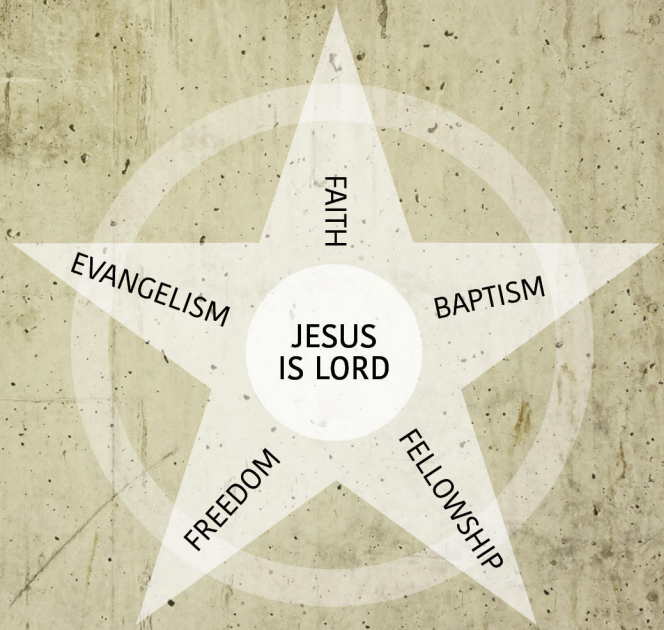


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‘Welcome One Another’: Applying Romans 14.1-15.13 to the Debate on Same-Sex Relationships

Tim Carter

Introduction

‘Welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God’ (Romans 15:7). With those words Paul concludes his address to the strong and the weak groups of Christians in Rome who were bitterly divided over the question of Sabbath observance and food laws. In his study advocating tolerance as an authentic expression of faith in God, Robert Jewett has argued that this call to welcome each other ‘was to accept others into full fellowship, to put an end to the hostile competition, and to admit the basic legitimacy of the other sides.’¹ For Jewett, tolerance is not the consequence of a lack of conviction: on the contrary, a vital faith should issue in a ‘strenuous tolerance’, one which goes beyond a passive recognition of another’s point of view, and instead actively reaches out to include them in one’s circle.² The call to welcome each other as Christ has welcomed us indicates that the tolerant ethic of Romans is a practical outworking of the grace of the gospel, inasmuch as we are called ‘to pass on the same unconditional acceptance to others that we ourselves have already received.’³ Whereas churches frequently respond to those with whom they disagree by severing connections, skirting round divisive issues, insisting on conformity or setting out to win the fight; Jewett argues that Paul’s call to welcome each other means that churches should actively encourage expressions of difference, so that believers can

¹ Robert Jewett, *Christian Tolerance: Paul’s Message to the Modern Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 29.

² Jewett, *Tolerance*, 35.

³ Jewett, *Tolerance*, 37.

respect the integrity of the other and in mutual love rejoice in their diversity.⁴

In this paper, I want to follow Jewett's line of argument and explore how the principles of tolerance set out in Romans 14-15 can be applied to the question of how we debate today's contentious issue of same-sex relationships,⁵ an issue which divides the church today as much, if not more than the issue of food laws divided the Christians in Rome when Paul wrote his letter to them. It is clear that in the Roman congregations those of each persuasion were equally devoted to honouring the Lord (14:5-6), but they were fundamentally at odds over the question as to whether it was legitimate for believers to eat unclean food. We get an insight into the mutual acrimony from Romans 14:2-3, where those who eat meat despise those who eat only vegetables, and those who abstain from meat sit in judgment on those who eat it.

Whereas for us the issue of unclean food is largely irrelevant, for some Jewish believers in Rome it was a matter of practical obedience to the clear stipulations set out in Leviticus 11. Others, however, interpreted Scripture in such a way that they felt, with a clear conscience, that they were not bound by the food laws. Underlying the question of what one was allowed to eat was the hermeneutical question as to how to interpret and apply the requirements of Torah in the light of the Christ event. On the one hand, there were those whose faith was inextricably tied to the clear and unambiguous teaching of authoritative scripture, and on the other, there were those whose faith was robust enough for them to interpret scripture in a very different way, resulting in a very different lifestyle.⁶

⁴ Jewett, *Tolerance*, 122-26.

⁵ Within the Anglican Communion, Reinhard has applied Jewett's work to the human sexuality debate: K.L. Reinhard, 'Conscience, Interdependence, and Embodied Difference: What Paul's Ecclesial Principles Can Offer the Contemporary Church,' *ATR* 94 (2012): 403-28. Cf. the response by J.C. Olson, 'Idol food, same-sex intercourse, and tolerable diversity within the church,' *ATR* 95 (2013): 627-47.

