUT DIFFERENT KINDS OF BROTHERHOOD AND THAT THERE IS A SPECIAL, CHRISTIAN BROTHERHOOD**

### **On brother in the Old Testament**

The first and basic meaning of the word brother means, as we all know, that some are related to each other and have the same parents. They then have a special relationship. The first brothers we hear about in the Bible are Cain and Abel, sons of Adam and Eve.

This kinship is thus the basic meaning of the word, and in the Old Testament, it is the dominant use of the word brother. In the OT, there is also a wider application of "brother" in the same way that the word "family" was broader. In Sweden we have in our time a narrow understanding of "family", meaning only parent(s) and child(ren), but in the Old Testament, relation words are used in a broader way, e.g., father, brother and family. In Swedish we also use the word "ancestor" (literally in Swedish "pre-father"), but that meaning is included in the biblical "father". As in Genesis 17:5, where God gives the promise to Abraham:

*No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.*

Abraham is thus the father first and foremost to the Jews – but also to the Ishmaelites, and spiritually to us Christians – and therefore the word brother is also used about all the Jews because they all had Abraham as their father. Here is a quote from the prophet Jeremiah 34:9 about how slaves would be released during the free year of our Lord: *...that everyone should set free his Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should enslave a Jew, his brother.* They were all children of Abraham, and since they had the same father, they could call each other brothers.

Let us now turn to the New Testament.

### **Brother in the New Testament**

In the NT there are also brothers after the flesh, it is almost the very first thing: *Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers.* (Matt. 1:2) Also, there is the same use of brotherhood of the Jewish people as in the Old

Testament. That is, it follows from the fact that the word ancestor is part of the word father. We can see this, for example, in the Apostle Peter's sermon on the first day of Pentecost, found in Acts 2. Peter spoke to all the Jews who had gathered for the Passover, and they had come from many different countries. It says: *from every nation under heaven*. And Peter begins: *Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem*. Then he starts to preach, and a little later he says with the same meaning: *Men of Israel*. And then he addresses them Brothers, again referring to all the present Jews.

I would like to take another example of this brotherhood according to the flesh, with Abraham as the father. It is the apostle Paul who in Acts 13 came to Antioch in Pisidia: *On the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it." And Paul said: Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God.* "Brothers" Paul said to the Jews. (The others he mentions, who "fear God", are non-Jews who have converted to Judaism.)

So here we see how brotherhood is based on having a common father: *Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*.

But even more common in the NT than earthly brotherhood is what is found in the Christian congregation. It is a spiritual brotherhood. Jesus teaches about it in Mark 3: 31ff .:

And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

So this is Christian brotherhood, and we will now take a closer look at it. I want to start by saying:

### **The Bible teaches that the Christians are brothers**

The spiritual brotherhood among Christians stems from the fact that we have the same Father, God. We are children of God, and therefore we are brothers and sisters in the faith. This childhood of God is fundamental in Christendom, that God is our Father and we Christians are his children.

This brotherhood can be seen in many places in the NT, especially after the Gospels. Those who belong to the Christian congregation are brothers, we see this already in the first chapter of Acts when the first Christians were gathered in Jerusalem: *All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. In those days Peter stood up among*

*the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, "Brothers"...*

Or think of all the letters of Paul. To the congregation in Rome he writes: *I want you to know, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you...* Or in the opening of the letter to The Colossians: *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.*

### **Brother in the Gospel of Matthew**

There are many such clear passages about the Christian brotherhood in the Acts and Epistles. In the Gospels, it may not be as easy to determine whether it means the Christian brotherhood or the Jewish one. I will now go through the Gospel of Matthew. We start with the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7), where Jesus says to the disciples:

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

*In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

So, when Jesus then says *everyone who is angry with his brother*, then "brother" would refer to Christians, even though only Jews were still Christians.

A little later Jesus says: *And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?* Here he contrasts brothers with Gentiles, and this suggests that brothers here might refer to the Jews, not the Christians. In any case, we can consider that the Christian congregation had not been founded yet, when Jesus said this, there was still no distinct difference between Christians and Jews.

### **Further on in Matthew**

Let's proceed in the Gospel of Matthew! In the twelfth chapter, the event we heard about earlier from Mark 3, it is told about when Jesus' mother Mary and his brothers came to him: *"Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand towards his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."* Here the Christian brotherhood is made clear and defined.

Thus, in the twelfth chapter, Christian brotherhood is undoubtedly introduced in the Gospel of Matthew. And if we go on to the eighteenth chapter, we will receive instructions about the conditions in the congregation, among the brothers:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of

two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Here we see that brotherhood can be terminated. He who defends sin must be excluded, and is then no longer a brother.

