

Three Difficult Passages

There are three places in Scripture which seem to teach that believers should treat no day as special; namely, Romans 14:1-6, Galatians 4:8-11 and Colossians 2:16-17. We have these passages because Paul wrote letters to deal with false teaching and false practices concerning the observation of certain days. This must be borne in mind. The passages were not intended to be positive statements about the Lord's (or first) day.¹ Rather, they were written to deal with an assortment of errors and mistakes made by some believers over the keeping of special days. What is more, the days in question were not all the same, and the causes of the errors were different, too. This explains why there is a seeming inconsistency within the three passages. The upshot is that nobody should or could build a consistent positive policy for the Lord's day from these verses. They were not intended to serve such a purpose. They were written as different responses to different kinds of false teaching in independent churches placed in distinct cultures.

Before I look at these passages in detail, I think an obvious point should be made – and noted! If these passages prove what is often claimed for them – namely, that believers should not use the first day of the week as the main day for their assemblies (in other words, to this extent 'special') – then it follows that the arguments in the previous chapters must necessarily be flawed. This is a definite possibility, of course. I freely admit it. As with all my preaching and writing, I constantly plead with my hearers and readers to cultivate the spirit of Acts 17:11. I do so now.

Having said that, however, I have a word for those who think that these three passages, which we are going to look at, do disprove what I have set out thus far: you must have your own explanation of the earlier passages which I have

¹ From now on, I will use the terms as interchangeable.

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dealt with. In particular, Acts 20:6-12, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 and Revelation 1:10 mean something. What? They may not amount to what I have claimed, but what do they amount to? And what of the principles I drew from the post-resurrection appearances of Christ, and so on? If I have misread these passages, what principles *can* be drawn from them?

Now for a look at the three passages which have something negative to say about ‘the observance of days’. I will take them in what I consider to be the ascending order of difficulty for my deductions thus far.

What can we learn about the Lord’s day from Colossians 2:16-17?

Nothing!

So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

Paul exhorts the Colossian believers not to let anyone impose any shadow of the old covenant upon them. Believers are not obliged to keep any old-covenant rules and laws concerning diet, feasts or days, including sabbath observance. This is his point. This is what he says.

Let me develop this a little. The ‘judging’ is almost certainly an act of condemnation, an act of disapproval, not approval. Paul told the Colossians not to let themselves feel threatened by those who disapproved of their attitude to food, drink, and Jewish days, including sabbaths, and not to let themselves be pressurised into keeping such.

So what has all this to do with the Lord’s day? Nothing. Nothing at all. These verses do not speak against the Lord’s day. Not in the slightest. It is not mentioned. Nor can the Lord’s day by any stretch of the imagination be called a shadow – it typifies nothing. It certainly does not belong to the old covenant! These verses do not speak against the Lord’s day.

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Rather, these verses refer to food and drink, which have nothing whatsoever to do with Christ, ‘for the kingdom of God is not food and drink’ (Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 8:8). As far as days go, the verses refer to the old covenant – to Jewish festivals and days – ‘a new moon’ and ‘sabbaths’ (2 Kings 4:23; 1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:4; 31:3; Ezra 3:4-5; Neh. 10:32-33; Isa. 1:13-14; Ezek. 45:17; 46:1-6; Hos. 2:11) – things which were ‘a shadow’ of Christ. They were a part of ‘the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us’ which has been fulfilled, removed and abolished in Christ (Col. 2:14). The only time the new moon is mentioned in the New Testament is here in Colossians 2:16 where we are told it has nothing to do with believers. They should keep none of these days, not feast days, new moons or sabbaths. This is what Paul was saying. As such, it does nothing to undermine the claims I have made throughout this book.

In short, Colossians 2:16-17 does not militate against the Lord’s day. Believers should not be sabbatarians. Let no one impose sabbaths on you, said Paul. No, nor any other old-covenant festival, new moon or the like. Hold to the substance – Christ. If you were a Jew before conversion, let go of the shadows. If you were a Gentile before conversion, never take them up. The passage has nothing whatsoever to do with the saints’ regard for the first day of the week, except to forbid them to take up the sabbath or any other aspect of the old covenant.

What can we learn about the Lord’s day from Galatians 4:8-11?

In my view, nothing!²

But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you

² Do not miss the different tone in my answer to this question compared to the first on Col. 2:16-17.

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turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have laboured for you in vain.

