

# ON ESTEEMING ONE DAY BETTER THAN ANOTHER

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One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. He also who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God (Rom 14:5, 6).

What was in the mind of the apostle when he indicated the Christian's perfect liberty either to esteem one day above another, or to fail to make any distinction at all between them? Was Paul objecting to Sabbath keeping? Was he attempting to prove that the "Jewish Sabbath" was "nailed to the cross" like any other day of worship, since the issue presented here seems to be of equal importance to both Sabbath and Sunday-keepers? What is Paul saying to the Christian community in Rome? Is he writing of doctrinal "essentials" or of ethical "unessentials"? If he is writing of soteriological "unessentials" would he include a reference to the Sabbath in the passage?

## *The Church at Rome*

The epistle itself seems to have been a product of Paul's three-month stay in Greece, at the close of his third missionary journey. Quite probably it was written from Corinth, or that city's seaport, Cenchreae, for Corinth was the site of the most important Christian church in the area.<sup>1</sup> The best historical evidence seems to locate this three-month period in Achaia between 57 and 59 A.D. The winter of 57-58 or the early spring of 58 seems a reasonable date for the letter.

Little is known regarding the beginning of the Christian

<sup>1</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London, 1954), pp. xviii-xx.

community in Rome. But it seems certain that Christianity was introduced quite early in the capital city. Evidently there was a large church at Rome in 58, composed like most churches of mixed Jewish and Gentile membership.<sup>2</sup> "When the Neronian persecution broke out (ca. 64), the Christians of Rome were 'a large body' (I Clem. VI, 1), 'an immense multitude' (Tacitus, *Annals* XV, 44).<sup>3</sup>

The basic theme recurring through the entire letter is that of justification by faith, the universal sinfulness of man and the universal grace of God. The epistle itself is divided into two main sections, the theological part (chs. 1-11) and the ethical or practical section (chs. 12-16): "Ethics" after "Dogma."<sup>4</sup>

In Rom 12 and 13 the principle of love receives first importance. It will express itself to the need of the brethren as well as to the world at large in civic justice, good citizenship, and a holy example. But what shall be done about matters of Christian ethics when believers differ in opinion and are convinced that their views are sound? Is there here some tangible meeting place? Yes, answers Paul in a passage which is an immediate illustration of the spirit of self-sacrifice that he has just been requiring (ch. 14:1-15:13). Depicting Christ as the model in self-denial, he summarizes the whole thrust of the passage by these words, "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him" (ch. 15:2). This ethical section is not to be considered as a new development in Paul's outline. It is rooted in the previous chapters. The first eleven chapters cannot be fully understood without the concrete and practical application of chs. 12-15, nor would it be possible to interpret the latter correctly without the background offered by the first eleven chapters. The passage under study (chs. 14:5,6) falls within a large section of the letter devoted to the very application of Christian truths to the daily Christian life.

<sup>2</sup> See Rom 1:13-16; 2:9, 10, 17; 11:13, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. xxviii.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Althaus, *Der Brief an die Römer* (9th ed.; Göttingen, 1959), p. 112.

### The Immediate Context

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

One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. He also who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God (Rom 14: 1-6).

No attempt at reliable interpretation of Rom 14:5 can be made without a careful examination of the context. A cursory reading of Rom 14 indicates that there existed in the Christian community of Rome a controversy in connection with both diet and the observance of certain days. In fact, the matter of "esteeming one day as better than another" seems to be merely interjected into a passage which has to do entirely with a controversy which existed in the Roman community on the matter of meat-eating *versus* vegetarianism and abstinence from wine (see vs. 1, 21).

Therefore, in order properly to evaluate Rom 14:5 it is necessary first to gain an understanding of what conflicting philosophies were involved in the controversy, and then determine, if possible, whether there is any connection between the question of diet and that of considering certain days as holy. If any conclusion may be reached, it might then be possible to suggest whether or not the seventh-day Sabbath is involved.

*Is Paul Speaking to a Specific Situation?* Whether or not Paul is speaking to a specific situation is a matter of debate. Although the suggestions made by some commentators seem very reasonable,<sup>5</sup> the author is inclined to believe that Paul

<sup>5</sup> Following an excellent resume of the various positions, W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam conclude that Paul is giving general counsel arising

aims his counsel to a specific situation and to a particular group of individuals in the Roman church. With Emil Brunner he believes that "a certain split had occurred in the church at Rome" <sup>6</sup> and that after having dealt with the more general aspects of Christian behavior, Paul now turns to a problem which was perplexing that community.<sup>7</sup>

Exactly what the problem was remains uncertain. In Christian communities tension arose between the "old-fashioned" and the "emancipated," the "progressives" or "enlightened," in T. W. Manson's words.<sup>8</sup> The weak are vegetarians, the strong are able to eat all kinds of food. In a classic chapter on the theory and practice of the Gospel in terms of Christian tolerance, Paul places his finger on the vice so liable to be indulged by the respective groups. That of the strong is the smile of disdainful contempt. That of the weak is the frown of condemnatory judgment. Both are condemned with equal vigor.

