

“Welcoming One Another” (Romans 14-15): A Paradigm for Mutual Cooperation Among Christians in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *Decades of discussions have occurred over whether Romans 14–15 is directed to any particular circumstance in the Roman community, as it contains arguments similar to those found in 1 Corinthians 8-10. Some scholars feel it is a generic admonition, while others say it is a reply to the Roman community's particular predicament. The concept of mutuality fits within the setting of Romans, and the chapters (Rom 14–15) speak of Paul's exhortations from the preceding chapters (Rom.12–13) being applied contextually. In Nigerian churches/Christianity, the scenario of separation and categorization found in the Roman Church exists. Certain Christians have been labeled as "weak" or "strong" as a result of this; ethnicity and other factors are most likely to blame. As a result, the negative effects exceeded the favorable effects among Christians over the last few decades. This paper examines Paul's style for eliciting mutual collaboration (brother/sister metaphor), arguing that if Christians read, comprehend, and embrace Paul's call to welcome one another in Romans 14 –15, the walls of division will fall and mutual cooperation will ensue.*

KEYWORDS: welcome, another, paradigm, mutual, Christians

INTRODUCTION

Romans 14:1–15:13 exhorts the Romans to unity and strengthens mutual relationships and acceptance. Mutual relations can be seen as an important aspect in Romans, which appears here as welcoming others. It appears that differences and diversity in a person's cultural practice may impede welcoming others. That may be why Paul exhorts Roman Christians to bear with one another regardless of position or status. Romans chapters 14 and 15 appear to be a continuation of the exhortations in chapters 12 and 13, and they serve as a vital link to the long list of greetings in Romans 16.

Decades of debate have ensued over whether Romans 14–15 is addressed to any specific situation in the Roman community, as it contains some arguments similar to those found in 1 Corinthians 8-10. Some scholars believe it is a general exhortation, whereas others believe it is a reaction to the actual situation in the Roman community. The theme of mutuality fits within the context of Romans, and the chapters (Rom 14–15) speak of the contextual application of Paul’s exhortations from the preceding chapters (Rom 12–13).

The situation of division and categorization in the Roman Church exists among Christians in Nigerian churches/Christianity. This has resulted in the classification of some Christians as “weak” or “strong”. Factors such as insufficient or incorrect application of biblical doctrines, ethnicity, tribalism, intolerance, pride, tribalism, godfathers, leadership position, inferiority complex, superiority complex, and so on are most likely to blame. As a result, the cumulative effects of this among Christians over the last few decades outweighed the positive effects. This study discusses Paul’s rhetorical strategy for eliciting mutual cooperation, and contends that if Christians read, understand, and accept Paul’s invitation to welcome one another in Romans 14-15, the walls of division will be broken down and mutual cooperation will occur. The article is divided into three sections: the first analyzes the social context, the second is an exegetical analysis of relevant passages on mutual welcome, and the third deals with the Pauline ethos of mutuality.

The Socio-Historical Context of Romans 14–15

Paul addresses specific issues of dispute within the house churches in chapters 14–15 of his letter to the Romans. The dispute is between two groups, “the weak” and “the strong,” who differ over issues of food and holy days. The identity of these groups has been a matter of contention among scholars. This work agrees with Hultgren’s view that “the ‘weak’ consisted of a core of Jewish Christians who preserved traditions regarding cultic and dietary matters, and perhaps some Gentiles who adopted them, and the ‘strong’ were the Gentile Christians and others of Jewish heritage... who do not.”¹ The real problem here is the differing understandings between these groups with regard to what faithfulness to God means in their everyday lives.²

Note that the terms “weak” and “strong” likely originated with the strong group. They are “strong” not only in faith, but also because “they have the power to name and to exclude. They use a term

¹ Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 496.

² Sarah Heaner Lancaster, *Romans. Belief Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Westminster: John Knox, 2015), 230.

of honor for themselves and a term of shame for the others,³ and in this way, they introduce into the Christian communities the disparity inherent in the first century Mediterranean culture of honor and shame, thereby “altering the internal dynamic of the communities in ways incompatible with the gospel.”⁴

Mutual Welcome: Exegetical Analysis of Paul’s Exhortations

Proslambanō (Welcome)

The core message of Romans 14–15 can be seen in the repeated usage of the *proslambanesthe*. It occurs four times: Rom 14:1 (*proslambanesthe*); 14:3 (*proselabeto*); 15:7 (twice: *proslambanesthe*; *proselabeto*). It is impregnated with meanings that are significant in the relationships between individuals, qualifying mutual up-building.⁵ The ‘one another’ relationship not only strengthens the personal bond but also facilitates the growth of the community. Paul urges his addressees to exercise the practice of welcoming.

Receive the Weak in Faith (14:1)

Paul’s exhortation to ‘receive the weak in faith’ places the weak as the object of his exhortation and implies that the strong are the leading members of the Roman church. To receive means to ‘receive or accept into one’s society, home, circle of acquaintance,’⁶ which connotes more than mere acceptance into the church membership, but accepting others as brothers and sisters into the close fellowship of the people of God.⁷

The verb in the present imperative possibly suggests a continuing attitude of acceptance. Jewett suggests that the home in the early Christian era may mean the house or tenement church and most likely the love feast, ‘since this was the format of the assembly that turned the secular space of a house or portion of a tenement or shop into an arena of sacred welcome’; this concrete context is more helpful for understanding than fuzzy statements of ‘mutual welcome’.⁸ Who are those ‘weak

³ Lancaster, *Romans. Belief Theological Commentary on the Bible*, 230-23.