⁶ Suggesting that the 'strong' and the 'weak' were 'liberal' and 'conservative' in their interpretation of scripture, Zerbe astutely argues that, 'Romans is primarily about resolving a crisis of relationships in the community of Christ's faithful', G. Zerbe, 'Welcoming as Christ has welcomed: Paul's challenge to

Seeing the issue in these terms invites us to revisit Romans 14-15 and to read these chapters, not as an appendix to the doctrinal body of the letter, written to resolve an arcane dispute over food laws, but rather as a pastoral call to believers, who were divided by very different approaches to Scripture, to accept each other. The differing approaches to Scripture in Paul's day resulted in very different attitudes towards one of the most basic of bodily functions, namely that of eating. Sexual activity is another basic bodily function,⁷ and churches today are deeply divided as to whether physically intimate relationships between people of the same sex can be compatible with the Christian faith. This essay seeks to explore how Paul dealt with the issue of unclean food in Romans 14-15, with a view to exploring whether there are lessons to be learned from his pastoral approach in Romans for a church at odds with itself over the issue of sexuality today.

This study will proceed by identifying the strong and the weak and the issues that divided them, and why those issues mattered, before going on to explore the implications of the probable social context of the Roman church for the exegesis of Romans 14-15, and then applying the findings to the issue of the debate over sexuality.

Identifying the Strong and the Weak in Rome

The identity of the strong and the weak has been a matter for extensive debate, but an important key to resolving this issue lies in noting that in 15:8-12 Paul turns straight from addressing the strong and the weak to addressing the relationship between those who are circumcised and the Gentiles. Unless there is a sudden jump in the

Christians in Rome,' *Vision* 17 (2016): 78-86 [78]; cf. Jewett, *Tolerance*, 29-30; J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 803; J.A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (Geoffrey Chapman: London, 1992), 686-88.

⁷ Eating and sex are not just bodily functions: both involve crossing bodily boundaries, and their regulation plays an important part in preserving the integrity of both somatic and social identity. Cf. M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2003), 122-29; C.M. Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (London: Routledge, 1999), 61-63.

focus of his attention at the end of 15:7,⁸ this suggests that the weak and the strong were divided, if not actually along ethnic lines, then at least in terms of their level of Torah observance.⁹ It is easy to see how keeping the Sabbath, prescribed as it is in the fourth commandment, was unambiguously a matter of Torah observance, but abstention from meat is less obviously accounted for in this regard. Yet if it was difficult to procure clean, *kosher* meat in the markets in Rome, or to be sure whether the meat or wine for sale had not previously been used in the worship of an idol, observant Jews would likely have followed the example of Daniel and his friends in Babylon and restricted their diet to vegetables and water (Daniel 1:8-16).¹⁰ Thus, there are good grounds for understanding the issue Paul addresses in Romans 14-15 as being one of Torah observance and devotion to God.¹¹

Towards one end of the spectrum there would have been believers who held that all Christians were bound to observe the prescriptions of Torah concerning circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws; moving across the spectrum, others would have seen these laws as binding on

⁸ For a defence of Romans 15:1-13 as an integral part of Paul's original letter, cf. R.N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 1010-12.

⁹ P. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 340-44; cf. Longenecker, *Romans*, 993-96, 1010-13.

¹⁰ Cf. also Esther 14:17 LXX; Josephus, *Vita* 13-14, and other references in C.H. Talbert, *Romans*, (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 311-15.

¹¹ In 1 Corinthians 8:4-13, Paul uses the term 'weak' to denote those who struggled to accept that an idol has no real existence, and who consequently refused to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols because it was against their conscience. Paul's concern is that their fragile faith could be jeopardised if they were encouraged to follow the example of those who felt free to eat in the temple of an idol on the epistemological basis that the idol was not real. It is likely that the weak vegetarians in Rome shared similar dietary scruples over idolatry as the weak in Corinth, and it may have been on this basis that Paul feels able to use the same nomenclature in both letters. However, we may not legitimately infer from his repeated use of the term that he is addressing the same scenario in each case. We must deduce what he means by 'the weak' in Romans from the context in this letter, and Paul would have expected his audience in Rome to be able to make sense of his words without needing to have read 1 Corinthians beforehand.

Jews but optional for Gentiles; others again may have felt that believers in Christ, whether Jewish or Gentile, were not required to observe Torah, but may choose to do so; still others, at the far end of the spectrum, seem to have felt that any observance of Sabbath, food laws and circumcision betrayed a lack of assurance that justification was solely a matter of faith in Christ, and so may have labelled as 'weak in faith'¹² those who had scruples about keeping the works of the law. ¹³ There was a tendency among the strong to despise those whose Torah observance was perceived as a sign of weak faith, whereas those labelled as weak were judging and condemning the strong who did not observe the law. Thus the unity and fellowship of the different congregations in Rome was under serious threat.

Indeed, it can be argued that the matter was of such importance to Paul that the entire letter to the Romans was composed to address this issue.¹⁴ He begins by establishing that justification is a matter of faith not works of the law (1-4), and then demonstrates that it is the eschatological Spirit of Christ, rather than the law, which effectively deals with the problem of the power of sin and so effectively directs the ethical life of believers (5-8). Subsequently he addresses the

¹² Dunn suggests that, 'In this case the weakness is trust in God *plus* dietary and festival laws, trust in God *dependent* on observance of such practices, a trust in God which leans on the crutches of particular customs and not on God alone, as though they were an integral part of that trust' (*Romans 9-16*, 798).

