

**Welcoming “the Weak” and “the Strong” Into the
Church-Family in Africa: Perspective from Romans
14:1-15:13**

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Introduction

Throughout Scriptures there is a sustained emphasis on the fact that if people truly know and love God, then they must walk in his ways and maintain good relationship and leadership with fellow believers. Biblical ethics of leadership, unity, of welcoming and of tolerating one another, ‘the weak’ and “the strong,” heard especially in Paul’s Letter to the Romans 14-15:13, could be challenging for the Church-Family in Africa and beyond. Such challenges (misunderstanding, disunity among “the weak” and “the strong”, Jews and Gentiles, with lack of tolerance for others’ observance, as well as refusal to imitate Christ) experienced in Pauline Roman Community context are perceived in today’s pluralistic contexts across African Nations and beyond.

Many of these challenges, though already testified in *Ecclesia in Africa* (EIA), in *Africae Munus* (AM) and in the *Instrumentum Laboris of the Symposium of Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar* (SECAM) and in Udoekpo *The Limits of a Divided Nation*, (1999), are worthy of our attention, particularly, readers of the *American Journal of Biblical Theology* (AJBT).

Challenges plaguing Africa, include poverty of unity and sense of common good, political instability, poor leadership, proliferation of worship centers, social disorientation, war, misery, despair, lack of

peace, justice and dialogue. Others are division, ethnocentrism, and mismanagement of ethnicity, violence, tribalism and lack of ethics of tolerance for one another (cf. *EIA*, 1995:42-43; *AM*, 2011; *SECAM*, 2019:3-5; see also Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983); Nwachukwu, *One Faith Many Tongues* (2017).

This article builds on these past testimonies. It theologically, metaphorically and socio-politically focuses on the analysis of the later paraneisis on “lack of ethics of tolerance for one another’s observance” in Romans 14-15:13. That is, on the need for believers, “the weak” and the strong” to learn to live side by side in peace in the Church-Family in Africa.

Foregrounding such analysis are the following clarification; (1) why Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans, (2) a working identity and nature of “the weak” and “the strong” and (3) some relevant images of the Church-Family in Africa.

This approach, especially in today’s era of the papacy of Pope Francis, a widely received global religious leader, is not only refreshing, but hopes to remind us in our different locations in life, of the true relationship between the gospel and life. It also reminds us, readers of *AJBT* and beyond, the ethical imperative to always welcome one another, treat people with love of Christ, and tolerate our neighbors, “the weak” and “the strong,” irrespective of culture, gender, religion and socio-political class (John 13:15; Rom 15:1-3).

Why Paul Wrote the Letter to the Romans

Paul’s Letter to the Romans of which our text of love, and tolerance among members of the Church-Family in Africa, forms a part, is the first and the longest of Pauline Letters in the New Testament. It is the most detailed of Paul’s gospel with great influence on Christian theology (Matera, *Romans* 2010:3). N. T. Wright (*NIBC*: 319) describes it as Paul’s masterpiece that “dwarfs most of his other writings, an Alpine peak towering over hills and villages.” Scholars are of the opinion that in order to understand why Paul wrote Romans,

which remains ever relevance to the Church in Africa, we need to step back into the historical circumstances of Paul and of the Romans (cf. Karl Donfried, *Romans Debate*, 1991; Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, 1996). I believe this is what Taylor Jr. (*Paul*, 2012: 229) intends to do by suggesting that answers be sought for the following three questions: (a) how was the community founded? (b) How did the edict of Claudius affect the community? (c) What kind of people made up the community to whom Paul wrote? Similar questions are worth contemplating by members of the Church-Family in a pluralistic Africa who seek to welcome and tolerate one another, in imitation of Christ who first welcome all.

As if anticipating Walter's proposal, Matera (2010:6) opines that Paul's historical circumstances included the fact that he wrote from Corinth, from the home of Gaius, during the winter and spring of AD 56; that Paul completed his work in the East, with the intention of opening a mission in Spain. On his journey to Spain, he planned to visit the Christ-believers in Rome. But prior to this, he needed to bring the collection that he had taken up among the Gentile congregation to the poor among Christ-believers in Jerusalem.

Matera (2010:8) also notes that Christianity came to Rome before Paul wrote to the Romans. While the original believers may have been converts from Judaism, there was a large Gentiles contingent in Rome at the time Paul wrote. These Roman Christians, like African Christians' history, discussed in *Ecclesia in Africa*, "belonged to different households' churches, in which there may have been tensions between Jewish Christians and the law-observant Gentile Christians, on the one hand, and Gentiles believers who did not observe the law, on the other. While the latter group was probably sympathetic to Paul's gospel, the former was probably wary of the apostle's teaching."

