

# Romans 14:5-6a and the Sabbath

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One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. <sup>6</sup> He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. (Romans 14:5-6a)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This passage looks like pretty clear evidence that no one should make an issue over whether Christians keep the seventh-day Sabbath of the fourth commandment. "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (vs. 6). The impression persists until we read the surrounding material. Every passage has a context, and this one is particularly important. What is the context for Paul's remarks about days?

## The Question of Fasting

When I was in college I studied Greek and, in order to get a minor in that language for graduation, needed to do some work for extra credit. The project my professor suggested was to translate the *Didache* (an early Christian document whose title means "Teaching" or "Instruction"). It was a valuable experience – not least because it clarifies the context for what Paul is saying in Romans 14:5-6a.

The *Didache* dates from approximately 50-120 A.D., which makes it one of the earliest document available to church historians. One evidence of this is the fact that, at the time it was written, in or immediately after the first century, there still no definitive split between Jews and Christians. Instead both groups saw themselves and each other as Jews with differing views about Jesus of Nazareth. As a result, Jews in the *Didache* are not called "Jews," but "hypocrites." At the beginning of chap. 8 the *Didache* says,

But let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on the second and fifth day of the week. Rather, fast on the fourth day and the Preparation (Friday).<sup>2</sup>

Apparently Jews had regular days for fasting. So did Christians, but they used different days. Jews fasted on Monday and Thursday (second day and fifth day), whereas Christians fasted on Wednesday and Friday (fourth day and Preparation).

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<sup>2</sup> *The Didache*, Roberts-Donaldson translation, beginning of chap. 8. For a choice of four modern translations online see <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/didache.html>.

## The Broader Passage

What does all of this have to do with Romans 14:5-6a? It helps explain the context for the passage, the first part of which reads as follows:

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. <sup>2</sup> One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Romans 14:1-4)

This much has to do with food. There is more. Paul returns to the same thought in the last part of vs. 6.

He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Notice the structure of the passage. There are three parts to it. Paul starts out talking about food. "One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables" (vs. 2). Then he switches to time. "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike" (vs. 5). Then he switches back to the original question, which is what people should consider acceptable for food.

This type of structure is called a "chiasm." The basic shape of the argument is chiasmic, coming as it does in ABA sequence. In this chiasm both A and A' answer the question "what?" and the B section (our passage) answers the question "when?" And my point is that throughout, the context has to do with food and eating.

## The Question of Time

We said that the middle part of the broader passage (vss. 1-6) has to do with time. What does time have to do with eating? Let us start by showing what the connection is not – at least in the present passage. It does not have to do with when to schedule one's meals, because Paul is speaking about days rather than hours. "He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord" (vs. 6a).

So Paul is not dealing with when Christians should eat, but with when they should not eat. The context is one of how to schedule fast days. On this topic Paul does not try to lay down any hard rule, but says, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (vs. 5). If you want to fast on Wednesday and Friday, fine. If not, fine. Each one will have to decide for him- or herself.

Others, such as the author of the *Didache*, were not willing to be so flexible. For them the answer was both clear and rigid – because Jews fast on Mondays and Thursdays, Christians must fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.

## Conclusion

We read Paul in the context of our own modern discussions and preoccupations, and there is nothing wrong with seeking instruction from Paul and other Bible writers on whatever concerns we might have. But if our goal is understand the concerns they have (instead of the ones we have), we must learn to read in terms of their contextual categories.

How can one do this? By reading whole passages – not isolated verses. Context is extremely important when trying to understand any document, but it is all the more important here, since Paul lived some 2000 years ago. 2000 years is long enough for the perspective to change considerably.