¹³ However, Barclay has argued convincingly that, rather than supposing that 'weak' was a disparaging term of reference adopted by those in Rome who saw themselves as those who were comparatively 'strong', it was Paul who coined the terms 'strong' and 'weak': contra Dunn (n.12), he argues that the weak are those whose faith is vulnerable because it is integrally connected to cultural norms, whereas the strong have been able to ground their faith solely in the gospel, rather than in any cultural norm or value: J.M.G. Barclay, 'Faith and Self-Detachment from Cultural Norms: A Study in Romans 14-15,' *ZNW* 104 (2013): 192-208.

¹⁴ C.f. Jewett, *Tolerance*, 23-29; J.P. Sampley, 'The Weak and the Strong: Paul's Careful and Crafty Rhetorical Strategy in Romans 14:1-15:13,' in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne Meeks* (eds. L.M. White, O.L. Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 40-52; T.L. Carter, *Paul and the Power of Sin: Redefining 'Beyond the Pale'* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 124-45; C.N. Toney, *Paul's Inclusive Ethic: Resolving Community Conflicts and Promoting Mission in Romans 14-15* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 49-90.

arrogance of Gentiles who wrongly supposed that what they saw as Israel's misguided pursuit of the law meant that they had missed out on the grace of God (9-11) before setting out how believers should relate to each other and to those who oppose them (12-13).¹⁵ Then, in chapters 14-15, we find the practical, pastoral outworking and application of his theological argument up to this point.¹⁶ Many reasons have been put forward as to why Paul wrote Romans,¹⁷ but the single pastoral issue of the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers¹⁸ and the interpretation and application of Old Testament food laws has the capacity to make sense of the letter as a whole, and correspondingly this means that we do well to pay particular attention to what Paul says in Romans 14-15.¹⁹

Why Unclean Food Mattered So Much

Because the questions of Sabbath observance and food laws are not particularly relevant to us today, it is tempting to categorise them as *adiaphora*,²⁰ matters of relative indifference, and we may

¹⁵ Jewett suggests that these chapters prepare the ground for what follows in Romans 14-15 (*Tolerance*, 107-120). Cf. also J-W. Lee, *Paul and the Politics of Difference: A Contextual Study of the Jewish-Gentile Difference in Galatians and Romans* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 141-46,

¹⁶ Cf. Toney, *Paul's Inclusive Ethic*, 120-24.

¹⁷ Cf. K.P. Donfried (ed.), *The Romans Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991); A.J.M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

¹⁸ K.B. McCrudden contests the view that Paul was addressing a specific pastoral situation in Romans, but suggests that the weak and the strong serve as literary theological models, demonstrating God's impartiality towards both Jews and Gentiles: 'Judgment und Life for the Lord: Occasion and Theology of Romans 14,1-15,13,' *Biblica* 86 (2005): 229-44.

¹⁹ Reasoner cogently argues, on the basis of his analysis of Romans 14-15, that the letter is 'thoroughly occasional': M. Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14.1-15.13 in Context* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).

²⁰ Longenecker (*Romans*, 1001) describes *adiaphora* as 'matters having to do primarily with social background, personal opinion or personal preference...that are neither required of nor prohibited to believers.' It is on the basis that the passage refers to such matters that he proposes how it can be contextualised for today (1018-19). Käsemann insists that 'Paul is not formulating a doctrine of *adiaphora* here': E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 375. According to Jewett, Paul frames his

correspondingly feel it is strange that Paul would devote so much attention to what is for us such a minor issue. But in the second century BCE, during the Maccabean crisis, Jews had been tortured, martyred, and slaughtered in battle because of their allegiance to the food and Sabbath laws.²¹ Consequently these commandments came to be regarded as badges of faithful allegiance.²² As Barclay has cogently argued, the issue of *kasbrut* may have been a matter of indifference to the strong, whose faith was less tied to the cultural and ethical demands of Torah, but for those who were weak, the kosher and sabbath rules were 'so closely interwoven with their faith-response to Christ that to depart from them would be, for them, an abrogation of that faith.'²³

For Torah-observant believers, keeping the requirements of Torah would be bound up with notions of holiness: they were to be holy because the Lord is holy (Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7-8). The charge to keep the Sabbath holy was one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15), and the command to distinguish between clean and unclean food was inextricably bound up with what it meant to be holy to the Lord and to be distinguished from all the other nations in the world.²⁴ In Leviticus 20:24-26, the same verb (ברל *hiphil*) is used four times as the Lord says, 'I am the LORD your God, who has **separated** you from the peoples. You shall therefore **separate** the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have **set apart** for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me, for I the

argument in such a way as to prevent the drawing of any distinction between what is essential and non-essential (*Tolerance*, 31-32).

²¹ 1 Maccabees 1:41-64; 2:31-38; 2 Maccabees 6:1-13; 4 Maccabees 4:15-6:30; 8:1-12:19.

²² Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 800-801.

²³ Barclay, 'Faith and Self-Detachment,' 200-201. Barclay shows (204) that it was precisely because the food laws were a matter of indifference to the strong, but of vital importance to the faith of the weak that Paul puts the onus on the strong to curtail their behaviour in order to avoid destroying the faith of the weak (Romans 14:20-23).

²⁴ C.f. G.J. Wenham, 'The Theology of Unclean Food,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 53 (1981): 6-15.