### *Who Were Those Ascetics?*

The tendency has been to point immediately to Jewish Christians who still adhered to the shadows of the laws and whose minds were not yet sufficiently established, as the weak

from past experience. William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (5th ed.; Edinburgh, 1958), pp. 399-403.

<sup>6</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 114.

<sup>7</sup> The questions raised by Paul in verses 4 and 10 appear to refer to a concrete situation. In verse 2 he uses *λάχανα* (vegetables), the only time in the entire body of his writings. The situation does not seem to have appeared elsewhere. Furthermore, his general method seems to be to state enduring Christian principles in the presence of problems or errors. 1 Cor and Gal are outstanding examples. Likewise it seems that the great principles of Christian living laid down in Rom 14:1 to 15:13 are triggered by the situation at Rome. It seems that Paul knew something about the Roman church through persons who had been in Rome or traveling church members (ch 1:8). It is like human nature that he could have heard of the contention as early as of the faith of the Roman Christians.

<sup>8</sup> T. W. Manson, *Romans*, in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (Matthew Black ed.; London, 1964), p. 951.

believers mentioned in this passage. Ascetic trends, however, existed in paganism as well as in Judaism.<sup>9</sup>

Pagan concepts may very well have made inroads in the Christian church at Rome. We find them indicated in Paul's epistles to the Galatians and to the Ephesians. Those who followed the Orphic Mystery cult and the Pythagoreans appear to have been vegetarians. Gnostic ideas also were prevalent in the first century in many parts of the Empire.<sup>10</sup> Their tendencies toward asceticism may have obtained some following in Rome. But these do not satisfy all the circumstances. Roman Christians were in the habit, says Paul, of observing scrupulously certain days, and this custom did not, as far as we know, prevail among any heathen sect. The possibility cannot be excluded, however, that there might have been those among the Roman congregation who, because of the influence of a philosophy of life rooted in Hellenistic dualism, chose totally to abstain from meat and wine.<sup>11</sup>

It seems difficult also to retain the possibility that Paul was speaking of Jewish Christians who rejected wine (see v. 21) and who had serious scruples about eating unclean meats of which others among the congregation partook. Judaism did not reject wine except for the duration of a vow, and the weak brethren objected to eating flesh at all, an objection which was not founded on the law of Moses but on ascetic motives foreign to the eleventh chapter of Leviticus.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For a list of the major groups, see Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (10th ed.; Göttingen, 1955), pp. 256 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston, 1958), p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> See Ernest Best, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 154, 155.

<sup>12</sup> The word used for unclean (Rom 14:14) is significant, *viz.*, κοινός. It is to be distinguished from ἀκάθαρτος, the word applied to forbidden food in the LXX text of Lev 11. Κοινός does not carry the sense of being impure, but common, unfit for the holy purpose of sacrifices, and defiling (see 1 Macc 1:47). Ἀκάθαρτος refers to meat which, defined by Lev 11, is unfit for human consumption. Κοινός is applied to perfectly proper food become "unclean" and therefore not lawful to be eaten.

Most vegetarians in those days abstained from meat on the basis of

Since all meat was refused, some have postulated that the reason could very well be the same as that given in 1 Cor, namely the difficulty of obtaining meat that had not previously been offered in sacrifice to deities.<sup>13</sup> There is a rather close affinity, in fact, between Rom 14 on one hand and 1 Cor 8 and 10 on the other. Food and drink is the issue (Rom 14:1, 21; 1 Cor 10:31), "everything" is permissible (Rom 14:14, 20; 1 Cor 10:23). In each case the eater gives thanks to God and eats with impunity (Rom 14:6; 1 Cor 10:26, 30). He is justified if he has no scruples and is no stumbling block to the weak brother (Rom 14:20; 1 Cor 8:9). In both instances Christ's disciples are exhorted to consider others before themselves (Rom 15:1, 2; 1 Cor 10:24) and to see the other's advantage rather than one's own (Rom 15:1, 2; 1 Cor 10:33). The appeal is to be considerate of the weak one's faith and to abstain rather than to cause another's fall (Rom 14:1, 21; 1 Cor 8:9, 11-13).

