

Q & A #1

Question: Doesn't Paul's instruction in Romans 14:5, 6 free the Christian to select his own time of sabbath during the week? The question of a holy day is one of personal preference, isn't it?

Answer: I'll begin by quoting these two verses from the New King James Version: "One person esteems *one* day above another; another esteems every day *alike*. Let each be fully convinced 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*."(1)

Christians who keep Sunday as the Sabbath sometimes use these verses as evidence that any day is OK to keep. "Saturday is fine," they say, "but so is Sunday or Wednesday or any other day of the week that one chooses. What's important is to keep one day out of seven." According to this argument, the requirement of the fourth commandment to observe only the seventh day of the week is no longer binding upon Christians.

We believe the fourth commandment still requires observance of the Saturday Sabbath—the seventh day (2). So how do we respond to Paul's statement in Romans 14:5, 6?

The first thing to notice is that the word *Sabbath* does not appear in these verses, nor do the words "seventh day" or "first day." So the question is whether Paul was discussing whether the fourth commandment should be observed on the seventh day or the first day of the week when he wrote these words. It's easy for us, living in the twenty-first century, to assume that he was, since there's quite a debate in our culture over whether the Saturday

or Sunday is the proper day to keep. But did such a controversy exist in the New Testament church?

The answer is, No, and this text does not prove that there was.

I'm sure there are those who will disagree with my statement that there is no New Testament evidence of a debate over whether the seventh day or the first day of the week is the proper day to keep. The best reason I can give you that indeed there was no such controversy is the New Testament's absolute silence on this issue.

I assume you are sufficiently familiar with the New Testament epistles to know that there was a huge controversy in the New Testament church over circumcision. Conservative Jews insisted that in order to become Christians, Gentiles had to become Jews first, primarily through submission to the rite of circumcision. Paul said No, this was not necessary, and he opposed these Jews throughout his ministry. Galatians 5:1-15 is probably his strongest response to this question.(3)

Had Paul or any other apostle advocated a change of the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week, I can assure you that conservative Christian Jews would have been absolutely outraged and at least as vocal in their opposition as they were to Paul's insistence that Gentiles need not be circumcised. But there isn't a shred of evidence that conservative New Testament Jews were upset over a change of the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week. Thus it seems rather obvious that there was no such controversy. And if there was no Sabbath-Sunday controversy back then, then that isn't the issue Paul was discussing in Romans 14:5, 6. To say that it was is to read our debates back into his time.

So what did he have in mind? The most frequently mentioned possibility is the Old testament ceremonial

feast days, such as Passover, Pentecost, and the Day of Atonement. There is some evidence of contention over this issue in the New Testament church,(4) so it is reasonable to read this into Paul's words in Romans 14:5, 6. However, Paul himself didn't say that's what he meant.

Having said all of this, I will conclude with what I believe is a reasonable *application* of Paul's words to our issues, even if he wasn't directly *addressing* them. Basically, Paul was advising Christians to respect each others convictions, even though they might disagree with them. While it's perfectly appropriate to hold strong convictions over the right day to celebrate the Sabbath (Paul did say that "each one should be fully convinced in his own mind"(5)), we must also respect each others choices, even where we disagree with them. We should not judge anyone to be a non-Christian simply because of his or her choice of a day to keep.

Answer is written by Marvin Moore, editor of *Signs of the Times Magazine*

Footnotes:

1. New King James Version, italics supplied
2. In the strictest sense, Saturday isn't the Sabbath. Saturday begins and ends at midnight, while the Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday (see Leviticus 23:32).
3. See also Romans 2:25-29.
4. See for example Galatians 4:10
5. NIV