

Romans 14 on the Observance of Religious Holidays

Romans 14:5-6 “One man esteems *one* day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.”

Since there is no passage of Scripture that commands Christians to observe religious holidays (such as Christmas or Easter) or religious seasons (such as Advent and Lent), many pastors and Christian writers in modern times have appealed to Romans 14 to justify their practices. They seem to think that Romans 14 provides a defense against those who would criticize their observance of religious holidays that have been invented by human tradition. However, a correct interpretation of Romans 14 shows just how off base their assertion is. In this paper, we will consider the two verses in Romans 14 that pertain to the observance of holy days and consider Paul’s teaching with some insight from one of the greatest leaders of the Protestant Reformation and greatest Bible commentators in the history of Christianity, John Calvin. Calvin wrote,

The apostle Paul had spoken before of scruples in the choice of meats; he now adds another example of difference, that is, as to days; and both these arose from Judaism. For as the Lord in His law made a difference between meats and pronounced some to be unclean, the use of which He prohibited, and as He had also appointed festival and solemn days and commanded them to be observed, the Jews, who had been brought up from their childhood in the doctrine of the law, would not lay aside that reverence for days which they had entertained from the beginning, and to which through life they had been accustomed; nor could they have dared to touch these meats from which they had so long abstained.¹

So what is the apostle Paul talking about in this passage? He is talking about first-generation Jewish converts to Christianity who had for their entire lifetime been taught by the Old Testament that God’s law prohibited them from eating certain foods and commanded them to observe certain religious holidays.

The people of whom Paul speaks were not Gentile converts to Christianity who superstitiously adopted Jewish dietary laws and holy days, which had been fulfilled in Christ. These people were not observing religious holidays invented by men, by human tradition, or by the Church; they were observing religious holidays prescribed by God under the old covenant in His word, the Old Testament. So for Christians today to use this passage to defend their observance of Christmas, Easter, Advent, or Lent, appears to be completely without warrant.

Beyond that, were these Jewish Christians of whom Paul speaks, mature in the faith or immature, weak brethren? Calvin explains that they were spiritually weak Christians:

That they were imbued with these notions, was an evidence of their weakness; they would have thought otherwise, had they possessed a certain and a clear

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. Rev. John Owen (The Calvin Translation Society, 1843), 496, emphasis added, English updated.

knowledge of Christian liberty. But in abstaining from what they thought to be unlawful, they evidenced piety, as it would have been a proof of presumption and contempt, had they done anything contrary to the dictates of conscience.²

So these first-generation Jewish converts to Christianity who felt compelled by their conscience to observe Old Testament religious holidays were the weaker brethren. If they had rightly understood their Christian liberty, they would have ceased to celebrate these days that were prescribed by the Old Testament law. Nevertheless, since God's law (the Old Testament) had previously prescribed the observance of these religious holidays and prohibited the eating of certain foods, these Christians evidence their piety. It is sinful to go against your conscience, and, for these Jewish Christians, their weak consciences still bound them to the Jewish dietary laws and religious holidays. Despite this fact, God wants us to mature in our faith, which means that with time these believers should have grown in their knowledge of their Christian liberty. Once they rightly understood their Christian liberty and matured, they should no longer have been bound by their conscience to these old covenant ceremonial laws and practices.

John Calvin explains that it is very important never to go against your conscience but to seek to please God and obey God in accordance with your understanding:

Here then the Apostle applies **the best rule**, when he bids every one to **be fully assured as to his own mind**; by which he means that there ought to be in Christians such a care for **obedience**, that they do nothing, except what they think, or rather feel assured, is pleasing to God. And this ought to be thoroughly borne in mind, that it is **the first principle of a right conduct, that men should be dependent on the will of God, and never allow themselves to move even a finger, while the mind is doubtful and vacillating**; for it cannot be otherwise, but that rashness will soon pass over into obstinacy when we dare to proceed further than what we are persuaded is lawful for us. . . . Paul's purpose was none other than to restrain undue liberty, by which it happens, that many thrust themselves, as it were, at random, into matters which are doubtful and undetermined. Hence Paul requires this to be adopted—that **the will of God is to preside over all our actions**.³

