

THE “WEAK” AND THE “STRONG” IN ROMANS 14:1–15:13

Elijah Baidoo, PhD Student

Abstract

Romans 14:1–15:13 addresses a pressing tension within the early Roman church involving disputes over dietary practices and the observance of specific days. This exegetical study investigates the identity of the “weak” and “strong” and the cultural-religious dynamics underlying these disagreements. While many scholars view Paul’s counsel as a general parenetic appeal for tolerance, this study argues that Paul’s exhortation in Romans 14–15 responds to a real historical situation during the post-Claudian period in the context of the Roman congregation, specifically tensions over kosher practices and Jewish feast days, rather than offering a general moral exhortation. Employing historical-literary analysis by examining the structure and rhetorical features and theological logic of Romans 14–15, the study argues that the “days” likely reference Jewish feast days and the “food” concerns stem from kosher sensitivities and possible idol-related contamination, not from Mosaic dietary laws per se. Paul’s call for mutual acceptance is argued to be more than an accommodation to cultural diversity. It is a profound theological necessity rooted in God’s universal salvific purpose. The repeated use of *προσλαμβάνω*, “receive,” in Rom 14:1 and 15:7 presents Paul’s call to unity as a missional and ecclesiological imperative. The study finally concludes that Paul’s prioritization of God’s redemptive work and community harmony over personal convictions provides a paradigm for Christian unity in diversity.

Keywords: Romans 14–15, dietary laws, sacred days, judge, receive, unity, the gospel.

1. Introduction

Scholarship has shown sustained and growing interest in interpreting Paul’s discourse on the “strong” and the “weak” (Rom 14:1–15:13). These studies have shown engagement with Romans 14:1–15:13, addressing its theological, ethical, and pastoral dimensions.¹⁹¹ Three main schools of

¹⁹¹ Oliver T. I. Wright, “A Theological Reading of the ‘Welcome’ Offered by God and Christ in Romans 14–15 Using the Septuagint,” *Heythrop Journal* 65, no. 3 (2024): 292–302; Andrew Errington, “On the Endurance and Limits of Disagreement: Romans 14–15 and Contemporary Moral Conflicts,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 38, no. 2 (May 2025): 105–23. See Ronald D. Roberts, “Deviance or Acceptable Difference: Observance of the Law in Romans

interpretation abound in scholarly debate on Paul's teaching in Rom 14:1–15:13. The universal application view, represented by scholars such as Robert J. Karris and Francis Watson, interprets Paul's counsel as general paraenesis for all Christian communities. According to this view, there is little evidence of distinct "strong" and "weak" groups in Rome. They advance the argument that Paul provides timeless principles for handling disputes over "indifferent" matters such as food and days by emphasizing faith, love, and mutual acceptance.¹⁹² Watson, for instance, argues that Paul's teaching on unity provides a lasting framework for navigating religious differences.¹⁹³ This approach risks obstructing Paul's message from the concrete historical and social realities of the Roman church. Based on internal evidence like specific disputes over food and days, as well as the categorization of "strong" and "weak," this study will explore the claim that this section addressed a real historical situation.¹⁹⁴

The second, and majority view often called the "cultural accommodation" view is well represented by scholars such as James D. G. Dunn, Robert Jewett, C. E. B. Cranfield, Douglas J. Moo, Thomas R. Schreiner, Brian Rosner, and Paul. T. Sloan. This camp grounds Paul's instructions in the historical context of tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Jewish believers, influenced by Torah-based practices and the realities of living in a pagan environment, adopted ascetic practices to avoid ritual contamination, while Gentile Christians "the strong" saw themselves as liberated from such restrictions. Paul's exhortation in this view is not to enforce uniformity but to promote mutual tolerance, with "God alone" as the ultimate judge of individual

14–15 and Dialogue with Trypho 47," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 38, no. 1 (2012): 95–109; Tony Costa, "The Sabbath and Its Relation to Christ and the Church in the New Covenant," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 20, no. 1 (2016): 123; Paul T. Sloan, "Jewish Law Observance in Paul," *Religions* 16, no. 91 (2025): 1.