⁴ Cornelius Constantineanu, *The Social Significance of Reconciliation in Paul’s Theology: Narrative Readings in Romans* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), 173.

⁵ BAGD, 717.

⁶ BAGD, 717.

⁷ Charles K. Barrett, *Romans* (London: Black, 1991), 236.

⁸ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 888.

in faith' to be received? The term implies a group or groups in Rome. The verb *astheneō* is used for physical illness, social or economic inferiority, and powerlessness of any kind.⁹

The term has a moral connotation in Epictetus' warning: 'the reason is that usually every power that is acquired by the uneducated and weak is apt to make then conceited and boastful over it'.¹⁰ As noted above the Latin adjectives *tenuis* and *infirmis* denote a low economic, social, and political status.¹¹ In Horace's witty depiction of a man, who declares that he is weak and could not speak on Sabbath, we find both social and religious inferiority: 'Certainly you know more than I do... I am a small man of weakness, one of many (*sum paulo infirmior, unus multorum*). Pardon me, we'll speak another time.'¹² Mark Reasoner suggests this as a parallel to 14:1, since it shows that 'the person excessively observant in a foreign religion who matched the 'weak' caricature was known to Horace's audience'.¹³

The term implies an 'ethical- religious weakness' in the New Testament, since strength shows honour and weakness indicates contempt in the Roman world.¹⁴ The title 'weak in faith' implies the other group is in a more dominant position, and finds fault with the faith of the inferior group, while being themselves more powerful (15:1).¹⁵ Paul is here attesting the fact that the 'faith' of the weak meets the criteria for membership in the church activities and communal meals.

The word 'faith' is significant in his description of welcome since he uses it to describe the disputes between the two groups: 14:1-2 and 14: 22-23. As seen a number of times in Romans, 'faith' or to 'believe' means a person's response to the gospel (1:5, 8, 16, 17; 3:22, 25-30; 5:1, 2). It is less probable that Paul is here talking about a person's weak faith in Jesus as the saviour and the Lord; rather he is condemning the undesirable implications of their faith in Christ. It does not probably mean Paul challenges weakness per se, since elsewhere he thinks weakness is the opportunity for divine grace (2 Cor. 4:7-11; 11:30; 12:5, 9-10). As Moo suggests, 'he is criticizing them for the lack of insight into some of the implications of their faith in Christ.'¹⁶

⁹ BGD, 115.

¹⁰ Epictetus Diss 1.8.8-9.

¹¹ Mark Reasoner, "The Strong and the Weak, Romans 14:1-15:13 in Context" *SNTSMS 103* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 49-55.

¹² Jewett, *Romans*, 834.

¹³ Reasoner, *The Strong*, 58-61.

¹⁴ Reasoner, *The Strong*, 58-61.

¹⁵ Ernst Käsemann *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 369.

¹⁶ Daniel J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 836.

Those who cannot accept that faith in Christ is liberation from Old Testament and Jewish regulations are weak in faith compared with those who worked out the freedom from the same. He wants to lift the 'weak' into the status of the 'strong' with respect to faith by having the former accepted by the latter. 'Paul wants the "strong" to receive the "weak" into full and intimate fellowship, something that could not happen if the "strong", the majority group, persist in advancing their views on these issues, sparking quarrels and mutual recrimination.'¹⁷

'For God has received...' (14:3)

The attitude to one another could control the freedom of Christians even to reject any one from the fellowship of Christ. In principle they must receive those whom God has received.

Here the ethic is that God receives the sinners in spite of their actions or attitudes. Those whom God has accepted became righteous; those who are made righteous have a change of status. The same term for welcome is used here as in v.1a thus showing that the welcome towards one another should be the same as that given by God.

Jewett suggests, 'welcome to the banquet is the crucial issue here, and Paul probably relies on the widely shared tradition of Christ as the host of the Lord's Supper, the master of the love feast, acting in behalf of God to welcome the faithful into the messianic banquet in fulfilment of the ancient prophecies.'¹⁸ Jewett and Käsemann consider that the recipient of this welcome is *auton* (him), which seems to be a general reference to both the weak and the strong. But Dunn makes a pertinent observation: the 'exhortation here (v.3c) is a rebuke particularly to the condemnatory attitude of the weak (vv. 3b, 4): the one with the much tighter understanding of what is acceptable conduct for God's people would think that God has not accepted the other'.¹⁹ The immediate object of the welcome here is the 'strong'. Paul's wording is similar to that of the Psalms: (LXX Ps 26:10; see 64:4; 72:24) *ho de kurios proselabeto me* ('the Lord has welcomed me'). This acceptance in the worship context is described in the context of the Christian love feast in Romans 12:13; 13:10; 14:1.

Receiving One Another (15:7a)

¹⁷ Moo, *Romans*, 837.

¹⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 841.

¹⁹ Robert Jewett, *Christian Tolerance: Paul's Message to the Modern Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 129. Also see Käsemann, *Romans*, 369.