It seems impossible to determine exactly what the problem in Rome was. It might very well have been identical with that in Corinth. But Paul's silence concerning idols and demons, as well as the mention of the observance of certain days, incline many to conclude that there is no real parallel between the two passages.<sup>14</sup>

*Christians of Jewish Origin Influenced by Essenism.* It is equally possible that those refraining from meat and wine might have been Christians of Jewish origin influenced by Essenism.<sup>15</sup> It is evident, as mentioned earlier, that the church their metaphysical concept of the world. Most Christian vegetarians today do so mainly in striving for good health.

<sup>13</sup> Anders Nygren, *Commentary on the Romans* (Philadelphia, 1949), p. 442. Cf. A. M. Hunter, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London, 1957), p. 117.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Adolf von Schlatter, *Gottes Gerechtigkeit* (4th ed.; Stuttgart, 1965), pp. 364, 368; Michel, *op. cit.*, p. 256; Ernst Gaugler, *Der Römerbrief* (Zürich, 1952), II, 326.

<sup>15</sup> On the importance of the Jewish influence in Rome, see J. Kinoshita's interesting theory on a source for the outline of Rom 14. He sees the passage as composed of "The Manual of Instruction on the Jewish Problem." J. Kinoshita, "Romans—Two Writings Combined," *NT*, VII (1964-65), 258-277.

at Rome was composed of both Jews and Gentiles. The relative size of the two groups is uncertain, although we know that at that time there was a large Jewish colony in Rome.<sup>16</sup>

Like the Pythagoreans, the Essenes sought to attain a higher sanctity by depriving the flesh of satisfaction of its desires. As a possible outgrowth of Pharisaism, Essenism had much in common with it, although it also found itself at great variance with it. Here ceremonial purity was not merely a principal aim, it was an absorbing passion. In his desire to observe carefully the distinction laid down by Moses of meats as lawful and unlawful, the Essene went far beyond the Pharisee. Many believe that he even drank no wine nor touched any animal food, at least at times.<sup>17</sup>

Less objection applies to this proposed solution if it is

<sup>16</sup> For a study of the Christian community and the Jewish colony in Rome, see G. La Piana, "Foreign Groups in Rome During the First Centuries of the Empire," *HThR*, XX (1927), 183 ff.

<sup>17</sup> It remains difficult to know whether the Essenes abstained entirely from meat and wine. Archaeological and literary evidences provided by the Qumran community—which most scholars relate to the Essenes—have been variously interpreted. Whereas some, on the basis of the Dead Sea scrolls, consider that the Essenes used wine, others regard it as improbable in view of the use of the word *tiros*: see J. van der Ploeg, *The Excavations at Qumran* (London, 1958), p. 212, and E. F. Sutcliffe, *The Monks of Qumran* (Westminster, Md., 1960), p. 110. Archaeologists uncovered numerous deposits of bones in jars and pieces of jars, bones of animals—mainly sheep and goats—which had been cooked or roasted. The theory that these are the remains of animals of which the flesh was eaten seems very natural, although not convincing to those who consider them as evidence of sacrifices that the Essenes felt necessary to offer within the purity of their own community; see Kurt Schubert, *The Dead Sea Community* (New York, 1959), p. 23; van der Ploeg, *JSS*, II (1957), 172; R. de Vaux, *RB*, LXIII (1956), 73, 74, 549-550; W. R. Farmer, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, II (New York, 1962), 148.

In the absence of coercive evidence it seems reasonable to suggest that wine was drunk and meat was eaten at times by the Essenes of Khirbet Qumran. But if the Pharisee fasted twice a week and, at times, rejected wine for the duration of a vow, the Essene, whose austerity was so highly esteemed by ancient authorities, must not have lagged behind in his zealous attachment to a strict observance of his religious practice. At Qumran the significance of asceticism and purity was pushed to the limit. The community stood or fell by it, so to speak.

presented in the form, not that Essenism existed in Rome as a strict organization, which is highly improbable, but that there was an Essenic influence in the Jewish community there. This is probable, and the view fulfills the three conditions of the case. The Essenes were Jewish and ascetic, and they observed certain days. "There is some evidence," writes F. F. Bruce, "that such 'baptist' communities were found in the Dispersion as well as in Judaea. The Jewish community of Rome, in particular, appears to have preserved some characteristic features of this 'non-conformist' Judaism—features which, as we may gather from the Hippolytan *Apostolic Tradition*, were carried over into Roman Christianity."<sup>18</sup>

#### *On Esteeming Certain Days Above Others*

Whatever the real problem may have been, Paul's plea is for consideration on the part of more mature Christians towards their weak brethren. Those whose faith makes them independent of ritual prohibition should not reject the weak, but welcome them as Christian brethren. To the weak and scrupulous Paul appeals with more elaboration of argument that they should refrain from condemning those who claim to exercise freedom in matters of such observances.