¹⁹² Robert J. Karris, "Rom 14: 1–15:13 and the Occasion Of Romans," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (April 1973):178. Karris shares that there is little historical or exegetical evidence that Rome had "the weak" and "the strong" communities. Romans 14:1–15:13 is better interpreted as general Pauline paraenesis, which is adapted and generalized from Paul's explanation in 1 Cor 8–10 and addresses a community-wide problem. Any concern with indifferent things, like eating or not eating specific foods, should be settled in faith, love, and edification, since Christ did not please himself, and Christians must accept each other as Christ has accepted them. This may be the case because of Paul's direct stance on the situation of the weak and the strong. The categorization of "strong" and the "weak" speaks to more of a situation than a general parenesis.

¹⁹³ Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles*, 129–145; John M. G. Barclay, "Paul and the Law: Observance and Non-Observance in Romans 14.1–15.13," in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 110–120.

¹⁹⁴ Paul's language in Romans carefully distinguishes Jews (Ἰουδαῖοι, Rom 2:17; 3:1; 4:1; 7:1) and Gentiles (ἔθνη, Rom 11:13), reflecting their covenantal and historical identities. Jews as those with the Law and covenant privileges, Gentiles as those formerly outside the covenant but now recipients of the gospel—while insisting on their equal standing before God (Rom 3:29–30; 10:12). The Edict of Claudius (49 CE) expelled Jews from Rome, so when Jewish Christians returned after Claudius's death, they found a predominantly Gentile church with new customs; this led to a "reintegration crisis" in which returning Jews the "weak" (cf. Rom 14:1–15:13) in the Roman honor-shame context struggled for acceptance among the Gentile "strong." This real historical backdrop underpins the tensions Paul addresses in Romans 14–15.

believers. The majority argues that references to “days” in Rom 14:5 include the Sabbath and that Paul relativizes its observance, asserting that such calendar-based and food-related distinctions are no longer binding under the new covenant. Paul’s use of terms like, κρίνω, “judge” and his emphasis on individual conviction are seen as promoting Christian liberty and leaving such observances to personal conscience.¹⁹⁵ Cranfield suggests Paul’s admonition reflects his conviction that distinctions between clean and unclean foods are irrelevant in the new covenant community.¹⁹⁶

Moo, for example argues that the conflict in Romans 14–15 arose because Jewish Christians, influenced by Torah-based asceticism, abstained from meat, wine, and observed special days to avoid ritual contamination. Paul agrees with the “strong” that such practices are not required for Christians, but his main concern is to promote unity and mutual respect within the church. He criticizes the “weak” for being judgmental, but especially warns the “strong” against using their freedom in a way that shows disregard for others and disrupts fellowship.¹⁹⁷

James D. G. Dunn argues that food and Sabbath observance were interconnected hallmarks of Jewish identity and covenant loyalty. He cites Josephus (*Ant.* 11.346), where violating the Sabbath and eating unclean food are the two chief signs of covenant disloyalty, and Isaiah 56:6, which views Sabbath keeping as a mark for proselytes. He highlights that special days were indisputable for devout Jews according to Sirach 33:7-9, and links them to election by citing Exod 31:16-17, Deut 5:15, Neh 9:1–14, Ezek 20:16, and 1 Macc 1:43. Thus, according to Dunn, in Rom 14–15, the Roman Jewish Christians protected these days to maintain their distinct heritage.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵This is a representation of the adherents of this school of interpretation arranged chronologically. Even though they may have some interpretative nuances. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 56; Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. R. H. Fuller (London: SCM Press, 1980), 310–12; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16, Word Biblical Commentary* 38B (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 806; Wayne Meeks, “Judgment and the Brother: Romans 14:1–15:3,” in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament: Essays in Honor of E. Earle Ellis*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Otto Betz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 292; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans, New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 859, 877–88; Douglas J. Moo, *Romans: From Biblical to Contemporary Life, NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 449–53; N. T. Wright, *Romans*, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 765–66; Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 532–36; Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans: A Theological Survey*, 2nd ed., Encountering Biblical Studies Series (EBS) (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 180; Tony Costa, “The Sabbath and Its Relation to Christ and the Church in the New Covenant,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 20, no. 1 (2016): 123–47; Roberts, “Deviance or Acceptable Difference”: 95–109; Sloan, “Jewish Law Observance in Paul” : 4–6.