The entire exhortation on the weak and the strong beginning from 14:1 has its climax in 15:7, which begins with *dio* (therefore)²⁰ to urge them to *proslambanesthe allēlous, kathōs kai ho Christos proselabeto humas* ('receive one another as Christ has welcomed you'). The admonition to the strong to accept the weak in faith in 14:1 and the reference to God welcoming the strong (14:3) is broadened to welcome 'one another' in 15:7, which is a very interesting shift of focus. Here the recipients are two groups, the strong and the weak; they need to welcome one another irrespective of their status. This is similar to the command not to judge 'one another' in 14:13 and to strive for the edification of one another in 14:19, where both groups need to invite and welcome others. If only one group has decided to welcome others, there will be an imbalance of proper behaviour. As Jewett rightly suggests, 'The hostility cannot be overcome if only one side participates in this breaking down of barriers, and the barriers themselves can most effectively be dismantled by sharing in sacramental love feasts in which Christ's inclusion of insiders and outsiders is recalled and celebrated.'²¹ Thus the task of receiving is applied to both groups as they welcome one another.

As Christ has welcomed... (15:7b)

The use of *kathōs* is significant since the welcome should be in the pattern of Christ: 'just as Christ has welcomed you'; comparing the manner of Jesus' welcome. It means more than 'tolerating' or giving 'official recognition'.²² 'What Paul has in mind is not simply the fact of Christ's acceptance, but the manner of it (*diakonos*-v. 8): it is precisely the humbling of oneself to a position where one's own opinions do not count and may not be thrust on another (one's master), which both weak and strong, Gentile and Jew, need to practice.'²³

Paul is here pointing to Christ who has shown a model of how to welcome others even if they were enemies. He was the host in the love feasts, and Christ's death for the sinners shows that the members of the congregations have received an undeserved welcome. This is clear in 15:3 and 15:8^{ff} where Paul mentions that Jesus did not please himself but he loved those who rejected him and killed him; 'the reproaches of those who reproached you fell on Me' (15:3). This may remind us of Jesus' attitude to sinners by welcoming them to the feast during His earthly ministry (Matt 9:9-11; see Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32). It is striking that the same verb *proslambanomai* is used here to describe the redemption of Christ as well as the welcoming attitude to one another in the

²⁰ BAGD, 198.

²¹ Jewett, *Romans*, 888; Jewett, *Tolerance*, 29.

²² Moo, *Romans*, 874.

²³ J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, WBC 38b (Dallas: Word, 1988), 846.

congregations (15:7a, b). This implies His love to sinners shown on the cross by sacrificing His whole life. A Christian has to follow the footsteps of Christ in loving others without pleasing themselves, yet bearing the scruples of the weak (15:1). Christ's welcome is irrespective of ethnic, social and religious differences. There is an echo of inclusivity in *humas* as it includes various groups in Rome. Jewett suggests, 'it is an ethic of obligation anchored in the ancient views of reciprocity' as he quotes Reasoner who comments, 'Christ's acceptance of the believer forms the basis for the obligation to accept a fellow member.'²⁴

However, this work would suggest this is not 'obligatory' behaviour, but the self-giving of Christ acts as a pattern of conduct to accept a fellow member. It is something to which we need to tune our character. The ultimate aim of welcome is to the glory of God, that is, to praise God with one mind and one mouth (15: 7c, also see v. 6).

Judging as Hindrance to Welcoming

Judging is the main issue Paul is dealing with that has a negative control over the relationships, since his rebuke of judging²⁵ follows that of his admonition on the act of welcoming, implying that welcome is hindered or completely blocked by judging the brethren. These arguments on judging in the diatribe style show that Paul is strongly condemning the destructive actions of a Christian believer to another. It is striking and apparently deliberate that the section on judgment in Romans 14 has parallels to Rom. 2 and its reproof of judging (*krinein*) another (2:1-3; 14:3-4, 10) with a reminder of the judgment seat of God (2:16; 14:10-12).

'Who are you who is judging...?' (14:4)

The section on judging opens with a rhetorical question in v. 4: 'Who are you who is judging...?' It is in a diatribe style marked by the colloquial expression *su tis ei* (who are you?).²⁶ Here it may mean, 'who do you think you are, you who are putting yourself in the position of judge over another believer?'²⁷ Each believer is answerable to his own master, who is responsible for the members of his own household. This gives a picture of the master-slave relationship of the Greco-Roman World. The phrase *allogenis oiketēs*, which is translated as 'someone else's slave or servant', overlooks the difference between *oiketēs* and *doulos*.²⁸ Jewett suggests, 'the former denotes a

²⁴ Jewett, *Romans*, 889. Reasoner, *The Strong*, 194.

²⁵ BAGD, 451-452.

²⁶ S. K. Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1981), 115; BAGD, 819.

²⁷ Moo, *Romans*, 839.