That there are some difficulties with these verses, I admit at once, but whatever their resolution they have no impact on the subject in hand. The passage has nothing to say on the subject of the Lord's day; nothing whatsoever. Note how Paul criticised the Galatians for turning 'again', turning back to, reverting to something they had observed in their pre-conversion days. They wanted to be in bondage 'again', bondage to whatever it was. This could not have been the Lord's day. It is utterly unthinkable, utterly impossible. If they had been Jews before conversion they would have kept the sabbath, and if they had been pagans they would have kept... what?³ In neither case could they be said to be turning *again* to, turning *back* to, or *returning* to, the Lord's day, the first day of the week.

So what were the Galatians going back to? Were they turning back to Judaism? Or were they turning back to pagan astrology and such like? Or what? In the light of the context, it is probable that the Galatians, having been influenced by Jewish teachers, were turning (back) to the law. This, after all, was the trouble in the churches at Galatia. But the fact is the verses have nothing to say about the Lord's day. In their unregenerate days the Galatians had been in bondage to false gods who, in reality, were no gods at all (Gal. 4:8). Whatever the 'days' of Galatians 4:10 were, they were a part of 'the weak and beggarly elements' of Galatians 4:9.

What is more, Paul was not referring merely to one day in the week – he talked about days, months, seasons and years. The trouble at Galatia was that the churches were dropping back into Jewish or pagan practices and observances. The

³ The Chinese keep the year of the rat, dog, pig, ox, tiger, rabbit *etc.* There seems to be little or no limit to the mad inventions of pagans. And not only pagans. What about 'Pastor Appreciation Day'? (If you don't believe me, put the term in any search engine).

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modern equivalent would be the religious observance by believers of the forty days of Lent, or Shrove Tuesday, Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Ascension day, Whitsuntide (Pentecost), Christmas day, and so on. Many of these are pagan in origin. Galatians 4:8-11 speaks volumes about *this* sort of observance, which is sadly so prevalent in many churches, even though there is not a scrap of biblical support for such behaviour. And, what is more, several of these days are observed, and observed with vigour, in churches where the believers talk much about the Christian sabbath! Are they observed in churches which think there are no special days? What a thought! Take Christmas day: that day, with all its trappings, comes from the pagan festival of Saturnalia, ‘Christianised’ by Rome, and larded over with a generous dollop of Victorian (more accurately, Albertian) sentiment. Away with such nonsense in the churches of Christ! To those believers who observe such festivals and days and seasons I say, with Paul, ‘I am afraid for you’ (Gal. 4:10-11). Yet again, perhaps another equivalent ‘observance of days’ might be the superstitious fear of Friday the thirteenth. How many believers, I wonder, have secret fears about *this* day?

Above all, whatever was wrong at Galatia, as I have already remarked, in all probability the believers were starting to think that such observances contributed to their salvation. Reader, if you are doing it (whatever the day may be), stop it at once; trust Christ, trust Christ only; trust Christ entirely.

But as for the question in hand, Galatians 4:10 says nothing about the Lord’s day.

What can we learn about the Lord’s day from Romans 14:1-6?

Quite a bit, possibly. Or not...

Receive one who is weak in faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things... Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls... One person esteems

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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. 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.

For my part, this is the most difficult of the three passages, the one which most seriously threatens my thesis. At first glance it would seem that the issue of the Lord's day (or the sabbath, or any other day for that matter) is completely optional for believers. The day in question can be observed; it can be ignored; each believer stands or falls to his own Master, Christ. Before we accept this, however, we need to weigh the consequences.

Forget, for a moment, the issue of the Lord's day. Think about the sabbath. Apparently, one believer treats the sabbath as any other day – 'every day alike' – while another believer gives the sabbath all the respect, honour and obedience demanded by God in the law. Both believers, apparently, are right. One is strong; the other weak. Which is which? The one who regards every day alike, who does not keep the sabbath, is a strong believer;⁴ the other, the believer who makes a distinction in the days, the one who is the sabbath-keeper, is weak.⁵ Can this be right? How would sabbatarians react to being called 'weak believers'? What is more, since both believers are acting correctly, no disputes must ever arise between them.⁶ The same goes for the new

⁴ According to Douglas J.Moo: 'Almost all commentators assume that it was the "strong" who were treating every day the same' (Douglas J.Moo: *The Epistle to the Romans*, William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1996, p842).

⁵ If Rev. 1:10 refers to the Lord's day as above, and Rom. 14 applies as is said, John would have been a weak brother.

⁶ If this is right, it would appear to me to destroy sabbatarianism. Whatever else may be said about the sabbath, it is *not* optional. It is, according to its advocates, perpetually binding. In the old covenant, the sabbath was a matter of *law*, God's law for Israel. Conscience does not come into it. No Jew was free to 'live and let

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moon, Christmas day – the lot! Any and every Jewish or pagan day is included in the principle. He who does not keep the day is strong; he who keeps the day is weak; but both are right; and both must happily live together without dispute in their local church.