This is not about achieving a church without sinners, for that is not possible, rather it is about sin not being defended. We must always be very willing to ask for forgiveness and to forgive each other. Immediately after this passage, Peter came forward and asked Jesus: *"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"* Jesus said to him, *"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."*

The last episode in the Gospel of Matthew that I want to address is about the last judgment, concerning the sheep and the goats, in chapter 25. Jesus says to the sheep:

*As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.* And here the term brothers means fellow Christians. People have often understood the word brothers here as all people, but it does not fit. As our late Rev. Staffan Bergman wrote in his Judgement Day sermon: *"Thus, Jesus' brothers are not all in need in the world, as has often been the case. Of course, we as Christians must also help them. But that is not what Jesus is talking about here."* (The common love for all people, it is found for example in Gal. 6:10: *So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone.*)

And the well-known Swedish Bible commentator Peter Fjellstedt writes with the same meaning in his commentary and points out that *"The least of these my brothers"* does not refer to the Gentiles: *"The faithful have also done good to unbelievers, according to the general love. But the good they have done, according to the law of brotherly love, is the most important thing, the one that mainly comes into play."*

So, Jesus is not talking here about a universal brotherhood of all men when he says *The least of these my brothers*. He does not refer to people in general. We also see this in what he says when it comes to the goats: *I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these.* It does not say "brothers" here, as it did concerning the sheep. For the goats have no brothers! They do not have God as their Father.

In summary, I can state here that I have nowhere found Scripture to use the word "brother" synonymously with "neighbour" (fellow human being in general), although exhortations concerning brothers and people in general may stand together. "Brother" and "neighbour" are two separate words with separate meanings. God is not the Father of all men, but the Father he is for those who are his children, for those who are children of God.

## II - BROTHERHOOD AND CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

This Christian brotherhood brings many things. In this address, I want to deal in particular with the consequences of brotherhood for church fellowship. I now want to state:

### **Brotherhood implicates Church Fellowship**

Those who are Christian brothers are brothers in Christ. They recognize each other as brothers; they treat each other as Christian brothers. One aspect of the Christian brotherhood is the doctrine of church fellowship. Church fellowship flows out of brotherhood. It has sometimes been claimed that church fellowship originates from the means of grace and their administration, or that it is bound to the means of grace, but I have not found this idea expressed anywhere in the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

Saint Paul writes to the Christians in Philippi, to the congregation in Philippi: *Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons - - Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you.* And here "the saints" is synonymous with "the brothers." The saints are the Christians, and they are brothers, with whom they have church fellowship. And vice versa: Those with whom they have church fellowship are their brothers. It's the same thing. We also see it, for example, in Hebrews. 2: 11f.: *For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise."* So the congregation consists of the saints, the sanctified ones, and they are brothers. *He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source.* We have the same Father.

This is how we see here that "brothers" are synonymous with "the congregation": *"I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.* Brotherhood implicates joint worship of God. And another well-known word is the description of the believers in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles: *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

It is often said that the Christian faith needs these four parts to stand firm: 1/ The Apostles' Teaching – the Bible 2/ The Fellowship of Brothers 3/ The Breaking of Bread 4/ The Prayers. Here we see that they had fellowship in doctrine, fellowship with the brethren, fellowship in communion and fellowship in prayers. These four are connected and

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<sup>1</sup> The expression "church fellowship" may incorrectly lead one to think that it is about the fellowship that is practised in the church building, that is, in the service and at the organizational level. We should note, however, that the expression "church fellowship" is not in the Bible. Perhaps it would be better to say "congregational fellowship" (the community that exists in the congregation) or "brotherhood" (the fellowship that exists between those who are brothers). The expression Church Fellowship is however so common that we anyhow need to understand it correctly.

belong together. Attempts have been made to separate them, saying that it is enough to hold on to fellowship and communion, but that one can have prayer fellowship with persons who do not belong to the Church. But this thought finds no support in the Bible. The Bible holds together these four kinds of Christian fellowship. These are not different things that can be treated separately, but they are connected. If you are brothers, you have Christian fellowship.<sup>2</sup> If you have Christian fellowship, you are brothers.

### **Are Christians in other churches brothers?**

If we then find that "brothers" in Scripture refers only to those who belong to the congregation, the outward church community, is it then so that there are Christians only in our outward church? No, absolutely not! In the invisible church, the body of Christ, there are only Christians. All Christians through all times are united in Christ, in the invisible church. As Jesus says: *I am the vine, you are the branches.* (John 15: 5) There are no Christians outside the body of Christ, and there are no non-Christians in the body of Christ. The hypocrites, those who are only Christians by name but do not believe in the heart, do not belong to the true church.