²⁸ Moo, *Romans*, 839.

normally inalienable member of the house-hold, including slaves, who function almost as family members, whereas the latter is ordinarily limited to slaves and hired servants, whether in the household or in other service.’²⁹

The ideal of the Christian community is different from that of the Jewish community, since the evaluation of a Christian should be in connection with the Lord. The basis of the Christian commitment is not some written laws that judge those who are not observing them but ‘mutual tolerance’ even if one does not observe the rules. ‘The mutual tolerance demanded by Paul in the Roman churches requires that neither side allow their strongly-held convictions to determine the contours of Christian commitment’.³⁰ He directs his words not only to one group since he is aware that both are at fault in their attitude to their fellow brothers and sisters. The one who eats is not to despise the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who does. Despise means a ‘disdainful, condescending judgment’.³¹

Paul states that human judgment is not valid as long as ‘God has received him’. The metaphorical use of terms ‘stand’ or ‘fall’ shows the relationship of the slave to the master. It is the Lord that every Christian should please. Moo rightly remarks, ‘Paul here expresses confidence that the ‘strong’ believer will persist in the Lord’s favour. Perhaps Paul’s intention is to suggest to the ‘weak’ believer that the Lord’s approval is attained not by following rules pertaining to food but by the Lord’s own sustaining power’.³² *Dunate* (is able) points both to the possibility and the power of grace.³³

‘Who are you to judge your brother?’ (14:10)

The section vv.10-12 of the pericope begins like v.4 with a challenging question: *su de ti krineis* (‘But who are you to judge?’), which in fact challenges the habitual judgment.³⁴ The use of *de* (but) and *su* explains the emphasis Paul is giving in this argument, since his main point from v.4^{ff} is to avoid mutual judging. Probably this verse has the same emphasis as that of v.3 since the two major mistakes are indicated as *krinō and exoutheneō* (judging and despising), ‘Who are you to judge your brother?... Who are you to despise your brother?’ *Exoutheneō* can convey strong note of contempt, the character of those who see themselves as strong in order to despise those who are

²⁹ Jewett, *Romans*, 842.

³⁰ J. M. G. Barclay, ‘Do we undermine the Law: A Study of Romans 14:1-15:6’, in J. D. G. Dunn (ed.), *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1996), 302.

³¹ BAGD, 277.

³² Moo, *Romans*, 841.

³³ Käsemann, *Romans*, 370.

³⁴ Käsemann, 372; Stowers, *Diatribes*, 115.

weak in their perspective, whereas *krinō* has a sense of ‘make a judgment regarding’ with a stress on the act of condemning; the weak are condemning the strong.³⁵ *krinein*, used eight times in chapter 14, denotes the condemnatory judgmental behaviour of the weak. ‘Christian judgment of things is valid and indeed essential (v.5), but judgment of people must give place to the judgment of God (vv.10-12).’³⁶

James 4:12 has a similar argument: *su de ti ei, ho krinōn ton plēsion* (‘But who are you that judges your neighbour? which is also somewhat similar to Matt 7:3: *ti de blepeis to karpos to en tō ophthalmō tou adelphou sou...*; (Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye...?). The repeated use of ‘brother’ is striking, since it is used here in v.10 after 12:1 and is also followed in vv. 13, 15 and 21; Paul’s concern is that the fellow brother is being mistreated. The use of the term ‘brother’ implies ‘brother/ sister in Christ’. Here the metaphor applies to both parties (cf. v. 13) and the other party is denoted by the metaphor rather than directly addressing the parties, implying ‘the obligations following from the sibling status of the other.’³⁷

Paul instructs them to avoid judging or despising a brother/sister at all in order to avoid this kind of offensive behaviour resulting in his/her ruin (14:15, 21). It implies that the brother/ sister should maintain ‘mutual loyalty’ in order to build up rather than putting a stumbling block before him/her.³⁸ The repeated use of the ‘brother’ metaphor emphasizes the attitude of a believer to the fellow believers in the context of the Roman churches. The believers belong to the Lord and all are members of the ‘spiritual brotherhood of believers.’³⁹

It is noteworthy that Paul’s metaphors move from the house slaves (14:4) to brothers and sisters (14:10). Here the first challenge is directed to the weak, who judge others for not following the law on food and days, whereas the second challenge is aimed at the strong, who are despising others.

‘Let us not judge One Another’ (14:13)

The admonition in v.13 is probably to both groups-the strong and the weak. The present hortatory subjunctive *krinōmen* is used to show an activity that has been continued must no longer (*mēketi*)

³⁵ Dunn, *Romans*, 802.

³⁶ Dunn, *Romans*, 808.

³⁷ R. Aasgaard, ‘My Beloved Brothers and Sisters!’: *Christian Siblingship in Paul* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 214.

³⁸ Aasgaard, *My Beloved Brothers*, 210.

³⁹ H. Freiherr von Soden, *adelphos TDNT 1* (1964), 145.

be continued.⁴⁰ The verb has an object *allēlous* (one another), which makes it clear that the object of exhortation is both groups.