LORD am holy and have **separated** you from the peoples, that you should be mine.⁷ It is incumbent upon God's holy people, who have been separated from the peoples of the world, to distinguish clean from unclean food: diet both symbolises and expresses holiness. Furthermore, the refusal to eat food commonly consumed by other nations actively hinders commensality and thereby actively increases social isolation. The food laws set Israel, as God's holy people, apart from the other nations.

Yet Paul understood that through the gospel of Christ his God-given priestly ministry was to present the Gentiles as an offering sanctified and made holy by the Holy Spirit to the Lord (15:16). Thus, for him, the nations themselves had been made holy in Christ. This shared holiness meant that there was no longer the social need to maintain the distinction between clean and unclean that the food laws symbolised and reinforced.

We see from the incident in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-16) that Paul was convinced that commensality between believing Jews and Gentiles was God's will in Christ, and in his eyes to expect Gentiles to observe Jewish food laws was a denial of the gospel. In Romans we see Paul arguing that no food was inherently unclean: rather it was only unclean for the person who regarded it as such (14:14).²⁵ This way of re-

²⁵ Horrell suggests that this approach to morality could be described as 'a constructivist realism: things really are such, to the one who reckons them so': D.G. Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul's Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 205. As Engberg-Pedersen astutely observes, it is the attitude – the presence of faith or its absence – that decides whether or not a sin is committed, and he appeals to the Stoic distinction between the objective value of a thing or an act and the value people ascribe to it to elucidate this. For the Stoics, the wise person sees that God has made all things in accordance with nature, but the unwise person, who is insufficiently directed towards God, may mistakenly suppose that an object is bad, in which case it actually becomes bad for them. Paul applies this principle to the strong, who rightly perceive that apart from God's action in Christ, everything is a matter of indifference: T. Engberg-Pedersen, 'Everything is Clean' and 'Everything that is not of Faith is Sin': The Logic of Pauline Casuistry in Romans 14.1 – 15.13,' in *Paul, Grace and Freedom. Essays in Honour of John K. Riches*, (eds. P. Middleton, A. Paddison, K. Wenell; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2009), 22-38.

interpreting the Levitical food laws gave Paul the freedom to eat any food and to honour God by giving thanks for what he ate (14:6). However, those who considered themselves bound by the requirements of the law would be quite incapable of eating such food in honour of the Lord (14:6). On the contrary, to eat food that they regarded as unclean would be to commit a sin, since they were not acting in accordance with their faith (14:22).

Paul was convinced that it was vitally important that each person should be convinced in their own mind (14:5). Those who abided by the food laws were bound by their clear sense of authoritative Scripture, but for Paul, the law in its entirety was effectively fulfilled in the love commandment (13:8-10) and therefore individual commandments were open to interpretation. These differing approaches to Scripture underlay the controversy in Rome, but on the basis that the strong and the weak were acting in accordance with their faith, Paul calls on both groups to refrain from judging each other or despising each other (14:1-3, 10).

The Social Context and its Implications

Paul was also particularly concerned about the impact that the behaviour of the strong could have on the weak (14:13-23). The strong should not cause a brother or sister to trip up or fall by placing an obstacle, hindrance, trap or a stumbling block in their way (14:13). Whereas the strong may regard the food as inherently clean (14:14), if they upset, injure or cause distress to someone, then they are not walking in love and so are not fulfilling the law; while food was of little consequence to them, the strong needed to take account of the fact that their food could destroy or ruin someone for whom Christ died (14:15).

When Paul asks the strong to moderate their behaviour, he is not merely asking them to refrain from eating unclean food in the presence of the weak so as to avoid upsetting them or causing offence.²⁶ The strong are not required to abstain from unclean food merely on the grounds that the weak find this objectionable. When Paul talks about

²⁶ J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2.190-91.

destroying another person, he is referring to the far more serious matter of leading them into sin; this is not about the conscience of the weak being offended by the behaviour of the strong, but about the strong causing the weak to act against their own conscience. Romans 14:23 makes it clear that this happens when someone ends up eating something which is against their scruples; because they are not acting in accordance with their faith, their own doubts condemn them. How does such a situation arise?

It is important to remember that, in talking about food, Paul is in fact talking about meals, and meals were shared social occasions.²⁷ We know from Romans 16:5, where Paul greets the church that meets in the house of Prisca and Aquila that at least some of the Christians in Rome gathered in each other's homes. This suggests that there is a practical dimension to Paul's imperative *προσλαμβάνεσθε ἀλλήλους, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς προσελάβετο ὑμᾶς* (15:7): 'Welcome each other, just as Christ has welcomed you.' Paul is not referring to passive acceptance of each other's point of view, but rather calling the groups to show hospitality to each other, by welcoming each other into their homes. The semantic range of *προσλαμβάνω* includes the meaning, 'receive or accept in one's society, into one's house or circle of acquaintances',²⁸ Dunn cross-references 2 Maccabees 10:15, which refers to taking in refugees from Jerusalem, Acts 28:2, which refers to the welcome extended by the inhabitants of Malta to Paul and his companions when they were shipwrecked, and to Paul's own injunction to Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he would Paul

²⁷ Although Paul instructs the strong to abstain from behaviour which would cause the weak to stumble, Barclay observes that this probably only applied in the context of shared meals; he did not require a complete change in their dietary habits. The weak are permitted to keep food and sabbath laws, but are required to accept and associate with brothers and sisters in Christ who did not do so. Thus the strong are required to moderate their behaviour as the occasion requires, but the weak have an obligation to welcome and accept those with whom they fundamentally disagree. Cf. J.M.G. Barclay, "Do we undermine the Law?" A Study of Romans 14.1-15.6, in *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 37-60.