But now we are talking about the outward church, about the church community. It is the one we are to relate to, for the invisible Church we do not see. Whether someone belongs to the invisible church or not is not our business to judge. The practical instructions given by the New Testament refer, without exception, to the visible brethren, the visible church. Then, of course, there are Christians outside our outward church, but they are not our brothers. Wherever one believes in the Word of God, believes in Jesus as the Son of God and the only Saviour, there is the Church of Christ. Yes, there are even Christians who do not belong to any church at all! Think of those who, without prior church affiliation, come to faith and are baptized as adults. Of course, they become Christians and are incorporated into Christ when they come to faith, but they are admitted into the outward church only when they are baptized.

But how should we then relate to those who are outside our church? As I have shown, brotherhood and church fellowship are two aspects of the same and one thing. Those who are outside are not our brothers and we, therefore, have no church fellowship with them. We do not baptize them without them being admitted to the church, we do not go to communion with them, we do not pray with them.

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<sup>2</sup> It has also been claimed that the "prayers" in Acts 2:42 refers to the congregation's common prayer times in the temple, not prayer in the home, etc., with the meaning that different rules would apply to these different forms of prayer. Thus one has created a distinction between prayer in the church and prayer in the home, (private prayer) which is not found in the Bible.

## From Church History

At the doctrinal talks in Marburg in 1529, Zwingli extended his hand as a sign of brotherhood and fellowship, which Luther refused because of their false doctrine concerning the Lord's Supper. Luther wrote a few days later: *They supplicated us to bestow upon them the title of 'brothers.'* - -  
- *We did not, however, accord to them this appellation of brothers. All we granted was that which charity enjoins us to bestow even upon our enemies.* And this conforms with what I have stated in this address, brotherhood and church fellowship are the same thing.

And from the ancient church I want to quote the following, which shows that they had fellowship with the brethren but not with those who were outside:

It is unlawful to communicate with excommunicated persons, or to assemble in private houses and pray with those who do not pray in the Church; or to receive in one Church those who do not assemble with another Church. And, if any one of the bishops, presbyters, or deacons, or any one in the Canon shall be found communicating with excommunicated persons, let him also be excommunicated, as one who brings confusion on the order of the Church.

Note that the same rules apply to praying at home as in the church: *It is unlawful to - - - pray with those who do not pray in the Church;*<sup>3</sup>

However, regarding church history, we cannot base our teachings on statements made by various theologians. The doctrine is based solely on the Bible. And there we find nowhere that someone who did not belong to the church was considered a brother.

## The outsiders

Let us consider how the Bible describes those outside the congregation. The church should be run according to Bible teachings and instructions, but we Christians here on earth should not judge outsiders. God knows their hearts. We must do our part by holding to the right doctrine. We should judge the doctrine, but not outsiders:

But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.” (1 Cor. 5:11-13)

This place is, it must be admitted, about those who previously belonged to the congregation. But the general sentence is still there: God judges those outside.

Those who are outsiders are, quite simply, outsiders. They are not our brothers. Are they Christians? That is God's business to deal with, not

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<sup>3</sup> Canon 2, Synod of Antioch in Encaeniis (A.D. 341) <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3805.htm>

ours. As the Apostle Paul writes to Timothy: *The Lord knows those who are his.* (2 Tim. 2:19)

Christians are to take care of the congregation and the members, and if anyone wants to join, we examine and catechize them. But those who are outsiders, we leave to God. We also see this in the following verse: *John answered, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us." But Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you."* (Luke 9:49f.) This is how we see that we should not interfere in what is not our business.

### **Joint invocation**

Brotherhood is a spiritual reality, and it also finds concrete expression. The apostle repeatedly admonishes Christians not to be divisive, but *to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* We must be patient and kind with each other. It does not always happen that way. Sometimes schisms even occur among Bible believers because there are divergences on the personal level. That must not be the case! We who are confessional Christians must make every effort to be good at resolving personal differences! We should not sweep problems under the rug, but sort them out.