But this cannot be. It is a nonsense. If this is what Paul intended, then the old covenant is still operative. Worse, it also means that pagan days are perfectly acceptable in the church. It contradicts Colossians 2:16-17. It contradicts the spirit of the letter to the Hebrews, let alone specific passages such as Hebrews 7:12,18-22; 8:7-13; 10:15-18. It contradicts Romans 6:14-15; 7:4-6; 8:2; 2 Corinthians 3:6-11; Galatians 2:19; 5:18; Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 2:14. Above all, it contradicts Galatians 4:10 where the days, whatever they are, are forbidden, since in Romans 14 the days, whatever they are, are indifferent. Take Romans 14:1-6 and Galatians 4:10. If they are both supposed to be talking about the sabbath, *there* is a contradiction. One says it is forbidden; the other says it is optional. The same goes for the Lord's day.

To elaborate this latter point a little: if the *prima-facie* view of Romans 14:1-6 is correct – the observance of days is a matter of indifference – then it inevitably follows that sabbath observance with all its old-covenant ramifications, while it may be weak Christianity, is perfectly acceptable; it may be indifferent, but it is acceptable. This is balderdash! Old-covenant order in the church? And this is what it amounts to – make no mistake! We know such a thing is unthinkable. It is abominable. This is precisely the error the Fathers made. And look at the consequences!⁷ Why did the writer to the Hebrews write his letter? He wanted to put a stop to this very thing!

This means, of course, that whatever the passage teaches it cannot possibly teach that a full-blown sabbath observance in the church is perfectly acceptable.

live' over the sabbath! And if the sabbath is *binding* on all men today, 'optional' is not in the vocabulary.

⁷ See my *Pastor; Gadfly; Deceit*.

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The same goes for pagan observances. Are we to believe that the keeping of pagan days in his churches, though indifferent, is altogether acceptable to God? Can anyone seriously suggest such ideas?

Is Judaism or paganism acceptable worship? acceptable to God, that is. Remember the exchange between Christ and the woman at the well in Samaria. The woman: 'Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship'. Jesus replied: 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father... True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit *and truth*; for the Father is seeking such to worship him. God is a Spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit *and truth*' (John 4:20-24). This surely makes the first glance at Romans 14:1-6 suspect, to say the least. If it is right, it leads to a consequence which is obviously wrong; disastrously wrong.

Coming closer to home: does the passage apply to the Lord's day? *This is the* question. Take the Lord's day to be any day you like. Take it, for sake of argument, to be the first day of the week. Does Romans 14:5-6 mean that the Lord's day is in no way special? Is the Lord's day a matter of indifference? Is God pleased whether or not we keep the Lord's day? If the Lord's day is the first day of the week, what do we make of the evidence we have looked at – evidence which shows that the New Testament churches did treat the first day as special and different? It was their main day for assembly life. Does Romans 14:5-6 really teach that the first day is not so to be regarded?

To develop this: let us assume, for sake of argument, that the Lord's day – take it, for sake of argument, as the first day of the week – must not be treated as the special day for assembly – that every day, including the Lord's day, is alike. Let us see where this leads us. First of all, I suggest that, in order to prevent anyone getting the impression that, after all, the first day really does have significance, churches ought to meet on every day of the week in rotation. You see, reader,

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by meeting every first day, churches inevitably *do* give the impression that they think the first day *is* important. Yet I am not aware of any non-sabbatarian church which claims Romans 14 *is* talking about the first day of the week (and, therefore, is against its observance), that does anything else *but* meet on the first day of the week, every week. Why do they do this? Are such churches only meeting on this day because the State has historically followed Christendom – Puritan sabbatarianism, indeed – and legalised a day of rest on the first day? Are they so gripped by Christendom, Constantine, Puritan institutionalism, and all the rest? If so, why bother with Romans 14 in the first place? Why bother with Scripture at all? Why don't they just do what tradition dictates, and leave it at that? But if they do regard Scripture as paramount, shouldn't their conscience tell them to obey God's word and treat every day alike – including the first day – and meet as and when the church appointed – whatever the cost in jobs, school and university courses, and so on?

Let me cut a little deeper. Those who think there is no such day as the Lord's day, but who still meet every first day of every week, are, in my view, guilty of hypocrisy. I say to such, whether or not you realise or acknowledge it, you are, in truth, riding on the coat tails of the inventors of the Puritan sabbath, the Christian sabbath. Have the courage of your convictions, I say! Cut free of all sabbatarianism. Have no truck with it in any shape or form. Demonstrate to everyone your freedom from all days by assembling on various days of the week. You say one thing, but do the opposite!