At this point, in a chapter that has to do with a controversy on the matter of meat-eating versus vegetarianism, Paul interjects another issue, that of "esteeming one day as better than another" (v. 5). This might very well have been another expression of the scrupulousness Paul is concerned with.

*Remarks on the Greek Text of Rom 14:5.* Part of the interpretative problem of this passage is the fact that a linguistic study hardly contributes any substantial information toward a more accurate understanding. The Greek text reads:  $\delta\varsigma \mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu$  ( $\gamma\alpha\rho$ )  $\kappa\rho\iota\nu\epsilon\iota \eta\mu\acute{\epsilon}\rho\alpha\nu \pi\alpha\rho' \eta\mu\acute{\epsilon}\rho\alpha\nu$ ,  $\delta\varsigma \delta\epsilon \kappa\rho\iota\nu\epsilon\iota \pi\acute{\alpha}\sigma\alpha\nu \eta\mu\acute{\epsilon}\rho\alpha\nu \cdot \epsilon\kappa\alpha\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma \acute{\epsilon}\nu \tau\tilde{\omega} \iota\delta\iota\omega \nu\omicron\tilde{\iota} \pi\lambda\eta\rho\omicron\phi\omicron\rho\epsilon\iota\sigma\theta\omega$ .<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> F. F. Bruce, "To the Hebrews or to the Essenes?" *NTS*, (1962-1963), 227.

<sup>19</sup> *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Erwin Nestle, ed.: Stuttgart, 1952).



Key words in this passage, on which its sense hinges to a large degree, are κρίνει, ἡμέραν παρ' ἡμέραν, and πληροφορεῖσθω.

Κρίνει: one man "esteems." The basic meaning of the word is that of separating, and then discerning, in the act of judging. It stresses mental discrimination, a moral scrutiny and determination. It is here properly translated "esteems." Some Roman Christians attributed a particular importance to certain days, others considered them all alike.

Ἡμέραν: "day." Although ἡμέρα may have several meanings,<sup>20</sup> in this passage the word falls easily into the category of a 24-hour period. Reference is made here to the calendar day.

Ἡμέραν παρ' ἡμέραν: "one day as better than another." In this phrase, the key word is παρα. When used before an accusative, as is the case here, except with verbs of motion and adverbially of place or time, παρα indicates a comparative-contrastive concept. According to the best Greek authorities this concept conveys two fundamental notions: (1) *Besides* or *beyond*, as in Rom 16:17; (2) *Above* or *beyond* in the sense of the comparative sense "more than," as, for instance, in Heb 1:9; Lk 13:2. Fundamentally, then, the preposition παρα serves to *set apart* one idea *from* another, or "one day *above* another."<sup>21</sup> Although in the opinion of some the addition of "alike" may seem to distort the meaning of the passage, this adjective has been supplied by the translators in an effort to complete the sense of the sentence.

<sup>20</sup> As a summary of the meanings ἡμέρα may have in the Pauline writings, W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich suggest: (1) An age, era, indefinite period of time, as in 2 Cor 6:2; Eph 5:16; (2) an eschatological day, as in Rom 2:16; 1 Cor 5:5; (3) the natural day from sunrise to sunset, 1 Th 2:9; 3:10; (4) the day of 24 hours, Gal 1:18; 1 Cor 15:4. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, 1957), pp. 346-348.

<sup>21</sup> James H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, Vol. III by Nigel Turner (Edinburgh, 1963), p. 273; F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 123-124; Arndt and Gingrich, *op. cit.*, art. παρα.

The various nuances of meaning possible to the entire clause  $\delta\varsigma$  κρίνει ἡμέραν παρ' ἡμέραν are reflected in various versions and translations. The following are samplings:

"One man discriminates between days" (Syriac).

"One man considers some days to be more sacred than others" (*The Twentieth Century New Testament*).

"One man esteemeth one day above another" (*KJV*).

"This man putteth difference between daye and daye" (Tyndale and Cranmer).

"One man esteems one day as better than another" (*RSV*).

"One man keeps certain days as holier than others (*Jerusalem Bible*).