²⁸ W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (London: University of Chicago, 1979), 717.

himself (Philemon 17).²⁹ As Esler observes, ‘Rom. 14:1 “Welcome...but not for disputes about opinions,” seems to envisage some such welcome into a specific place, and the most likely place is the house of the one being urged to do the welcoming.’³⁰

In Graeco-Roman culture, sharing food was one of the most powerful symbolic expressions of fellowship.³¹ Accordingly, the appropriate social expression of welcoming each other would and should have been a shared meal.³² However, rather than being occasions where the fellowship was built up, the gatherings had degenerated into arguments over different opinions and mutual recrimination (14:1-3), and the meal had become a source of grief and distress and even destruction for those whose faith was weak (14:15).

Paul commands, μή τῷ βρώματί σου ἐκεῖνον ἀπόλλυε ὑπὲρ οὗ Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν: ‘by your food do not destroy one for whom Christ died.’ When it comes to translating τῷ βρώματί σου, ESV and NRSV opt for ‘[by] what you eat’; NIV goes for ‘by your eating’. These translations all assume that ‘your food’ is the food on your plate that you consume. However, when guests are invited to someone’s house for a meal, they eat the food that the host provides. If we suppose that Paul is addressing the host of a dinner party, then the phrase ‘your

²⁹ Dunn, *Romans*, 798.

³⁰ Esler, *Conflict*, 347.

³¹ This subject is thoroughly explored in Plutarch’s Table Talk, where consideration is given to the question as to ‘Whether people of old did better with portions served to each, or people of today, who dine from a common supply’: *Moralia: Quaestiones Convivales* 2.10 (LCL 424:183-19; 5642E-644D). Cf. L. Jamir, *Exclusion and Judgment in Fellowship Meals: The Socio-Historical Background of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2017), 1-5, 62-64.

³² Coutsoumpos argues that shared meals would have taken the form of the *eranos*, a meal where all the guests brought food to share between them: P. Coutsoumpos, *Community, Conflict and the Eucharist in Roman Corinth: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 14-21. However, his sources (Homer, Aristophanes, Xenophon) are all far too early to have relevance. At the end of the second century CE, when Athenaeus explains that *eranoi* are gatherings made up of people who all bring something to contribute towards the cost of an event, he indicates that this is how people spoke of meals in ancient times rather than in his own day (*The Learned Banqueters* 8; LCL 235:160-161.).

food' refers not to the food that you eat but to the meal you set before your guests. This reading of τῷ βρώματι σου has far-reaching ramifications. It means that 'your food' has the capacity destroy another person, not merely because they witness you eating it,³³ but because you have provided it, and either they eat it without realising that they should not have done so, or they eat it because social constraints deter them from refusing to partake of the meal.³⁴ Paul is not concerned about the weak being upset when they see the strong eating food, but about the strong inviting a weak to a meal where the weak are served food, which, were they to eat it, would have catastrophic consequences for their faith.³⁵

Is it plausible that those who were strong would be so inconsiderate as to invite the weak to a meal and serve unclean food? In Romans 14:3, 10 Paul uses the verb (ἐξουθενέω) to warn the strong not to despise the weak and treat them with contempt as if they were of no account. To invite the weak to a meal where unclean food was served would be a vivid expression of the utter disdain with which the strong regarded the scruples of the weak,³⁶ and it is easy to see how, if this were happening, the meal would degenerate into arguments and acrimony.

Furthermore, this scenario also suggests that where Paul mentions putting a stumbling block (πρόσκομμα) in someone's way (14:13), he is actually referring to the food provided at the meal, which causes the downfall of the weaker brothers and sisters. In 14:20, Paul asserts that all things are clean, but he goes onto assert that it is bad for the one who eats διὰ προσκόμματος ἐσθίοντι. There is some debate as to whether the phrase describes how one person's act of eating can give

³³ It is likely that our interpretation of Romans 14:15 has been unduly influenced by 1 Corinthians 10:28, but since the readers of Paul's letter to the Romans would not have read 1 Corinthians, we should once more be wary of using the latter to understand the former.

³⁴ 'When we are invited to a drinking party we enjoy what is before us, and if one should bid his entertainer to serve him fish or cakes, one would be thought eccentric' (*Fragments from Arrian the Pupil of Epictetus* 17).

³⁵ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 821, 827.