Reader, do you see my point? Those who think the passage destroys the significance of the Lord's day, ought to consider weak believers, and do all they can to stop them (the weak) thinking the first day is important. They should stand by their principles, and abandon any particular day for

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regular worship. One way to do this, as I have said, is to meet on all days of the week in rotation.⁸

Let me come at this from another angle. Since you think Romans 14 does teach that the Lord's day has no significance, and that those who keep it are weak, then I appeal to you, my stronger brothers and sisters: according to Paul, you should be gracious and loving to those who are weak and not cause them to stumble. I suggest that since you are strong and 'know' you have no need to observe the Lord's day, you, being perfectly well aware that some of your brothers and sisters do feel scruples in this matter, you – the strong – should help your weak brothers, by keeping the day for their sakes; or at the very least, by not offending them by overtly pressing your liberty upon their weak conscience. This, after all, is what Romans 14:3,12-15,20-21; 15:1-3; 1 Corinthians 8:9-13 teach.

I am, of course, hoist with my own petard. In my *Sabbath Questions*, I made the point that Paul, when he spoke of indifferent days, did not exempt the sabbath, and that this was a strong argument against the claim that the first believers observed the sabbath.⁹ I must now do the same for the Lord's day. Paul did not exempt the first day of the week, and this works against my claim that the early church began to treat the first day as 'the Lord's day'. I admit it.

Even so, I still suggest the passage does not refer to the first day of the week at all. I am not saying for a moment that there is no application to the Lord's day to be made from

⁸ Have you thought what is involved with living with someone who keeps the sabbath on a lunar (not solar) basis? This means that the sabbath can fall on any day of the week each lunar month according to the phase of the new moon, all bewilderingly worked out with astronomical tables. I have read the heart-rending, anguished blogs of those who are desperately trying to do this, and yet, equally desperately, are trying to cling on to a semblance of normal family, work and social life with a spouse, employer, colleagues and neighbours who reject the system.

⁹ My *Sabbath Questions* pp19-20.

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Romans 14:5-6; not at all. But, the Lord's day is not itself among the things indifferent.

So then, to what does the passage refer? Reader, I confess I do not know – certainly not for certain.¹⁰ It appears that no-one does! I simply offer a few tentative suggestions. It might refer to some Jewish days – there was a sizeable population of Jews in Rome. What is more, law men were attacking the early believers in nearly all (if not all) the first churches. Rome was no exception (as Romans 3:21 – 8:39 makes clear). It was the number-one issue, arising in many of the New Testament letters.

In addition, note the context – meat and vegetables – referring to 'things indifferent', 'doubtful things', things which are disputable (Rom. 14:1) – grey areas. Seeing that food is strongly mentioned in this context (Rom. 14:2-3,6,15-17,20-23), is there any possibility that days of fasting might be meant? Indeed, food seems to be the main issue here. It is striking how Paul plunges into 'days', and as suddenly moves away from the subject, back to food. The distinction of days is introduced only as a part of the argument about food.

Then again, we know how drastically circumstances can alter cases – even in Scripture. Take, for instance, circumcision; in Galatians 5:2-3 it is forbidden; yet in Acts 16:3 it is perfectly acceptable; in 1 Corinthians 7:19 it seems not to be important (although the reference there may be to the past and not the future); see also Galatians 5:6; 6:15. The point is that sometimes circumcision was treated as unimportant in the early churches; sometimes it assumed major importance. I suggest the dividing line came over the issue of salvation. If anybody taught that circumcision is essential to salvation (Acts 15:1; Gal. 2:1-21), the New Testament came down on him like a ton of bricks; if, on the

¹⁰ As I have observed, the sabbath cannot be in view in the passage; it was not a thing indifferent; it was a command! Now for the Lord's day to be included in Rom. 14:5-6, it has to be proved that *it* is a thing indifferent. If it is a part of the law of Christ, whatever else it is it is not indifferent.

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other hand, salvation was not involved, perhaps the practice was tolerated; I am not sure.¹¹

Not to appear facetious, I have another suggestion as to the days in question. Might they not be little more than the observance of special anniversaries – birthdays, for example? Some believers place more importance than others on such days. Was Paul referring to something peculiar to the church in Rome?