"This man rates one day above another" (Moffatt).

"One demeth a day bitwixe a day" (Wycliffe).

"This man regards one day more highly than another" (*NEB*).

Πληροφορεῖσθω: "Let one be fully convinced," a compound verb which means to become filled with a thought or conviction to the extent of accepting it, and of being settled in mind. The contextual significance of this verb seems obvious. It fits in with Paul's attitude in matters of moral issue, and more specifically in this case, in the matter of "eating and not eating." So also in the matter of discriminating or not between days, it is important that one's mind be settled. The mind must be "fully assured,"<sup>22</sup> having carefully pondered the question and come to a settled conviction.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, IV (New York, 1931), 413.

<sup>23</sup> Biblical scholarship is divided on the matter of retaining or dropping a passage which follows Rom 14:5. The KJV has translated Rom 14:6 as follows: "He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks." The uncial authority is strongly against the italicized passage; the lack of completeness in the antithesis might easily have led to its insertion. On the other hand the possibility of omission by homoioteleuton exists and the repetition characteristic of the clause increases the probability

The passage has been very faithfully rendered by the translators.

*Paul's Distinction and the Seventh-day Sabbath*

But is it possible to discover what days Paul had in mind when he wrote that "one man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike"?

Although one may not want to exclude the possibility of Paul's referring to certain days of fasting as of heathen origin<sup>24</sup> or to an early keeping of Sunday,<sup>25</sup> commentators have very generally thought of them as being: (1) Jewish ceremonial feasts or Sabbaths which Jewish Christians would still have been observing; (2) fast days on which it would not have been permitted to eat certain things; and (3) the seventh-day Sabbath.

It has been argued that the distinction here touched upon refers to the seventh-day Sabbath. "What other day would any Roman Christian judge to be above other days?" asks Lenski.<sup>26</sup> A small group of Jewish Christians, some of them probably from Jerusalem, "still clung to the Sabbath much as the Christians did after Pentecost."<sup>27</sup> In this interpretation Paul considers that all distinction of the Sabbath day from other days has been abolished by Christianity. In other words, for the Christian there are no sacred days any longer, all days being indifferently sacred. Although Alford does not see how the passage can be otherwise understood,<sup>28</sup> others—from an understandable fear that any application of "one day" to the sev-

of its having existed in the original manuscript, inasmuch as its inclusion completes a parallel between observing and not observing on the one hand, and eating and not eating on the other. The insertion or omission of the clause does not essentially modify Paul's argumentation.

<sup>24</sup> See Michel, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

<sup>25</sup> Von Schlatter, *op. cit.*, p. 371.

<sup>26</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Columbus, Ohio, 1945), p. 821.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> H. Alford, *The Greek Testament*, II (Cambridge, 1865), 452.

enth-day Sabbath would equally apply to the "Lord's Day"—have suggested that Paul was exclusively dealing with the *Jewish* Sabbath, and not at all with the *Christian* Sabbath.<sup>29</sup> When confronted by the fact that the "strong" esteems every day alike, such commentators reply—with much common sense—that "if any man is disposed to plead this passage as an excuse for violating the Sabbath [Sunday] and devoting it to pleasure or gain, let him quote it just as it is, *i.e.*, let him neglect the Sabbath from a conscientious desire to honor Jesus Christ. Unless this is his motive, the passage cannot avail him."<sup>30</sup> Both groups agree, therefore, that it is ruled by Paul that the seventh-day Sabbath is no longer of permanent moral obligation.

It is to be noted, however, that the attempt to connect the fourth-commandment Sabbath with the "days" mentioned in this passage is not convincing for everybody.<sup>31</sup> The whole discussion concerns "unessentials," matters in which God has not spoken clearly in his Word. No such question can be conscientiously raised concerning the fundamental moral issues that are clarified in the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount, or in any other plain statement of Scripture. Who can have a divine commandment before him and say to others: you can treat that commandment as you please; it really makes no difference whether you keep it or not; please yourselves? No apostle could so conduct an argument. And probably no man would be more surprised at that interpretation than Paul himself, who had utmost respect for the Decalogue, God's law, which is "holy, just and good" (Rom 7:12). For the apostle each of the ten commandments is an expression of love (ch. 13:8-10), and Christ himself, the norm of all Pauline teach-

<sup>29</sup> A. Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament*, IV, *Romans* (London, 1832), 299, 300.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Joseph Parker, *The People's Bible*, XXVI, *Romans and Galatians* (New York, 1901), 123 ff.; Barnes, *op. cit.*, pp. 299, 300; Wilber T. Dayton, *Romans and Galatians*, in the *Wesleyan Bible Commentary*, V (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1965), 85, 86.

ing (see, for instance, ch. 15:1-13), was indisputably a Sabbath keeper. For the apostle, the situation of the Christian toward God's law has become much more responsible—and dangerous—than that of the devout men of the Old Testament.