In the early church, for example, there were contradictions between Jews and Greeks, that is, between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. They came from different cultures and traditions. To the Romans the apostle wrote: *May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Through this unity of Christ they are led to earthly human brotherhood. The apostle continues: *Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*

Another quote that I would like to cite when we are talking about the joint invocation in unity is from the beginning of the first letter to the Corinthians: *I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgement.*

This verse forbids us to tolerate different teachings within our church. Brothers have to be united in the Word of God. The apostle also writes about this to the Romans, in the well-known quote from the sixteenth chapter (16:17): *I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.*



## **On fraternal admonition**

How, then, should the congregation see to it that some brothers do not follow God's Word? It is written in Galatians 6:1: *Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.* And we must be patient, remembering that we are all sinners, sinning daily. It says in St. James' letter 1:19: *Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.*

Sin is a part of everything for all of us. Yet we Christians do not consent to sin. We are fighting against it. But since sin is part of everything, it is important that we are willing to apologize and ask for forgiveness. We should not be proud and defend ourselves when we have done something bad. Unfortunately, this can be difficult. Receiving a reprimand is not always easy. We must pray to God for humility, both the one who exhorts and the one who is exhorted. One way to exercise one's ability to admit one's sins is to go to confession and sincerely confess one's sins.

## **Brotherhood may cease**

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul writes: *Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another. (4:9)* And a little later: *And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. (5:14)*

But in the next letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle had to clarify his teaching. For we must have infinite patience, we must forgive our brother seventy times seven times, that is, beyond counting. There is no limit to the number of times we should forgive. However, there are also situations where it is not appropriate to be patient. In time, sin can take hold of the sinner, so that he no longer cares about it. He becomes careless with God's forgiveness, and no longer believes that sin is something to be fought against. He begins to defend it, and does not care about the admonition he receives. So in the first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul wrote *admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all*, but it looks like that had been misapplied, because in his next letter he wrote: *Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. (2 Thess. 3:6)* So it may be that the brotherhood is endangered.

How do we handle this? We have Jesus' teaching in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew: *If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with*

*you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

Here are three steps: 1/ Individual admonition 2/ Semi-private admonition with one or two more brothers 3 / Open rebuke.

Sadly, it may be necessary to exclude a brother. If the third step does not help either, he becomes an outsider, one who does not belong to the brothers. This is because he defends sin and is *not in accord with the tradition that you received from the apostles*. One cannot be a child of God and deliberately consent to sin. And sin can be both in life and in doctrine. In life, it is to agree to act contrary to God's commandments, and in doctrine, it is to hold false doctrine for true.

Here are some important points:

**All possibilities for misunderstanding must be ruled out.**

Of course, such important things cannot go on unfounded records. I do not think I need to explain this further. Don't be too hasty to judge! Make sure there are no misunderstandings.

**Sins in private should first be handled in private**

*If your brother sins against you*, it's something you happen to know. It could be that it is something being committed against you, or something that you happen to witness or get to know. This is not about such sins that we all commit daily, such as being irritable and angry or generally arrogant. We find it so easy to see the speck in our brother's eye and become a fault finder. Nor is it about commonplace little things, or what I should call it, as if you were to see your brother walking over the lawn even though the sign says: "Keep off the grass", but it could be that you see him steal in a shop.

Then you should not immediately shout it out to everyone, but handle it individually first. Then it's easier to win your brother. Maybe it's something you misunderstood; it can be sorted out by talking to each other. In this situation, one should not go to the priest or pastor, but directly to the person involved.

If it does not help that you speak to him in private, you should bring a fellow brother or two with you, to try to make the brother repent and forsake sin. If it does not help either, only then will the matter be openly presented to all the brothers, to the pastor and the congregation.

**That which is open, is open.**

If false doctrine is openly expressed or a sinful deed is widely known, it must be dealt with immediately. Then the first two, private procedures will not be needed. (Of course, the fact that the matter is open does not

prevent one from admonitions in private.) We can see this in the way the Apostle Paul acted in the second chapter of Galatians:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

So we see that Paul directly and publicly addresses what is public. In such a situation, where the matter is public, one should not start with private admonition.

That situation was that Peter acted improperly, so that everyone could see it. A similar thing happens when false teachers teach and practice things publically. Then one should also not follow the procedure that individual admonition is required first. We can see this applied, for example, when Apollos (who was born a Jew) preached to the Jews who denied that Jesus is the Son of God: *For he [Apollos] powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.* (Acts 18:28)

Or as Paul writes in the first letter to Timothy 5:20: *As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.* So this verse is not in conflict with Matt. 18! If the matter is public, it is right, and it is also a duty, to respond to it directly in the same open way. Step 1 and 2 are not required when it is a publicly known sin. In such cases one should go directly to step 3.

Unfortunately, the Wisconsin Synod does not teach correctly about this. They want to defend their tardiness in breaking with the Missouri Synod in the 1940s and 1950s by retaining the requirement for some kind of three-step procedure with private admonition even with openly known false teachers. Then everything takes much longer time.