Barrett argues that the second clause in v.13, *alla touto krinate mallon* describes the judgment that both sides are to make on the basis of Paul's admonitions, since *krinein* is used in the aorist, second person plural.⁴¹ *Krinein* here means 'to decide' not to put an offence in the brother's/sister's way. That means, deciding not to place a stumbling block before a brother/sister (*ho adelphos*, which includes all believers v.13c). The use of *proskomma* (stumbling block) and *skandalon* (hindrance) (both words are used in connection with idolatry in Jewish thought but not probably the same here) explains how judging can be a destructive force in the way of a brother/sister.⁴² Christ is referred as the stone of stumbling in Rom 9:32-33, a citation of Isa. 8:14. *Skandalon* refers to 'cause of ruin' or 'occasion of misfortune' in the LXX.⁴³

What is the stumbling block in this instruction? Presumably, Paul is concerned about putting an end to negative evaluation of the sibling, that is, by 'taking care not to place in his way anything that might cause him to fall from his Christian faith and practice'.⁴⁴

Cost and Effect of Welcoming

Obligation: Bearing the Scruples (15:1a)

The strong are obliged to do welcoming at the cost of bearing the scruples of the weak: *Ophelomen de hēmeis hoi dunatoi ta asthenēmata tōn adunaton bastazein*. The language of obligation is characteristic of Romans while Paul did not use it in I Corinthians.⁴⁵

Paul declares that he is obliged to 'Greeks and Barbarians' (1:14), whereas the believers are obliged to the Spirit to live as the Spirit wants them to (8:12), and are obliged to love one another (13:8). Why is it stated that the strong category is obliged to bear the other category that of the weak? Probably, since he numbers himself among the strong and wants to start the admonition from the strong side to the weak. The Pauline system of obligation reverses this cultural peculiarity

⁴⁰ BAGD, 518.

⁴¹ Barrett, Romans, 262.

⁴² Jewett, *Romans*, 858.

⁴³ Gastav Stählin, *skandalon skandalizō TDNT 7* (1971), 339.

⁴⁴ Barrett, *Romans*, 241-242.

⁴⁵ Obligation is defined in the Roman legal context as follows: *Obligationum substantia non in eo consistit, ut aliquod corpus nostrum aut seruitutem nostram faciat...* (The essence of obligations does not consist in that it binds another person to give, do, or perform something for us), see R.P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 19.

by saying that the strong are obliged to bear (*bastazein*)⁴⁶ the weaknesses of the weak. It implies that the initiative is taken from the strong group to honour the weak group thereby putting into practice the exhortation to outdo⁴⁷ one another in honouring (12:10) by carrying another person's weaknesses. Carrying another person's weaknesses implies carrying the weak themselves by placing one's strength in the place of the weaknesses and probably place oneself in another's position. It needs more power and strength so as not to please themselves, thereby imparting Christ-like character.

It is striking that he balances the obligation to 'each of us' in pleasing 'the neighbour for good' in v.2. Why and in what ways are the 'strong' obliged to the weak is the question that comes to our mind. Jewett suggests, 'Having received the supreme gift of salvation, granted freely to the undeserving, each recipient has the reciprocal obligation of gratitude to the divine giver and of passing on the gift with the similar generosity to others who are equally undeserving'.⁴⁸ The strong ought to bear the scruples of the weak; the scruples may mean any failings that they had to undergo, and they could not bear by themselves for which they need support and help.

Serving the interests of the other (15:2-3)

The obligation to bear the weakness of the weak should have an essential qualification as *kai mē heautois areskein* (not to please ourselves, 15:1). The verb *areskō* (must please) implies accommodating oneself to someone.⁴⁹ Paul reverses the order of pleasing just as overturning the obligatory system prevalent in the Roman patronage; the cultural principle is that the superior class have the capacity to please themselves while those in the lower level lack ability and also (as 'slaves and members of the urban underclass') always work to please their masters; the important Pauline concept of pleasing is that in Christ, those who are able should serve the powerless by not pleasing themselves which has its implications in 'not destroying the work of God' (14:15, 20), pursuing peace and mutual up building (14:19) and to keep away from anything that offends others (14:21).

Although Paul sides with the strong and places the responsibility of bearing on their shoulders (as their first choice), by reversing the existing pattern of obligation of the Roman system, he broadens his vision of obligation in the Christian community by sharing the responsibility to both sides- weak and strong- with the formulation 'each of us'. It clearly envisions the Pauline concept of

⁴⁶ BAGD, 137.

⁴⁷ Reasoner, *The Strong*, 181.

⁴⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 876.

⁴⁹ BAGD, 105.

community with all the members equally participating in their effort of mutual up- building (12:3-8), which again points to the Roman social system that assumes the powerful are able to act independently. Hence, Paul uses language that includes him too in the one Christian family, devoid of divisions.

The mutual responsibility is qualified by pleasing the *plēision* (neighbour) for good and mutual up- building. The fulfilment of the law by loving your neighbour is referred to in 13:9-10; while Paul speaks of his apostolic strategy ‘to please all people in all he does’ (1 Cor 10:33). *Plēision* (neighbour) has a broader definition of ‘one’s fellow human being’,⁵⁰ which means here the fellow believer or, in a much broader context, those whom they associate with. The pattern of Christ’s receiving without pleasing himself is the fundamental model in relationships to one another. It brings to light that the redemptive action of Christ has not been fulfilled in our righteous mode but in our undeserving and unrighteous mode of character. The aorist verb *eresen* (to please) implies Jesus’ selfless attitude in his entire ministry.⁵¹ In Philippians 2:3-5, we read:

Though He was in the form of God (Jesus) did not count equality with God, but emptied himself to become a servant, being in the human form, he humbled himself and was obedient until death, death on the cross.