Paul himself, who evidently cannot be reckoned among the "weak," worshiped on Sabbath "as was his custom" (Acts 17:2; cf. Lk 4:16), and there is no conclusive evidence to the contrary. He was in no doubt about the validity of the weekly Sabbath. Thus, to assume that when they were converted to Christianity by Paul, Gentiles or Jews would be anxious to give up the "Jewish" Sabbath for their "own day" is hardly likely. This could be expected only at some later time in the history of the Christian Church, and for other reasons.

In Rom 14 Paul is taking for granted certain things which ought never to be disputed. If it had occurred to his mind that there were presumptuous believers who thought that a commandment could be trifled with, he would probably have conducted his argument accordingly. It seems safe, therefore, to conclude with a large group of exegetes, that the seventh-day Sabbath does not come within the scope of the distinction respecting the days mentioned in Rom 14:5.<sup>32</sup>

*The Jewish Ceremonial Sabbaths.* It has been argued with a great deal of plausibility that Paul was simply referring to the sacred days of the Jewish ceremonial economy. Some regarded them as having abiding sanctity. Others considered them as abrogated with the passing away of the ceremonial institutions. After the deliverance from Egypt, the Lord instituted for Israel six annual feasts, and in connection with these, seven ceremonial Sabbaths.<sup>33</sup> In subsequent Jewish history these

<sup>32</sup> It is to be noted that it is even more so for John Murray, the Presbyterian theologian, since he considers that the Lord's day, the memorial of Jesus' resurrection, borrows its religious significance from the Sabbath institution which keeps its abiding relevance and binding obligation upon the believer of the New Testament covenant. See "Appendix D" in *The Epistle to the Romans*, II (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1965), 257 ff.

<sup>33</sup> See Lev 23 and Num 28, 29.

feasts were given great prominence and became deeply ingrained in Jewish culture. Some of the early Christians, of Jewish origin, might have been slow to break away from the old customs. It is quite possible that in the church at Rome there may have been a strong Jewish element endeavoring to make a case for the observance of these yearly feasts and Sabbaths. Some converts from Judaism still like to observe them today and see nothing wrong in this, regarding them as part of their ethnic heritage.

These interpreters generally see a connection between the problem mentioned in Rom 14 and that discussed in Gal 4 (vs. 8-11) and Col 2 (vs. 16, 17). It might seem that the similarities between the two groups of passages would indicate the same issue. This inference, however, is not established, and the evidence would point to the conclusion that the weakness in view in Rom 14 is of a somewhat different character. It seems that more has to be taken into account. In Rom 14 there is no mention of the specific days designated in Col, for instance. If this were the question we would expect an explicit reference as in Col 2:16, 17. Here Paul mentions only a distinction between days.<sup>34</sup> The main weakness of Rom 14 involved a vegetarian diet, which is not reflected in the epistles to the Galatians and Colossians. There is no indication either that the weak in reference to food had, as the Galatians, been "bewitched" in accepting "another gospel" (Gal 3:1; 1:8). Both attitudes may very well have been an outgrowth of Essenic-Judaistic sectarianism, and it is conceivable that the yearly Sabbaths could have been included in this reference, but that they constituted the real subject of reference seems rather unlikely.

#### *The Essenes Might Have Caused the Problem*

Paul may have had in mind the case of Jewish converts who were still clinging to these feast days. But the special days of

<sup>34</sup> See Joseph Huby, *Saint Paul, Épître aux Romains* (Paris, 1957), pp. 452, 453.

the week were more probably fast days. This suggestion is based on the context itself, in which abstinence is the predominant feature. It may even be that among the faithful who strictly abstained from flesh and wine—or besides them—there were others who did so only on certain days. Paul's phrase in v. 2, "one believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables" is curiously analogous to this statement in v. 5, "one man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike." He mentions the two cases together and later in the chapter he declares that a man should not be judged because of his eating (vs. 10-13), which may imply that Paul is referring to fast days. It appears quite probable from the context that Paul here is correlating the eating with the observance of days. Most likely, although it is impossible to ascertain it, the apostle is dealing with fast days in a context of either partial or total abstinence.<sup>35</sup>