³⁶ It would also be a further example of counter-cultural behaviour on their part, using the meal as an opportunity to court controversy, rather than to promote harmony.

rise to an offence in someone else's eyes, or whether the offence is that committed by the person who eats because they regard the food as unclean.³⁷ The meaning of the preposition *διὰ* is significant here:³⁸ with the genitive, *διὰ* can denote 'attendant circumstance', in which case the one who eats does so in a situation where a stumbling block occurs. However, the construction can also denote 'means or instrument' or 'efficient cause', in which case the person eats as a result of some kind of stumbling block. This would suggest that it is not the act of eating which creates a stumbling block; on the contrary, it is the stumbling block which causes someone to eat. A literal translation would be, '...it is bad for the person who eats through [an occasion] of stumbling.'³⁹ If someone serves a guest food which the guest regards as unclean, the host has put a stumbling block in their way. If the guest eats that food, it is bad for them, and the food they eat is what makes them stumble.

Having said that food is bad (*κακόν*) for anyone who eats 'through stumbling' (14:20), Paul goes on to say that it is good (*καλόν*) not to eat or drink or do anything that causes another to stumble. The contrast here is rhetorically unexpected: the strong may have anticipated that Paul would say that food was bad for someone who deemed it so and good for the person who deemed it so, but instead he says that for the sake of the weak in faith it is good for the strong to abstain from meat or wine. The food may be good for the strong, but the wellbeing of the other is paramount,⁴⁰ and so they are to keep their faith⁴¹ between themselves and God (*σὺ πίστιν [ἡ]ν ἔχεις κατὰ σεαυτὸν ἔχε ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ* (14:22)). Again, the social context of host and guest determines the import of Paul's meaning here: he is not

³⁷ Dunn (*Romans 9-16*, 826) argues in favour of retaining the ambiguity, as does R. Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 867.

³⁸ Arndt & Gingrich, *Lexicon*, 180.

³⁹ Murray, *Romans*, 2.195; U. Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 3 vols. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978-1982), 3.95.

⁴⁰ Horrell makes the point that in Paul's argument the discernment of what is right and wrong can only be specified in the context of human relationships (*Solidarity and Difference*, 207).

⁴¹ This designates 'the peculiar form of faith that each group has been given by God, which includes the cultural and theological factors that govern each group's service to its Lord,' (Jewett, *Romans*, 870).

saying that one should keep one's freedom to eat and drink a secret; rather he is saying that the strong have a faith that is right for them, but they should keep it to themselves in the sense that they should avoid imposing or inflicting it on others. Each group should act in accordance with their own faith:⁴² those who can eat freely are blessed because they have no reason to judge themselves for behaviour of which they approve, but those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because if the act of eating is not an expression of faith for them, then for them it is a sin (14:23). What is good and right for one group is bad and wrong for the other and tolerance entails recognising and respecting this.

In the above analysis I have suggested that a specific social situation could lie behind Romans 14-15, namely one where the strong were inviting the weak to meals and serving food which took no account of their scruples.⁴³ As a result meals, which should have been a focus for building up the fellowship, had become an occasion for dissension. Paul chides the strong for serving food which could be a stumbling block to the weak, not because the weak might be offended by the freedom of the strong to eat such food, but because the strong were expressing contempt for the scruples of the weak by serving them such food in the first place. If the weak ended up by eating the food against their conscience, their faith was vulnerable to being seriously damaged through what they regarded as the sinful consumption of unclean food. It is because of these vital considerations that Paul urges the strong to abstain from serving meat when the weak were present,

For the strong, the freedom to eat any meat was an expression of their faith whereas for the weak, the need to abstain from unclean meat was a vital expression of their faith. Paul calls on both parties to stop judging and despising each other, and genuinely to welcome each

⁴² Jewett argues that Paul does not permit 'mutual conversion' between the adversarial groups in Rome (*Romans*, 857).

⁴³ There is perhaps a considerable amount of reading between the lines in reconstructing this scenario: Paul refrains from addressing the issue explicitly, perhaps because he has played no founding role in the church in Rome, but the length of the list of greetings in Romans 16 indicates that he knew enough people in Rome who would have been able to give him a clear picture of what was going on.

other, respecting each other's differences, as Christ has welcomed them.⁴⁴

Application to the Debate over Sexuality

The above exploration of Romans 14-15 and its possible social context has attempted to demonstrate how deeply held convictions about food led to dissension and controversy within the church, of such a serious nature that this may have prompted Paul to write his letter to the Romans in order to address it. Underlying the controversy in Rome were different hermeneutical approaches to Scripture. For the weak, the authority of Scripture led them to accept that the food laws had binding validity on their diet, whereas the faith of the strong gave them the liberty to interpret scripture in such a way that they could regard all food as inherently clean. The issue of food laws may be arcane to us today, but how Paul addresses the resulting divisions has profound relevance to a church deeply divided today over the question of sexuality. In our own context we find deeply held convictions based on differing approaches to scripture which threaten the unity of the church and the faith of many believers.

For many Christians today, for whom the Bible is the inspired Word of God, the plain sense of the text in both the Old and New Testament leads them to the conclusion that LGBTQ relationships are sinful in the sight of God, and condemning those who live this way is a natural (though not a necessary or automatic) consequence of that. In terms of their attitude to Scripture their stance corresponds to the weak in Rome, who were bound to live in accordance with the literal sense of the food laws.