Given Taylor Jr., and Matera's proposals we can conclude that Paul wrote our text, *Romans*, for several reasons; (1) to summarize his gospel; (2) to prepare the Romans for his visit to Rome; (3) to ask

them to support his new missionary work in Spain; (4) to resolve any misgivings about his understanding of the gospel and to prevent inroads by missionaries who disagreed with him; (5) to ask for prayers for his trip to Jerusalem and possibly intercession with Jerusalem believers; (6) to resolve the problem of the weak and the strong (cf. Matera, 8; Taylor Jr., 235; Wedderburn, 140-42; Moo, *Romans*, Fitzmyer, *Romans*, Cranfield, *Romans*). But who are “the weak” and “the strong” for Paul, and for the Church in Africa?

Working Images of “the Weak” and “the Strong”

While most commentators agree that Romans 14:1-15:13 is an exhortation that focuses on the relationship between the weak and the strong, there is a disagreement on the exact nature and identity of “the weak” and “the strong.” While most argue that “the weak” were Jewish Christians who observed the dietary and ritual prescriptions of the law, and “the strong” were Gentile Christians who found no need to do so, others assess the ethnic makeup of this group differently (Matera, 306). Andrew Das, (2007:264), for example, argues that both the weak and the strong were Gentile Christians. The former had a deep appreciation of Judaism and its practices because they had been closely associated with the synagogue, whereas the latter did not. The underlying issue, Taylor Jr., (248) argues is disagreement over food rules and holy days. Some members of the community abstained from certain foods and observed holy days not observed by the whole-believing community. They were probably “the weak,” (Rom 14:1). Moreover, the “strong” (probably those who agree with Paul) are to support and carry along the weak (Rom 15:1).

Beside Pauline perspective of “the weak” and “the strong,” in Africa, how often do we not judge one another base on his or her tribe, color, gender, food and drink choices, school attended, degrees acquired, and style of dressing, socio-economic status and language? How often do we not inordinately discriminate against one another because of his or her religion, region, state, local government, clan, village, family, culture, church denomination and political party? It is in these

perspectives that the metaphors of the “weak” and the “strong” is used in this paper, for the Church-Family in Africa, which identity we must define.

The Church- Family in Africa- Identity

As already mentioned elsewhere, especially during the last, Thirtieth Theological Conference at the Catholic Institute of West Africa (April 8-12, 2019), there are many images found in ecclesiastical documents, theological treatises and literature, relevant for our discussion. These include, the church as the mystical body, paradox, a mystery, people of God, temple of the Holy Spirit, flock and sheepfold, the house in which God dwells, the bride of Christ, our mother, the holy city and the first fruits of the coming kingdom (cf. De Lubac, *The Church*, 1967; *Lumen Gentium*, 1964; *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965; Bender, *Nature of the Church*, 14-66; Okure, “Church-Family of God,” 13-24; “Church of the NT,” 93-105; Minear, *Images of the Church*, Dulles, *Models*). But the Church as “a Family” remains most relevant for us. Thanks to Paul VI (*Evangellii Nuntiandi*, no. 71) who encourages us to also see the family as “a domestic Church.” In his part, John Paul II (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 15), reminds us that it is the family that points the “way of the Church.” The Church must remain the guiding principle for evangelization, which include welcoming the weak and the strong into the Church-Family in Africa (*EIA*, nos. 63-64). This Church-Family must emphasize care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationship, acceptance, dialogue and trust. It must be “sanctuary of life” for all (*AM*, no. 42), as well as a place that propagates the “fundamental elements of peace, justice, and love between brothers and sisters, as preached by Paul in Romans 14: 1-15:13.

Ethical Implications of Romans 14:1-15:13 for Africa

In the final part of Romans, Paul presents his readers, including the Church in Africa, with an extended exhortation in which he urges them to live a morally good life made possible by the saving righteousness that God has manifested in Christ’s death and

resurrection. This section on the transformed life of believers has two major units. The first unit is on humility, love, obedience and services among believers (Rom 12:1-13:14). The second unit, our text of concentration (Rom 14:1-15:13) is an invitation for peoples of all walks of life, barriers of custom and ethnic identities to live in unity, tolerating one another, without judging one another (Rom 14:1-12).

While adjudicating between two factions that he identifies as the strong (*hoi dynatoi*), and the weak (*ta asthenēmata*), he exhorts the Roman Christians not to judge or scandalize one another because of differing opinions regarding diet and the observance of particular days but to sustain and receive one another (*proslambanesthe allēlous*) as Christ has received them (Rom 15:7-13). Romans 14: 1-4 , in particular, is a true reminder that even in Africa even though saving faith may lead us to abstain from certain things, especially other people's food, drinks, customs and culture, they do not ethically determine our standing before God. Loving families do accommodate members of the family who are allergic to certain food items and drinks, so should the Church-Family in Africa.