Here also the Essenes might have caused the problem. It is certainly significant that besides abstaining from meat and wine—at least at times—they also were very specific in the matter of observing days. They sanctified certain days which were not observed by the general stream of the Jews. Although the Essenes' principal feasts were the same "...as in the rest of Israel, others have been added which seem to have been unique to the sect."<sup>36</sup>

Their liturgical calendar was different from the official priestly calendar in Jerusalem. Set up according to the calendar of Jubilees, it caused the major feasts to fall on the same day of the week, year after year. The year of the Jubilee Calendar had only 364 days, exactly 52 weeks. Each month counted 30 days. After every three months an extra day was added so that the weekly cycle would work out evenly. In other words, it was a synchronization of the weekly and yearly

<sup>35</sup> James Denney, *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, II, *Romans* (W. R. Nicoll, ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich., 1961), 702; Huby, *op. cit.*, pp. 455, 456; Gaugler, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

<sup>36</sup> Marcel Simon, *Les sectes juives au temps de Jésus* (Paris, 1960), p. 62.

time periods, so that every year a particular date always fell on the same day of the month. All new moons and religious feasts fell on Sundays, Wednesdays, or Fridays.

Some have suggested that the calendar of Jubilees represented the ancient liturgical computation of the Temple itself, later abandoned at Jerusalem in favor of the lunar-solar calendar in use in the Hellenistic world. "It is not impossible that this substitution gave rise to the Essene secession."<sup>37</sup> As might be expected, there was, of course, a predilection for these particular days.

Some pertinent observations emerge now which could well tie in the matter of diet with that of "esteeming certain days above others." The Essenes scrupulously abstained from meat and wine. They added certain feast days to the regular Jewish calendar. The dissension over this very point existed in Jewry prior to the advent of Christianity. Could it be that the controversy was carried over into the Christian Church and finds itself reflected in Rom 14? In this case the practice of the weak may be compared with the early Christian custom indicated in the *Didache* of fasting twice every week.<sup>38</sup> Is it not significant and relevant at the same time that we have here a matter of diet *and* days connected in a controversial issue? Although this is not an established fact, this interpretation is a possibility which cannot be ignored. It seems, in fact, to be the most likely possibility in a context in which abstinence is a predominant feature. This is why I suggest that Paul is here referring to practices of abstinence and fasting on regular fixed dates.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Simon, *op. cit.*, pp. 62, 63. A. Jaubert, *La date de la Cène, calendrier biblique et liturgie chrétienne* (Paris, 1957), pp. 51-56.

<sup>38</sup> The *Didache* (8:1) warns Christians not to fast with the hypocrites on the second and fifth days of the week, but rather on the fourth and sixth days.

<sup>39</sup> See F. J. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London, 1961), pp. 348, 349. M. J. Lagrange declares, "Il est assez clair, d'après le contexte, qu'il s'agit d'abstinence." *Saint Paul, Épître aux Romains* (Paris, 1950), p. 325. There also remains the possibility that the apostle is referring here to another example of Pharisaic influence. There is little



*The Problem Was Not a Basic One*

The problem, obviously, was not a basic one, as the mild way in which Paul deals with these weak brethren indicates. The contrast between the tone of the letter to the Romans and the tone of the letters to the Galatians and to the Colossians is highly significant. The reason is clear. In Gal, for instance, Paul is dealing with Judaizers who are perverting the Gospel at its very center. Propagandists of a legalism which maintained that the observance of days and seasons was necessary to justification and acceptance with God, they were denounced as "false teachers" preaching "another gospel" (Gal 2:4; 1:8). Their views are a return to "spiritual slavery" (ch. 4:8,9) and Paul fears that he has labored in vain among them (ch. 4:11). The Colossians likewise adulterated the ground of salvation by dogmatic confidence. There is no evidence of such a fatal error in Rom 14. The Roman Christians were not "propagandists for a ceremonialism that was aimed at the heart of the cross."<sup>40</sup> The Galatians were involved in essential doctrinal issues; they were outside the Gospel in dogmatic terms. This explains Paul's language. The Romans always remained within the Gospel. The climate is radically different and explains Paul's tolerance and restraint. He was dealing here with unessentials.

The apostle is convinced that these differences of opinions regarding days have nothing to do with the fundamentals of Christian experience. They are indifferent matters. None of them is characteristic of an inadequate theory of life and

doubt that the Jews in general and the Pharisees in particular laid great emphasis on fasting as a religious practice in Bible times. Besides the biblical evidence, the Babylonian and the Palestinian Talmuds contain a sizable tractate called *Ta'anit* (Fasts) devoted to the Jewish fast-days and the practices peculiar to them. I feel, however, that this does not meet all the circumstances described in Rom 14, since Paul is dealing with Christians who not only observed certain days, but also abstained from meat and wine.