¹⁹⁶ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans, International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 2:710.

¹⁹⁷ Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 180.

¹⁹⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16, Word Biblical Commentary* (WBC), Vol. 38B (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 804–807. Dunn also references Palestinian calendrical disputes via Jubilees (2.17–33; 6.32–35; 50.6–13), the Damascus Document (CD 3.14–15; 6.17–18;

Schreiner further argues that Paul here is teaching that the Mosaic food laws are no longer binding for believers, highlighting the apostle's emphasis on Christian liberty in dietary matters.¹⁹⁹ Rosner argues that Paul definitively moves past the requirement of the Sabbath, using Romans 14:5b and Gal 4:9–11 as his primary evidence. Rosner suggests that Paul “explicitly sets aside” the fourth commandment, effectively treating it as no longer binding for Christians. A key part of Rosner's analysis involves Paul's use of the Greek word κρινω, which usually means “to judge” or “to decide”²⁰⁰ which explains that no Christian has the moral right to pass judgement on the other for what days he chooses to worship or what he decides to eat.²⁰¹

The minority view, also argues for a real historical situation where Paul's instructions address voluntary practices such as optional festivals or feast and dietary concerns related to purity and social identity. They however rejects the view of total abolition of Mosaic distinctions. Rather than abrogating the law, they argue Paul aims to foster unity and mutual tolerance over disputable matters, without negating Jewish tradition or requiring theological uniformity.²⁰²

David J. Bolton observes that while the majority view refers the “day” in 14:5 to the Sabbath and highlights Paul's non-polemical tone, it may be challenged for overstating the case. He argues it risks minimizing Paul's strong emphasis on individual conviction and his apparent indifference toward calendrical distinctions in Rom 14:5. If both groups equally affirmed certain days, it becomes difficult to explain why Paul frames the issue as a matter of “disputable opinions” rather than shared practice.²⁰³

Norman H. Young contends that if the Sabbath was recognized as a significant feast day, then both the “strong” and the “weak” would acknowledge it as one of the days they view favorably. Young continues to critique the

10.14–11:18), 1 Enoch (74.10–12; 75.2; 82.4–7), 1QS 1.14–15, and 1QH 12.8–9. Finally, to show the Sabbath functioned as a diaspora ethnic badge, he cites Aristobulus (frag 5) alongside historical defenses in Philo (*Legat.* 155–58; *Abr.* 28–30; *Decal.* 102; *Spec. Leg.* 2.59, 70; *Mos.* 2.21) and Josephus (*Ant.* 14.241–46, 258, 263–64; *Ap.* 2.282).

¹⁹⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 715–16.

²⁰⁰ All translations are mine, except otherwise indicated.

²⁰¹ Rosner, “Paul's Ethics,” 214.

²⁰² Gerhard Rouwhorst, “The Reception of the Jewish Sabbath in Early Christianity,” in *Christian Feast and Festival: The Dynamics of Western Liturgy and Culture*, ed. P. G. J. Post et al., *Liturgia Condenda* 12 (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 307–8, in Norman H. Young, “Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, vol. 54, no. 1, (Spring 2016): 70; David J. Bolton, “Who Are You Calling ‘Weak’?” A Short Critique on James Dunn's Reading of Rom 14,1–15,6,” in *The Letter to the Romans*, ed. Udo Schnelle (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 622 in Norman H. Young, “Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, vol. 54, No. 1, (Spring 2016): 52; Norman H. Young, “Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, vol. 54, No. 1, (Spring 2016): 52.

²⁰³ David J. Bolton, “Who Are You Calling ‘Weak’?” A Short Critique on James Dunn's Reading of Rom 14,1–15,6,” in *The Letter to the Romans*, ed. Udo Schnelle (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 622 in Norman H. Young, “Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, vol. 54, No. 1, (Spring 2016): 52.

majority view for potentially overstating Paul's indifference to calendrical observance and for reading later theological developments back into the text. He notes that if the Sabbath were an issue, both groups would likely value it, making it difficult to frame the debate as merely a matter of "disputable opinions." Instead, Young argues the "strong" and "weak" may simply have differed over the significance of certain Jewish festivals, not over the abandonment of holy days altogether²⁰⁴

The view that Paul dismisses Sabbath observance may be critiqued for reading later theological developments into the text rather than deriving conclusions strictly from Paul's argument. The passage itself does not explicitly mention the "Sabbath," and the term ἡμέρα "day" remains ambiguous with regard to NT authors, who are specific when it comes to the usage of the Sabbath and days.²⁰⁵ Furthermore, Paul's emphasis falls on respecting differing convictions rather than definitively abolishing the practice, raising questions about whether the text can sustain such a definitive claim regarding the Sabbath or deletion of distinction between clean and unclean food.