So did Paul defend the practice of these first generation Jewish converts to Christianity who continued to observe the old covenant holy days? Calvin comments,

Since **Paul well knew that a respect for days proceeded from ignorance of Christ**, it is not probable that such a corruption was altogether defended by him; and yet his words seem to imply, that he who regarded [old covenant holy] days committed no sin; for nothing but good can be accepted by God. Hence, that you may understand his purpose, it is necessary to distinguish between the notion, which any one may have entertained as to the observance of days, and the observance itself to which he felt himself bound. **The notion was indeed superstitious, nor does Paul deny this**; for he has already condemned it by calling it infirmity, and he will again condemn it still more plainly. Now, that he who was held fast by this superstition, dared not to violate the solemnity of a particular day; this was approved by God, because he dared not to do any thing with a doubtful conscience. **What indeed could the Jew do, who had not yet made such progress, as to be delivered from**

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 496-497.

scruples about days? He had the word of God, in which the keeping of days was commended; there was a necessity laid on him by the law; and its abrogation was not clearly seen by him. Nothing then remained, but that he, waiting for a fuller revelation, should keep himself within the limits of his own knowledge, and not to avail himself of the benefit of liberty, before he embraced it by faith.

It is important to note that Paul is not talking about the weekly Sabbath day, as this preceded the giving of the Mosaic law. The practice of observing one day in seven as a day of rest, a Sabbath to the Lord, is grounded in creation (Exodus 20:11; cf. Genesis 2:2-3); that is why God set apart the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, as a Christian Sabbath for people under the new covenant (cf. Luke 24:1; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10). What Paul is talking about is the observance of the ceremonial religious holidays instituted by the Mosaic law from the time of Moses to the time of Christ. Christ fulfilled these days which foreshadowed the coming of the new covenant.

How does this passage apply to those today who observe Christmas, Easter, Advent, and Lent? It is difficult to apply this passage to them because most of these people are not first generation converts from Judaism to Christianity. Nor are they observing holidays that are prescribed by God's law. There is no mention of the religious holidays of Christmas and Easter in Scripture, nor of the religious seasons of Advent and Lent. All of these were the invention of the Pope of Rome and the Roman Catholic Church. The fact that many Protestant pastors today use Romans 14 to defend their observance of such religious holidays and seasons really should be quite shocking and perplexing.

Of course, this passage does have many applications to us as modern Christians. We should bear with the weaker brethren in the Church. We should never go against our conscience, as that would be to sin. We should be very concerned about obeying God, that we do nothing except what we think or feel assured is pleasing to God. We should be dependent on God's will, never allowing ourselves to move even a finger, while our mind is doubtful and vacillating. Indeed, this passage has much application to us as Christians today. But does it have application to those who observe religious holidays?

Romans 14 may apply to a modern Jewish convert to Christianity, whose conscience binds him to observe Jewish holidays and dietary laws for a time. However, they do not have the right to impose these on the church or to cause division in the church by creating "Messianic Synagogues" instead of assimilating themselves into the true church of Christ, in which there is no longer a religious division between Jews and Gentiles.

Does this passage mean that Christians today should be sensitive to the consciences of Roman Catholic converts to Protestantism who were instructed from childhood to observe certain religious holidays and seasons? While these converts should not go against their conscience, their observance of religious holidays would be more difficult to defend, since they are not observing days that God prescribed in Scripture but rather days of human invention and tradition. Thus, the comparison is a difficult one to make because of the differences in their circumstances.

Even more difficult would it be to defend the practice of Protestant Christians who observe religious holidays and seasons that go against the principles of the Protestant Reformation. Instead of defending such practices, would it not be better to abandon the inventions of men and return to the word of God alone, *sola scriptura*, as the only rule for faith and practice? Why return to the darkness of the Middle Ages, when we have the light of God's truth?