Furthermore, I draw your attention to the fact that whichever day it was, it was not an ‘apostolic day’. Nor could it have been what might be called a ‘church day’; that is to say, it was not a day fixed by the local church as a day which they would treat as special. Rather, it was a day which individuals did or did not esteem or observe as a day ‘above another’ – ‘one person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike’; ‘one person’ I stress. It is self-evident therefore that the day in question could not possibly have been, for instance, the meeting-day for the church at Rome. If the members had agreed that a certain day was a special day for the church, then it *was* special! This day, therefore, must have been non-special. In other words, I suggest that Romans 14:5-6 has nothing to say about the question in hand. The day at issue is simply a personal ‘day’.

Reader, at the risk of wearying you, I admit I don’t know what Romans 14:5-6 is all about, as far as days go. Does anybody? But before I jettison all the evidence for Lord’s-day assembly in the churches of the New Testament, I for one would like to be certain that Romans 14 *does* refer to this issue. For the reasons I have given, I am convinced it

¹¹ If Rom. 14:5-6 refers to the sabbath – if (and I do not think it does) – then a similar argument might apply. Was the church at Colosse treating the sabbath in a different way to the church of Rome? At the former, was it a vital matter – an attack upon salvation by grace – while, at the latter, it was regarded as a thing indifferent? Hence the difference between Rom. 14 and Col. 2. Once again, I do not know.

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does not. If it does, then it is the one place in the Bible which teaches that the first day is not special. But if it does teach such a thing, the issue is over. We ought to treat the first day as any and every other day, and this is the end of the problem. Other problems will immediately arise, however. We must not think that we can confine the application of the passage to what suits us. Others will take up our cudgels and use them against us, and we will be helpless. For instance, we will have no way of stopping a full-blown sabbath observance from now on – all in the name of Christ, based on Romans 14. Nor will we have an effective bar against any and every other Jewish day or festival. And we might well have to get used to tolerating those who observe pagan days in the name of Christ.

Before all this is allowed to happen, I for one would like clearer and stronger, much stronger, evidence. Above all, I would like to know what the other scriptures we have looked at mean. And if the sabbath and the Lord's day are to be treated as indifferent within any particular assembly, I ask to be shown a New Testament church which survived such a scheme, and survived it for any length of time.

Douglas J.Moo, commenting on Romans 14:5, said:

Pinning down the exact nature of this disagreement over 'days' is difficult since Paul does not elaborate. Some expositors trace the problem to the influence of the pagan environment, which might have led some Roman Christians to distinguish 'lucky' and 'unlucky' days, or to practice days of abstinence in accordance with certain Greco-Roman religious cults. But we have seen [that is, in previous comments] good reason to trace the root issue between the 'strong' and the 'weak' to Jewish concerns about the law. And the observance of days was, of course, important in the Old Testament [better, the old covenant] and in Judaism. Whether the specific point at issue [in Romans 14] was the observance of the great Jewish festivals, regular days of fasting, or the sabbath is difficult to say. But we would expect that the sabbath, at least, would be involved, since sabbath observance was, along with food laws (compare verses 2-3), a key Jewish distinctive in the first century, and

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surfaced as a point of contention elsewhere in the early church (see Gal. 4:10[?],¹² Col. 2:16).¹³

For the reasons I have given, I fail to see how the sabbath could ever be regarded as optional, something ‘indifferent’: either it is binding on believers, or it has been abolished, having been fulfilled by Christ. The fact that Moo included the sabbath in matters of indifference, however, meant that he was forced to reach a weak conclusion:

Inclusion of sabbath observance among the matters of dispute in Rome demonstrates that it was not considered by Paul to be an obligation binding on Christians; this suggests, further, that the early church did not take over the decalogue as a whole.¹⁴

In light of Romans 7:1-6, 2 Corinthians 3:6-17 and the letter to the Galatians (and that is just for starters), this is far too weak. The old covenant, including the sabbath, has been fulfilled by Christ and abolished, rendered obsolete (Heb. 8:13).

However, Moo’s overall conclusion was excellent:

Reference to early Christian observance of ‘the Lord’s day’ [in Romans 14], on the other hand, is almost certainly not present.¹⁵

And, on a positive note, as John Piper concluded:

John [in Rev. 1:10] does not call one day in the week ‘the Lord’s day’ as one option among many. He calls it ‘the Lord’s day’ because he and the early church treat it in a special way among all days. I cannot escape what seems to me compelling evidence that the Lord’s day remains till Jesus comes, and that it is set apart for the glory of Christ and the good of our souls. May the Lord give you wisdom

¹² Question mark original.

¹³ Moo p842.

¹⁴ Moo p842.

¹⁵ Moo p842.

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and freedom and joy as you display his work and his worth
on his day.¹⁶

And this takes us neatly to the final chapter.

¹⁶ John Piper: ‘Is there a “Lord’s Day”?’