In a brief evaluation of the majority view that argues for deletion of the distinction between the clean and unclean meats, Paul's use of κοινόν "common" instead of ἀκάθαρτος "unclean" in Rom 14:14, 20 makes their argument problematic. This may point to concerns about ritual association rather than intrinsic impurity under Torah law because he was not arguing for the deletion of the distinction between clean and unclean meat. Also, the conspicuous absence of the term νόμος "law" throughout the passage further suggests that Paul is not abrogating Mosaic law, but addressing the complexities of maintaining communal identity in a mixed Jewish-Gentile context. The abstention from meat and wine likely reflects concerns over idolatry and communal meals, as seen in 1 Corinthians 8–10, rather than strict Torah observance.

This study aligns with and develops a minority view of Paul's theology. It suggests that his primary concern is not legalistic requirements regarding the Sabbath or dietary laws. Paul focuses on preserving unity and a shared communal mission in the face of diverse practices. Paul shifts the focus away from isolated disputes between the "weak" and the "strong" over their differing worldviews. He achieves this by framing the conflict through the lens of ritual "commonness" (κοινόν) inherent "uncleanness," (ἀκάθαρτος). By emphasizing the call to "receive" one another (προσλαμβάνω) with Rom 14:1; 15:7 serving as an inclusio,²⁰⁶ Paul offers a transformative vision of ecclesiological unity intended for the greater good and the advancement of the gospel.

While this study concurs with Young that the "days" point to Jewish festal observances rather than the weekly Sabbath, it rejects his assertion that

²⁰⁴ Norman H. Young, "Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, vol. 54, No. 1, (Spring 2016): 52.

²⁰⁵ The New Testament authors were specific in referring to days. See Matt 28:1; John 5:9–18; 7:22; 19:31; 20:1,19; Acts 20:7; Phil 1:5.

²⁰⁶ The claim of the inclusio is to be explored in the study to further the argument of Paul's argument on receiving one another for unity and the gospel as God has received all.

the “strong” were selective observers of these feasts.²⁰⁷ Young notes that Paul usually addresses the “strong” first throughout chapter 14,²⁰⁸ however, this study proposes a strategic rhetorical reversal in verse 5. Here, the first position (ὁς μὲν) represents the selective evaluation of the “weak” (returning Jewish Christians) who distinguished specific feast days to preserve their identity. Conversely, the second position (ὁς δέ) represents the comprehensive view of the “strong” (the Gentile majority) who evaluated “every day” as inherently equal under Christ's lordship. The phrase in verse 6, ὁ φρονῶν τὴν ἡμέραν κυρίῳ φρονεῖ, καὶ ὁ ἐσθίων κυρίῳ ἐσθίει, appears to clarify these two positions and challenges Young's reading. This will be explored in-depth in the paper.

Ultimately, this paper addresses a pervasive gap in Rom 14:1–15:13 in scholarship where existing studies appears to isolate localized issues, like specific dietary restrictions, Sabbath observance, or social identities rather than recognizing how Paul weaves these disputes into a single, cohesive rhetorical strategy focused on the church's missional and theological unity.

This is a historical-literary study focusing on grounding Paul's discourse on the historical situation of the Roman church and the rhetorical development of Paul's argument toward communal harmony. Four key questions guide this study: (1) What was the context of Paul's argument regarding the weak and the strong in Rome? (2) How did the audience view the sacredness of days and food laws? (3) What is Paul's overarching admonition in Romans 14:1–15:13, and how does it reflect his worldview? (4) How might Paul's call for unity be applied to contemporary Christianity.