<sup>40</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1965), 173.

religion. "He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. He also who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God" (Rom 14:6). Whether they observe holy days or not, whether they partake or refrain from food, these Christians' actions are regulated by the great principle of the lordship of Christ. There is no proof that the weak brethren differed from the strong on the great principle of justification by faith. All there is for some is weakness "in faith," that is to say an inadequate grasp of the great principle of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, which brought some to an anxious desire to make their salvation more certain by the scrupulous fulfillment of formal rules. But however weak these brethren may have been they still are brethren, and remain part of the Christian fellowship. As Bultmann indicates, the Scriptures point to different degrees and possibilities of faith for individuals. There are "deficiencies in faith" (1 Th 3:10); "growth in faith" (2 Cor 10:15); "fullness of faith" (Rom 4:21; 14:5); and "weakness of faith" (Rom 14:1).<sup>41</sup> But all are characteristic, not of Judaizers or apostates, but of Christians. Therefore, our weak brother of Romans 14 is to be welcomed as a Christian.

*Matters Not Regulated by a Revelation from God.* The weight of evidence points to the fact that Paul is not dealing with the fourth-commandment Sabbath. The polyglot society at Rome helps one to understand somewhat better the complex situation existing in that Christian community. The Roman, Greek, Oriental, and Jew lived there. The slave, the free man, and the freedman lived there. All were confronted by the question of Christian ethics in a pagan society. While all had one and the same faith, all did not share one and the same philosophy of Christian life. Some, who were strong in the faith, could rely on the past and not let it disturb them. Others wanted added protection against the non-Christian environment. They felt

<sup>41</sup> Rudolf Bultmann and Arthur Weiser, *Faith* (London, 1961), pp. 88, 89.

the necessity for certain restrictions governing their Christian way of living.

Is it not significant that this epistle to the Romans which presents the Christian doctrine with such exceptional power and clarity should indicate that the teaching of faith and a healthy doctrine do not guarantee a healthy community? There are questions which concern matters morally indifferent, which are not regulated by a revelation from God. In these matters, Paul asserts, "let every one be fully convinced in his own mind"; fully convinced, that is to say fully settled, having sound reasons for one's actions. Since divergencies are to be expected in such a context, let the weak respect the position of the strong (ch. 14:3) as well as the strong bear the weak brother and welcome him to fellowship (chs. 14:1; 15:1, 7). Both, in fact, are doing what they do "in the Lord" or "unto him." Whether they keep certain days, whether they partake or refrain from food, their actions are to be regulated by the lordship of Christ, by the fact that they recognize him as Lord.

It is important, therefore, that in these matters every individual Christian stand true to the authority of his conscience. It is possible for Christians to have reached different levels in the education and strength of their conscience. And having thought through the same problem they might come up with different answers. Some things are unquestionably right, and others are unquestionably wrong. But there are still others regarding which the consciences of men differ. Here is precisely where none will interfere in an arrogant spirit. Let there be no bickering, disputing, or fault-finding. Men are neither saved nor lost by these matters. This is in essence the teaching of Paul in Rom 14.

¶ The dispute between the strong and the weak over unessential matters is to be understood in such a way as to prefer the common edification of the Church over one's own objective right. This is how one shows the superior soundness of his faith, and it is precisely what only the strong in faith can do. The strong in faith do not become weak when they are able and

willing to resign all thoughts of asserting their objective right for the common upbuilding of the Church and the growth of the work of God. When they act in this way, they, rather, give evidence of their strength by the fact that they genuinely bear the weakness of the weak, making it their own and recognizing that all cannot at once rise to full strength. Together they accept the challenge that each should be fully persuaded in his own mind. This is using one's liberty, not for doing harm, but for the furtherance of the Church and of the work of God.

In these ethical unessentials, Paul identifies himself with the strong brother. From such a starting point we might have expected him to seek to persuade the weak that their scruples regarding eating or fasting were baseless, and so to avoid a schism. But Paul proceeds in an entirely different manner. In unessentials Paul contends for Christian freedom, for the right of both weak and strong. "One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike." The chief thing is that "every one be fully convinced in his own mind." This is no arbitrary indulgence. It was in this way alone that in such matters the apostle could be true to the Gospel. Never was there a Christian more emancipated from un-Christian inhibition. "He was not even in bondage to his emancipation."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1963), p. 243.