Is it appropriate to describe the faith of such believers as weak? The appellation will be as unwelcome to them as it would have been to the

⁴⁴ J.M.G. Rojas argues that Paul employs an inclusive rhetoric to extend the scope of his argument in Romans 14:1-15:13 beyond the dietary matters affecting the community in Rome to any issue which could cause someone else to stumble: the apostle recalibrates the thinking of his audience, moving them beyond the categories of 'weak' and 'strong' in order to create a communal 'we', engaged in mutual respect and universal praise: *Why do you Judge your Brother? The Rhetorical Function of Apostrophizing in Rom 14:1-15:13* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2020).

weak believers in Rome. Yet it could be argued that such faith is vulnerable in the sense that it is inextricably tied to a particularly high view of the authority of Scripture. For some, faith can be threatened or undermined by arguments that significant parts of the Bible are culturally conditioned or that the plain sense of the text is historically untrue. Consequently, for those who are committed to this way of understanding the Bible, a huge amount is at stake. For those whose faith has been grounded in a set way of interpreting the Bible, a hermeneutical shift of such seismic proportions is entailed in rethinking their stance on human sexuality that it has the potential to cause a crisis of faith. There is the scope here to see an element of weakness in their faith, and it is important that this is recognised by those who can be frustrated by and dismissive of those who are tied to what they might see as a hermeneutically naïve and literalistic understanding of the text; such people may well need to heed Paul's injunction not to despise those who do not share their views.

Can this second group be perceived as being strong? Like the strong in Rome, it could be said that their hermeneutical freedom to depart from the traditional interpretations of Scripture on this issue is an indication of a robust faith. Yet it has to be said that the term 'strong' does not transfer well from the first to the twenty-first century. In Rome, those whom Paul refers to as being strong were the socially dominant group, whereas members of the LGBTQ community are frequently marginalised within the church. Correspondingly, whereas in Romans 14:1 Paul urges the strong to welcome those who are weak in faith, the onus in today's church is undoubtedly on the mainstream church to make sure that a genuine welcome is extended to members of the LGBTQ community – a welcome they have not always received. Thus, in terms of their social location, gay or lesbian believers cannot be described as strong.

Could they, though, be described as being 'strong in faith', even though Paul never uses this phrase in Romans 14-15?⁴⁵ Paul says of Abraham that he did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body which was as good as dead, but was rather was strengthened in

⁴⁵ The phrase 'weak in faith' (14:1), does however, imply a contrast with those who are 'strong in faith'.

faith when he held fast to the promise that he would have a son: that was the faith that was reckoned to him as righteousness (4:19-23). Thus it is a ‘strong’ faith that holds fast to God’s promise in the absence of supporting evidence, and it may fairly be said of LGBTQ believers that their belief in God’s acceptance of them, despite the negative experiences so many of them have undergone in church, is evidence of a strong faith. It could also be said that those who can affirm with integrity that they are LGBTQ and Christian, and that same-sex, committed, loving relationships are sanctified by God⁴⁶ are in a position of strength, since their assurance that God does not condemn them for who they are or the way they live places them in a position to receive the blessing to which Paul refers in Romans 14:22.

If Romans 15:1 is read in accordance with this hermeneutic, then Paul’s urging the strong not to please themselves, but rather to put up with the weaknesses of those who lack power could be re-interpreted, somewhat against the grain, as a plea to the LGBTQ community to bear with the failings of the mainstream church and to see its tendency to judge them as a sign of its own weakness, in contrast to their strength. The reality is that God has welcomed them (14:3), which means that there is no scope for others to pass judgment on them: ‘Who are you to pass judgment on the servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand’ (14:4 NRSV).

Paul opens his consideration of this contentious subject in Romans by calling those who are convinced that they are right to welcome those they are sure have got it wrong, and to make sure that they do not do so in order to prove their point or to win the argument. This call to mutual acceptance needs to be heard by a church where the debate has often been deeply polemical in tone, fracturing the Body of Christ. For both sides a huge amount is at stake: for conservative Christians this issue is fundamental because it pertains to the Word of God on which their whole faith is based, whereas for believers in the LGBTQ community it is nothing less than their own personal identity which is

⁴⁶ M.S. Piazza, *Holy Homosexuals: The Truth about Being Gay or Lesbian and Christian* (Dallas; Sources of Hope, 1997) is a book written for the ‘thousands of lesbian and gay people who have discovered how to become the happy, healthy and holy people God created them to be’ (6).

on the line. So it is no surprise that the controversy has engendered a great deal of anger and pain on both sides –but to both sides in a divided church, Paul issues the call to welcome each other, as Christ has welcomed you, to the glory of God (15:7). To a deeply divided church, Paul makes it clear that the priority must not be winning the argument, but rebuilding relationships. Without mutual acceptance, discussion of differences tends to lead to deeper polarisation, but acceptance of the other provides a basis for dialogue and mutual understanding

Of course, we know that Paul adopts a very different tone in Galatians, a letter which is all about circumcision and law-observance, the same issues he addresses in Romans. But, whereas in Romans Paul is the careful mediator, in Galatians he is the arch-polemicist, castigating the Galatians for abandoning the gospel and heaping invective on those who have led them astray. And what is the difference between Galatians and Romans? When he wrote Galatians, Paul was angry that outsiders had come into the church, preaching a different gospel; he was deeply hurt that the Galatians had listened to them so readily, and he was frightened about what the final outcome might be. If nothing else, Galatians is a lesson in how differently we express ourselves when negative emotions take over.