Christ did not please himself but as it is written ‘the reproaches of those who reproached me fell on me’ (Rom 15:3, see Ps 69:9). Paul quotes the Psalmist in a way that has Jesus speaking about the reproaches (*oneidos* that means disgrace, scandal, abuse, shame etc.)⁵² fell on him. ‘Christ died the most shameful deaths in behalf of the shamed’.⁵³

In the context of Rom. 15, Paul wants to maintain a ‘mutually accepting attitude between the strong and the weak’, which ‘has the stunning implication that contempt and judging going on between the Roman congregations add to the shameful reproach that Christ bore on the cross for the sake of all’.⁵⁴ The two groups should work for mutual honour and integrity by pleasing others rather than judging and despising that tends to shame others.

Up-Building Metaphor (*oikodomē*, 14:19; 15:2)

⁵⁰ Klaus Haacker, *plēision* EDNT 3 (1993), 113.

⁵¹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans ICC* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1975-79), 2:732.

⁵² Johannes Schneider, *oneidov*, TDNT 5 (1967), 238.

⁵³ Jewett, *Romans*, 880.

⁵⁴ Jewett, *Romans*, 880.

Welcoming one another has its result in mutual up-building. The change from the third person singular (14:18) to first person plural (14:19) implies that Paul and his associates are examples for the weak and the strong to 'pursue' (*diōkein*) peace and edification of others. The expression 'to pursue peace' in 14:19 has a corresponding expression *ta tēs oikodomēs* ('the edification of one another'), which amplifies the significance of the former 'pursue peace'. Cranfield suggests that this expression 'should probably be understood as serving more to fill out and clarify the significance which *ta tēs eirēnēs* has in this context'.⁵⁵

The use of *oikodomē* is characteristic of Paul's language to denote congregational work (1 Cor 3:9-10; 14:3, 5, 12, 26; 2 Cor 10:8;12:19; 13:10). In the LXX, the term is used to describe 'God's building of Israel' (Jer 12:16; 38:4, 28; 40:7; 49:10; 45:4; 51:34). There are also parallels in the Qumran Community which is described as 'eternal planting of holy house for Israel and a circle of the Most High' who witness to the truth of the law and 'make atonement for the land and judge the helpless.'

Although the term *oikodomē* is the same, the situation in the early Christian communities is different and the task of up-building is broader than in the context of the Qumran although there are closer parallels to Paul's up-building of the community in Epicurean philosophical communities.⁵⁶ To build up one another includes both groups, the weak and the strong, to work for the other side. The *allēlous* formula (see 14:13) calls forth both the groups to unite and work together for mutual edification. Jewett suggests, 'as each group supports the integrity of the other and encourages growth in others, a "mutually nurturing community" flourishes'.

The double emphasis in 15:2 (*eis to agathon pros oikodomēn*) to strive for the good and the up-building with the effect of pleasing one's neighbour indicates that Paul is reinstating the earlier exhortations in 13:10a, 'the love does not do evil to the neighbour', the quality of goodness versus evil that each believer should uphold (12:9), and the need to make every effort to overcome evil (12:21), thereby giving preference to the neighbour. Seeking the good of others results in the mutual up-building, which refers to the communitarian aspect rather than the individual sense. If each believer seeks the good of his neighbour, this has its effect in goodness and up-building of the community in its total dimension. In 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Paul urges the recipients of the letter to build up each one implying the task and effort of building one another, reversing the cultural paradigm of seeking good for themselves by dishonouring others. As Jewett rightly suggests, 'If each group seeks constructively to encourage the development of integrity and

⁵⁵ Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:721.

⁵⁶ Jewett, *Romans*, 866.

maturity in other groups, rather than trying to force them to conform to a single viewpoint, the ethnic and religious inclinations in Rome would no longer be divisive and destructive.’⁵⁷

It seems that Paul reinstates the implications of the body metaphor here, since the body works for a common purpose in spite of differences and diversities in the tasks of its members (Rom 12). Similarly, *oikodomē* calls forth unity in the purpose of the community to work for the edification of one another.

Theological Synthesis of the exegesis

Paul’s concern is to unify these fractured communities. He does so not by imposing uniformity but by accepting differences. Paul’s response comes in the form of a series of exhortations: he pleads for the welcoming of all, especially the weak (14:1; 15:7), just as Christ has welcomed them. This is the basis of believers’ practices of mutual acceptance. Believers are to welcome one another, including their cultural and religious differences. Paul admonishes the strong to be careful in their dealings with those whose faith is weak, and the weak not to judge those who are doing what God allows (14:1-4). Each member should be true to his or her conscience and do their duty as service rendered to the Lord (14:5-9). Paul warns the believers against condemning or despising one another, for Jesus will be the judge (14:10-12), and against putting a stumbling block in a brother’s or sister’s way (14:13). Rather than engage in the politics of division, he asks the community to pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding (14:13-23). The kingdom of God according to Paul is righteousness, as well as peace and joy. Thomas D. Stegman notes that “peace and joy are not commodities that can be bought or things that can be found. Rather, they ‘find’ us when we are growing into the people God calls us to be.”⁵⁸ Living peacefully and joyfully is distinctive of reconciled communities of God.