As noted by David M. Kasali (2006), in verses 5-9 Paul deals with another issue causing division- considering particular days more sacred than others. Probably the days were Jewish Sabbath and other festivals. What Paul's exhorts applies to the Church in Africa in relation to what they do or do not do on Sundays and Holy Days of obligations. These days in the Church in Africa does not prohibit love and acts of charity, or acts of saving our neighbors' lives, especially by health workers in clinics and hospitals. For Paul judgment should be left to God alone (vv.10-12).

In addition, Christians even when they think they are free and right, must not be a source of scandals to others. They must live in unity without offending others (vv. 13-23). The strong should not condemn the weak by insisting on their convictions about dietary prescriptions. Like in Paul's days, some believers today in Africa are uncaring, their freedom not only cause their neighbors to stumble, but are offensive.

As Kasali (2006) would put it “whether we are strong and insensitive to others, or weak and petty about trivial things/rules (food, style of dress, drink, ones’ village of origin and dialect: Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Annang, Ibibio, Ogoni, Oron, Ogoja, or Ijaw and Ikwere etc), we can become the reasons that fellow believers fall into sin.” Paul reminds members of the Church in Africa that it is unethical to cause problems for others (vv.14-16). On the contrary members of the Church in Africa are to serve Christ, by tolerating others, maintaining peace at places of work, institutions, in religious and civil communities. In other words, what is important for God’s kingdom is not food and drink, nor where we come from, south or west, east or north, but righteousness, peace, harmony, good leadership, tolerance and joy in the Holy Spirit (vv.17-19, 20-21).

In verses 22-23 Paul offers the Church-Family in Africa, three things (1) we should not voice our opinions indiscriminately when we know that they may offend other members of the family. This does not mean we should not speak up our minds. But, we must speak at the right time, right place, right manner for the building up of the community, (2) in all that we do we must not be against our consciences and (3) no one should force any fellow believer to act against his or her conscience.

In Romans 15:1-13 Paul concludes his exhortations on the unity of the strong and the weak (*tōn adynatōn*). He identifies himself with the strong and speak from experience by reappealing to the strong Christians to bear (*bastazein*) with the failings of the weak and not to please themselves (v. 1). They must not merely tolerate the weak, they must patiently and tenderly identify with them as much as possible, sacrificially accommodating the limitations of the weak members of the church, especially in Africa (v.2). By so doing the strong members of the Church-Family in Africa will be following the example of Jesus, who gave up his rights and put the interests of others before his own when he suffered and died for us (v.3). Paul draws from Psalm 69:9 to support his exhortation, showing that Christ

journey to the cross on behalf of others, was an essential part of his mission.

In addition, Paul wants the Church-Family of God's people in Africa not only to practice ecumenism, and Christian dialogue with other cultures, but to realize that the record in Scriptures, whose focus is Christ and the example the Messiah he has set, is meant to build the virtues of endurance and encouragement in our lives (v.4). Maintaining these virtues, Paul prayerfully stresses, are necessary for the unity of members of the Church, who must bear with one another with love, acceptance and tolerance (vv.5-13)

Conclusions

We notice in what precedes that although Paul's discussion of the weak and the strong deals with a practical issue, it raises important theological questions, beneficial to the Church in Africa and beyond. Matera (325) also captures these questions: What is the nature of the freedom that believers enjoy in Christ? This question arises because of Paul's teaching on justification by faith. If believers in the Church-Family in Africa are no longer under the law because they belong to Christ, then are they not free in regard to the matters that deal with the law? Again, since members of the Church-Family in Africa belong to the new humanity that their risen Lord has initiated, are they not free from all things that pertains to the aforementioned challenges and old humanity plaguing Africa? In other words, can the freedom and new life that Christians in Africa enjoy in the Spirit be circumscribed in any way? While one can imagine Paul's answers in favour of the freedom of good leadership that Christians enjoy in Christ, his discussion in Romans 14:1-15:13 shows that there are moments when it is necessary to restrain one's personal freedom for the good leadership of the body of believers.

The freedom that members of the Church in Africa enjoys is a freedom to tolerate one another. It is a freedom to live in a community of Gentiles and Jews where each graciously acknowledges the differences of the other so that the entire community can worship God

in the voice of the messianic Lord. N. T. Wright (647) calls this freedom “shared worship.” It is a freedom that recognizes that, at times, it may be necessary to restrain oneself for the good of others since all are not the same level of maturity in Christian life (Matera, 326).

In addition, Paul’s vision for the Church-Family in Africa is love and never to play down Christian ecumenism, good leadership, intercultural and religious dialogue. They must transcend their tribal and sectional cultural differences and build a united and harmonious Church-Family rooted in the values of the gospel. It is this same vision of tolerance and unity that Pope Francis (*Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 38-47; Udoekpo, *Francis*, 81-83) shares in his ministry. With Paul, Pope Francis, invites the Church everywhere, Africa in particular, to constantly go forth with good leadership, in order to be in contact with the homes and lives of all peoples, “the weak,” and “the strong,” and not with a chosen or selected few.

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