2. Argument on the Real Historical Situation in Romans 14:1–15:13 on “Weak” and the “Strong”

This section looks at the introductory issues of the epistles to the Romans and the historical situation of the Roman church in order to interpret Paul's strong and long admonition in Rom 14:1–15:13. It covers issues on

²⁰⁷ Young, “Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting,” 70.

²⁰⁸ Young, “Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting,” 57, 70. Young argues that Because Paul consistently prioritizes the “strong” before the “weak” in his rhetorical structure, the first position valuing one specific day over another belongs to the “strong,” while the second position valuing every day equally belongs to the “weak”. Consequently, both factions within the community were actively observing sacred days. This shared practice explains why Paul provides only a positive acknowledgment of day-observance in verse 6a. Young continues to argue that Paul's rhetoric strategy of addressing the “strong” (Gentile believers) prior to the “weak” (Jewish Christians) across Chapter 14 establishes a vital interpretive pattern. He maintains that this predictable structural sequence occurring in verses 2a–2b, 3a–3b, 5a–5b, 6a–6c, and 22a–23a offers essential clues for understanding the social interactions and theological tensions within the early Roman church. He however notes that Paul reverses this order in 10:14. It may also be pointed out that Paul points out the positions of the weak-first and then the strong in 6a, also, arguing for the reverse in vv. 5 and 6.

authorship, provenance, audience, occasion and purpose, and the socio-religious milieu of the audience. In Rom 16:22, Tertius is identified as the amanuensis for Paul in writing the book of Romans. There are arguments about whether Paul wrote all the letters himself or if someone else wrote and incorporated them. Some scholars claim there are textual inconsistencies, but they provide a lack of textual evidence.²⁰⁹ One worth considering is the theory that the doxology in 16:25–27 appears in different places in different manuscripts, thereby casting doubt on its authenticity.²¹⁰ Paul reveals his desires and plan to travel to Rome en route to Spain (15:24, 28; see 15:19–20). The Gentile-Christian congregations established by Paul gathered a donation for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, and Paul intends to deliver this contribution (15:25–27, 30–33). As Paul approached the conclusion of his third missionary journey while composing Romans (Acts 19:21; 20:16), he probably wrote this epistle from Corinth (Acts 20:3; 2 Cor. 13:1, 10; cf. Rom. 16:1–2, 23; 1 Cor. 1:14).²¹¹

These characteristics allow to ascertain Paul's location when he wrote Romans and, consequently, the timing of its writing. All evidence indicates that Paul resided in Corinth towards the conclusion of his third missionary journey (Acts 20:2–3), perhaps around AD 57. Paul's commendation of Phoebe, who hailed from Cenchreae, adjacent to Corinth, indicates a similar approach (Rom 16:1–2).²¹² Looking at the occasion for the writing of Romans, Moo suggests two ways of looking at the occasion for the writing of Romans. He suggests the situation of Paul and the situation of the church in Rome. In chapter 2, it is learned that Paul writes Romans before going to Jerusalem to give Jewish Christians money from Gentiles. He will go to Spain via Rome. It is also to be noted that Paul hopes for help from the Roman Christians for the ministry in Spain (15:24). Many scholars cite this to explain the purpose of Romans. Paul wrote Romans to meet the Roman church.²¹³

²⁰⁹ Walter Schmithals, *Der Römerbrief als historisches Problem*, SNT 9 (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1975), 180–211 in D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 399. Schmithals argues for the point that 1–11 and 15:8–13 make "Romans A" and 12:1–15:7; 15:14–16:21; and 15:33 "make Romans B" with other interpolations from others. See also Nigel M. Watson, "Simplifying the Righteousness of God: A Critique of O'Neill's Romans," *SJT* 30 (1977): 464–469.

²¹⁰ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 399. They observe that since in Paul's letter, and notable of all NT letters, doxologies is found at the end of the letter, the doxology at the end of chapters 14 and 15 shows the letter ended at either 14 or 15. Also, several manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate omit 15:1–16:23. There is a codex of Vulgate (Amiathinus), while it contains 15:1–16:24 and does not have the section summary of 25–27. Also, some of the church fathers, like Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Cyprian, didn't refer to chapters 15 and 16 where it was obviously expected they cited those chapters from Romans.