These admonitions towards peace, unity, and reconciliation continue in chapter 15. However, in 15:5-6, Paul couches his admonitions with prayer for harmony in life (15:5) and in liturgy (15:6) among the believers. This passage is important for two reasons: (a) it highlights the need to accompany the ministry of unity and reconciliation with prayer. While we strive for peace and unity, we recognize that, ultimately, these are divine gifts. In his analysis of Paul’s prayer, Thomas Schreiner submits that Paul’s prayer for unity here is not a prayer for unanimity on the issues that divide the “weak” and the “strong.” According to him, Paul is not praying that unity be achieved

⁵⁷ Jewett, *Romans*, 876.

⁵⁸ Thomas D. Stegman, *Written for Our Instruction: Theological and Spiritual Riches in Romans* (New York: Paulist, 2017), 60.

via the “weak” surrendering their unsatisfactory theology. Rather, Paul prays that they will be unified by learning to love and accept one another in the midst of their differences.⁵⁹

(b) The prayer Paul calls for shows that unity within the Roman Christian communities should be modeled on the life of the Messiah, that is, on the self-giving love that marked his earthly ministry. For Paul, when believers are united, they will be able to worship God together in harmony as one body. God is not honored when believers are fractured by divisions. As Schreiner strongly argues, “God is honored when Jews and Gentiles, with all their diversity, stand shoulder to shoulder and lift their voices in praise of God.”⁶⁰ Giving glory to God is the ultimate divine purpose for the creation of this new people of God, the glory that sinful humanity denies God (1:21). Note also that Paul’s reference to his appeal for the financial support of the church in Jerusalem (15:22-29) reflects a praxis of mutuality between the new people of God.⁶¹

The Pauline Ethos of Mutuality

I prefer to call the paradigm of mutuality in Romans 14, 15 as ‘Pauline Love Mutualism’, since love has an important role in leading to mutual character. Paul envisages this type of mutuality in these chapters of Romans as he urges the two groups to implement in their dealings with one another. This is significantly different from the simple idea of reciprocity because it has the procedure being servants of one another, without pleasing themselves, each side giving priority to the others with participation of both parties in a dynamic reversal of position like pedal of a bicycle (a continuous and reciprocal movement, up and down). The manner of Christ is involved and the two groups emerge mutually edified and mutually welcomed in the end, without any necessary change in their mutual identity. The mutual exchange of joy, peace, righteousness, hope, truth, grace, promises etc. might takes place. The edification passes on to others as a chain reaction since each and every member of the congregation is involved in this process in its total dimension.

Allēlous (one another): Two Way Relationship

Paul’s admonition to love and care for each other is significant among his teachings to the community of believers. The main aim is to encourage the believers to have a proper conduct towards each other; that is, the emphasis is on mutuality. The *allēlous* language is carried into these chapters 14, 15 from 12 and 13 as Paul encourages the Roman Christians to extend mutual

⁵⁹ Stegman, *Written for Our Instruction: Theological and Spiritual Riches in Romans*, 750.

⁶⁰ Stegman, *Written for Our Instruction: Theological and Spiritual Riches in Romans*, 750.

⁶¹ Thomas Stegman, “What Does the New Testament Say About Reconciliation?” in *Healing God’s People: Theological and Pastoral Approaches, A Reconciliation Reader*, ed. Thomas A. Kane, (New York: Paulist, 2013), 43.

relations to the fellow believers, although he distinguishes the community into two groups the 'strong' and the 'weak'. There are four *allēlous* references in chapters 14 and 15.

- i. Do not judge one another (14:13)
- ii. let us pursue matters that lead to peace and to edification for one another (14:19)
- iii. May the God of endurance and of comfort give to you the power to think the same thing among one another according to Jesus Christ (15:5)
- iv. Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (15:7).

Allēlous is an important term used by Paul in Romans to describe the horizontal and ethical dimension of Christian life. Commitment to fellow human beings has a positive implication in relationship to God (Rom 12:1, 2). God's mercy described in 12:1 and 15:9 links the section to the emphasis of chapters 9-11. Christian life has a social significance and the ideals of the kingdom of God are justice, peace, joy and fellowship which have their expression in mutual relationship and love. Paul's desire is to urge unity and solidarity among the believers by enhancing mutual relations. He wants to emphasize it in the different dimensions of life as a Christian, that is, it can be explicit in different forms of love as affection, generosity, hospitality, identifying with, honouring and forgiving (Rom 12, 13). The attitude of sober mindedness (12:3) creates 'other'-mindedness, being the 'body in Christ' and 'members of one another'. As members of the 'one' body (in Christ), each one's task of welcoming, bearing and edifying one another is significant and its implication to the community is also remarkable as each one is required to avoid judging that destroys the work of God and ruins the fellow brother/sister.

Dynamic Relationship

The basic idea of reciprocity has the characteristic of two way relationships, and reciprocity in antiquity can be either on equal or on unequal grounds. However, uniqueness of Pauline mutuality is that there is dynamism involved by reversal of positions. Here a question arises whether the mode of mutuality implies hierarchy or equality. Paul alters the hierarchical model in antiquity to that of a process of equalization though not static equality. It could be more than equality, as 'reciprocity of honour' seems to suggest. No one is permanent in their position. Each one promotes the other by reversal of positions: one takes the position of the other. There is a process of reciprocal relationships. In antiquity there is generally a permanent system of hierarchy. But in Paul there is a repeated process of change in position; continuous change to put others in balance. This type of relationship can be sustained by being servants of one another and by regarding others as brother/sister (sibling).