## **BROTHERHOOD IN DAILY LIFE**

### **Brotherhood and worldly arrangements**

We must remember here that Christian brotherhood does not abolish secular orders. Love each other sincerely. *Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour.* None of this abolishes the orders that exist in the family and society. Think of the Reformation, when there were, for example, Christian princes. A prince showed his brotherly love for Christian subjects by being a good prince for them, by enacting good laws and governing for the good of the people and so on. In society he was superior. But in Christ, in the church it is

not so. Before God, in the church we are all equal. As it says in Colossians about life in the church (3: 8 ff.):

But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Of course, they were still ethnic Greeks, Jews, barbarians and Scythians. They were still slaves or free. But in Christ they were all one, they were all brothers in the church. One would not have two congregations, one for Greeks and one for Jews. Nor one for whites and one for blacks. They were equal, they were brothers in Christ. But for that reason it was not a Christian duty for a prince to abdicate and wear a simple linen shirt like servants. Christianity does not abolish social orders. Nor in the church, it does not abolish the office, as some believe. Yes, all are equal before God, but that does not stop God from ordaining priests and pastors in the church. But the clergy are not superior to the laity when it comes to standing before God. So the priests and bishops should not be looking for power and for Christians to be subjected to them, then they suffer from the words of Jesus: *But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.*

### **Brotherly love and human love in general**

In the twelfth chapter of Romans, the apostle gives many exhortations about brotherly love, and at the same time he deals with the general love of man. We read from verse thirteen:

*Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.* – It's about brothers.

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.* – It cannot refer to brothers but has to refer to outsiders.

*Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.* – As we see, the apostle does not make much difference between the love of brothers and the love of the people, but he applies God's commandments in both of these areas at the same time. Both are God's commandments. But this should not make us forget or diminish the difference between brothers and fellow human beings. Regarding church fellowship, there is a big difference, but when it comes to doing good deeds, it is not.

*Live in harmony with one another.* – Said especially about brothers.

Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge

yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

So I find that Christians should treat all people with the greatest love, but the brethren with an even greater one.

## **Weak Brothers**

Now we come to chapters fourteen and fifteen in Romans. They are about weak brothers:

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgement on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgement on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

So: A weak brother is one who has misgivings about various earthly things. This applies to things that are free, things that you can have but do not have to have, such as eating vegetables or meat, whether to drink wine or not, going to the movies or not and so on.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honour of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honour of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honour of the Lord and gives thanks to God. - - - Why do you pass judgement on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God;

In such matters, which belong to Christian liberty, we shall not judge one another: *Therefore let us not pass judgement on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.*

However, we should not push our Christian freedom too far. If it is necessary to save our brother, we must give up something that is permissible, but not necessary: *For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.*

## **Weak brothers or false teachers?**

This does not mean that it is the weak brothers who decide. If the weak brothers take precedence over dictating the conditions of the strong brothers and making demands, they become false teachers. Paul writes to the Colossians 2:

Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. - - -

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)— according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

### **“Weak brothers” apply to free things**

The Bible's teaching about weak brothers is also used incorrectly, if one tries to invalidate God's commandments. For “weak brothers” is about things that are free in themselves. So it may be that a brother does something that is sinful, without knowing that it is sin. That it is not a free thing. Then one should not say: “We the strong must be tolerant of the weak and should not judge them.” No, then the strong will kindly help the weak to see what is right and what is wrong.

We should never tolerate consenting to sin nor false doctrine. At times, Bible teachings about weak brothers have been applied to this, but that is not right. Of course, it may happen that a brother in ignorance holds to false doctrine. We could call such a person a “weak brother”, but we should not apply Romans fourteen because that chapter is about things that are in themselves permissive. However, we can use this verse in the fifteenth chapter: *I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.*

That ignorance exists within the church, is natural. We have all been children in the beginning! And of course, we can all forget things that we were taught. But he who is ignorant receives instruction. If he, instead, defends false doctrine he becomes a false teacher. In Romans sixteen we read: *I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.* For those who cling to false doctrine even though they have been taught, they are not ignorant or weak brothers, but become false brothers.

### **On circumcision**

We have a good example of the difference between weak brothers and false teachers when it comes to circumcision. As a free thing, St. Paul could agree to circumcision, we see in the sixteenth chapter of Acts:

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany

him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek

Timothy's work among the Jews could be hampered if there was uncertainty as to whether he was circumcised or not. So Paul consented that he should be circumcised. But it was completely different when the false brothers, the false teachers, demanded that Moses' law be kept. Then Paul did not agree with it, and did not give an inch. We read in Galatians 2:3ff.:

But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

### **Conclusion in Romans 15 about the brothers' approach**

*We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*

*May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*

And lastly, the conclusion of the whole letter in the last chapter (16):

*To the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.*