We should beware, though, of simply supposing that Galatians permits justifiable anger when it is a matter of defending the gospel against those whom we see as overturning its central truths: Galatians is a two-edged sword. The reason why Paul was so angry was that the teachers were trying to persuade his Gentile converts to embrace the law, saying that their faith in Christ was not enough; they needed to come within the fold of Torah-observance.⁴⁷ A radical application of Galatians to the sexuality debate would see righteous anger being directed at those who claim that to be accepted by Christ it is necessary to abandon one's LGBTQ identity and come within the heterosexual fold. Paul's anger is directed at those who want to persuade the Galatians to change because it serves their own theological agenda and purpose (Galatians 4:17).

⁴⁷ Jewett argues that Galatians should be read as Paul's repudiation of the intolerance of the Judaisers (*Tolerance*, 14).

In our discussion of the food laws in Romans, we have seen that a believer could be destroyed (14:15) if they are persuaded to eat food which they believe to be unclean. So Paul urges people to abstain from meat or drink or anything that could cause someone else's downfall (14:22). I have argued that he is not talking about merely upsetting someone or causing offence. If that principle were applied to the field of same-sex relationships, then it would be a misappropriation of Paul's advocacy of abstention from meat to suggest that gay Christians should practise celibacy or stay in the closet so as to avoid causing offence to others in church. Paul's concern is that a believer could come into condemnation if they are pressurised into acting against their own convictions. For an LGBTQ person, that could entail being persuaded to undergo conversion therapy to change their orientation, or succumbing to social pressure or the expectations of others by entering into a heterosexual marriage, so causing a deep-seated conflict with their convictions or their awareness of their own identity. Equally, where someone has accepted their LGBTQ identity and is convinced that it is their calling to stay celibate, to pressurise them into abandoning that conviction can be destructive if they sin against what they believe. Each has to find their own way of living with integrity in a way that is in accordance with their own faith, and we need to heed Paul's injunction that this is a matter between ourselves and God (14:22), not in the sense that we keep it secret, but in the sense that we do not try and impose it upon others, because to do so is to run the risk of destroying their faith.⁴⁸

Respecting difference in the other is crucial here.⁴⁹ Just because I am utterly convinced as a Christian that something is right or wrong for me, that does not mean that it is necessarily right or wrong for you. This does not cast us all adrift on a sea of ethical relativism, because Paul supplies us with two anchors. The first is that however one behaves, that behaviour must genuinely be in honour of the Lord

⁴⁸ Cf. Käsemann, *Romans*, 379: 'Christ remains the only measure for all. No one must make his faith a norm for others as the seek to serve Christ. The weak want uniformity by making their law binding for others, and the strong seek it too by forcing their insight on the weak. We thus try to make others in our own image and in doing so sin, since faith has to do always and exclusively with the image of Christ.' Cf. Jewett, *Tolerance*, 132, 137.

⁴⁹ Cf. Lee, *Paul and the Politics of Difference*, 146-61.

(14:6).⁵⁰ Because there can be and are drastically different opinions over how very different lifestyles can honour the Lord,⁵¹ this principle needs to be supplemented by the love commandment,⁵² which governs relationships of difference and unambiguously interdicts the domination of others.

Of course, I am aware that the Achilles' heel in this whole approach is that Paul is not talking about same-sex relationships in Romans 14-15 and Galatians. He is talking about circumcision and food laws. Would Paul have accepted extending his arguments in Romans 14-15 so that they apply to the modern, contested issue of same-sex relationships? The kind of language he uses in his letters about homosexuality suggests that he probably would not have done so. We might say that Paul's faith was strong and robust when it came to interpreting Scripture with respect to the food laws, but when it came to sexual ethics, Paul's faith looks decidedly weak, inasmuch as he instinctively follows the moral code of Torah.⁵³ Many would argue that we simply do not have the liberty to cross a moral boundary that Paul has put in place. Yet, if Paul, as a pastor, were writing to the church today, where Christians are divided over the issue of sexuality, what might he have written? Would it have been so very different to what we read in Romans 14-15?

Might Paul say that same-sex relationships are wrong only for those who see them as wrong, and they are not to pass judgment on those who read the Scriptures differently? Maybe Paul would not instruct us to abandon our own convictions, or to reject those who do not share them. On the contrary, each of us should be fully convinced in our own mind and at the same time welcome and accept those who fundamentally disagree with us, neither judging them nor rejecting and excluding them. Centuries after he wrote Romans, it feels as if Paul is

⁵⁰ Cf. Jewett, *Tolerance*, 33-34; *Romans*, 860.

⁵¹ While he does not apply Romans 14-15 to the issue of sexuality, Dunn argues that, 'the overarching concern and priority in [this passage] is that a church should be able to sustain a diversity of opinion and lifestyle as an integral aspect of its common life' (*Romans 9-16*, 799); cf. Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference*, 203-208, 303-304.

⁵² Cf. Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference*, 217.

⁵³ Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference*, 170-71; 308.

praying for us all: ‘May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God’ (Romans 15:5-7).

Notes on Contributor

Tim Carter is Senior Pastor, Brighton Road Baptist Church, Horsham and Research Fellow, London School of Theology