Servants of one Another:

The Christological motivation for the dynamic process of behaviour in welcoming, bearing, pleasing, edifying etc., is the fundamental mode of community relationships, leading to unity and harmony. Romans 15:1-3 is closely parallel to Mark 10:45; Jesus came to the world 'not to be served, but to serve...' Being servants of one another doesn't work unless one individual/group is ready to accept a lower state which automatically uplifts the opposite group. It needs surrendering of selfish motives for the sake of others. In turn, the recipient of the service intends to serve the donor by going through the same process in return for the same purpose. The strong and the weak members of the community represent diversities and differences in a community just like body. This probably helps the community to follow Christ's pattern of behaviour in the matter of welcoming (Rom 14, 15). If the members are either all weak or all strong, how can the community exercise the character of other-mindedness? The effectiveness of the Christ-like character could be revealed only if it is given an opportunity. Those who have greater strengths are obliged to bear those of the lesser, thereby implying mutuality in the community as seen in the body metaphor: giving more honour to other members. The implications of being the body of Christ are expressed in receiving one another as Christ has received them all. It seems that the gist of all that Paul has explained regarding being one body in Christ and members of one another is clearly implied in the action of mutual welcoming. The act of welcoming or receiving does imply the denial of one's own motives in order to promote others.

Brother/Sister Metaphor:

It is striking to note how Paul brings up relationships to one another by introducing models from the practical realm. If the first metaphor he used in Rom. 14-15 is the servant model (v.4), the second pattern of relationship is depicted as the members of one family (v.10, 13, 21, 15). It emphasizes the strong relationship between those who are knit together in Christ and work for a common purpose. It implies the belonging togetherness of the members and their effort for the common good.

Working for the common good involves honouring others rather than oneself. As Aasgaard puts it, Paul's aim in the use of this metaphor 'is to make each party hold the other party in higher esteem than previously.'⁶² The singular usage of the brother metaphor probably indicates individual responsibility towards others as well as to God (14:12), thereby implying that although working as groups, an individual's responsibility towards another individual constitutes to the responsibility of the whole group to attain its destined purpose. In other words, if a community

⁶² Aasgaard, *My Beloved Brothers*, 214.

fails to attain its goal, each and every member of it needs to take the responsibility of his/her failure of mission towards its achievement.

Romans 14–15: A Paradigm for Mutual Cooperation Among Christians in Nigeria

The implicit theme of Romans 14:1–15:13 is Christian mutuality or unity. If the community is also the Body of Christ, then any division is a division of Christ. It can only be the work of the Holy Spirit who gathers the community, confirms, and sustains it and drives its mission to announce Christ to all nations. Mutuality, therefore, is not the product of structures. It differs from other forms of social unity: it is the work of grace lived in mission. Everyone has a responsibility to maintain this unity. It is the product of the members' genuine Spirit-led desire to be 'one in Christ'. This harmony is the fruit of the Spirit and the transformed relationality of the community.

The way in which Paul speaks of qualities that characterise the relationships between members should not be reduced to a list of aspirational virtues or of ethical qualities. They are evidence of the life of grace and witness to the new healed and regenerated humanity given in baptism. 'Humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another, bonds of peace...': these, too, are all Christological. Yet they are also specifically those relational gifts which keep things open for one other; they do not break or close possibilities of restoration and life. They are the hallmarks of a creative love that is willing to carry the burden and pain of the other. Here, Paul shows us that the 'walking together' of the Church's life is a 'walking in love'; therefore, the reality of the "weak" and "strong" among Christians in Nigeria is incompatible with Paul's principles of love, mutuality, accommodation, and inclusiveness, etc., because it endorses human hatred and division, superiority and domination.

Christians are here enjoined to maintain good relations with one another and with non-Christians through praying for their welfare, empathy with their joys, sympathy with their sorrows, and respectful and forgiving attitudes towards them. Paul admonishes Christians against taking on arrogant and superior attitudes based on their differences. According to Constantineau, "to judge, or despise one another, or to be a stumbling block for others are practices of exclusion which Paul describes as sinful because they destroy the relationship between members of the community, which is the body of Christ."⁶³ Christians are called to an ethic of love and care for the other. Oppression of the socially weak and the poor, or indifference to their plights, is social sin, something that attracts God's anger on a people (see Amos 2:6-7; Luke 11:42).

⁶³ Constantineau, *The Social Significance of Reconciliation*, 173.

CONCLUSION

The paradigm of mutuality that Paul emphasizes in Rom 14–15 is concretised in mutual welcome. The attitudes of judgment and despising remain hindrances to this positive aspect of relationships. Genuine love to a brother or sister is shown by accepting him/her in the present state of existence, even if in the undeserving state, which is the pattern of the cross. Christ made us righteous by bearing all our sins on himself. We have to accept others as Christ has accepted us. The Christian *philadelphia* (Rom 12:10) and *koinonia* (Rom 12:13) are expressed in the form of welcoming one another, while each retaining their respective identity.

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