²¹¹ Andrew David Naseli, *Romans: Concise Guide to the Greatest Letter Ever Written* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 2.

²¹² Moo, *Encountering Romans*, 17–18.

²¹³ Moo, *Encountering Romans*, 29–30. Moo argues that Paul knows they've heard false reports about the gospel he preaches, so he does this at length. To get their help, he must defend himself against the charges. Paul's letter ends with a mention of this difficulty, indicating that he wrote to ask for help with his Spanish mission. But this reason alone doesn't explain the

On the identity of the audiences, a cursory reading of the Epistle on Paul's use of some key expressions not only identifies but also interprets the roles of Jews and Gentiles within the Roman congregation. The term ἔθνη "nation/gentiles" (Rom 11:13) refers to the nations outside Israel, marking Gentiles as those formerly outside the covenant but now directly addressed as recipients of Paul's apostolic mission. By contrast, Ἰουδαῖος (Rom 2:17) denotes one who bears the covenant identity of Israel, often with the connotation of relying on the Law and covenant privileges. This is reinforced in Rom 3:1, τὸ πλεονεκτήσιον τοῦ Ἰουδαίου, "the advantage of the Jew," where the phrase highlights the historical and theological advantage associated with being Jewish. Paul's use of ἡμῶν "us" in Rom 4:1 (Ἀβραάμ... προπάτορα ἡμῶν) signals shared ancestral identity, aligning himself with Jews who claim Abraham as forefather according to the flesh. Furthermore, the phrase γινώσκουσιν νόμον "those who know the law" (Rom 7:1) characterizes those shaped by intimate knowledge of the Mosaic Law, a defining feature of Jewish identity. In Rom 3:29–30 and 10:12, Paul's juxtaposition of Jews and Gentiles underscores a crucial theological claim: despite distinct identities, covenant insiders (Ἰουδαῖοι) and formerly excluded nations (ἔθνη), both now stand on equal footing before God.

From the background on the audience, above, the historical situation underlying Romans 14–15 may be understood as a "reintegration crisis" triggered by the Edict of Claudius (cf. Acts 18:1–3). Historical records from Suetonius and the Book of Acts suggest a period of significant instability for the Roman Jewish community in the mid-first century. Suetonius records that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in 49 CE because they were "constantly making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus." This expulsion fundamentally altered the Roman church; for five years, the community evolved in an exclusively Gentile environment, independent of Jewish leadership and Torah-centric customs. When the edict lapsed upon Claudius's death in 54 CE, returning Jewish Christians found a thriving, Gentile-led church that had established its own cultural norms.²¹⁴

On reconstructing the historical situation of the audience on the identity of the strong and the weak, Moo and Carson suggest that the Claudian expulsion was relatively brief, likely lasting under ten years, as evidenced by the presence of Jewish Christians like Priscilla and Aquila in later accounts (cf. Rom 16:3). Despite its short duration, the enforcement of this decree may have fundamentally altered the Roman ecclesial landscape. During the period when Jewish believers were absent, Gentile converts likely assumed leadership and shaped the community's direction. Consequently, upon their return, Jewish Christians may have found themselves in the minority, potentially facing a sense of marginalization or condescension from a now-dominant Gentile majority.²¹⁵

This make-up of the Roman church probably made the returning οἱ ἄσθενοῦντες "the weak" to negotiate space within a community dominated by

letter's topics. There must be more uses. Paul's writing may be affected by his next trip to Jerusalem. Paul's worried about that visit, as 15:30–33 shows. Paul is told to write Romans to prepare for his speech in Jerusalem. Paul probably won't propose it in a practice speech, but it raises the issue of Jewish/gentile ties, which is key to the Romans' argument.

²¹⁴ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 394.

²¹⁵ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 396..

the οἱ δυνατοί “the strong.” The terminology Paul employs reflects existing social labels within the Roman honor-shame system. To understand Paul’s use of the “weak” and “strong,” in Romans 14–15, one must move beyond a purely theological reading and recognize that these were social identifiers in the first-century Roman world. Paul was navigating a culture defined by the honor-shame system, where one’s standing in society was determined by power, patronage, and public perception.

Mark Reasoner argues that the “strong” and ἀσθενέω “weak” in Romans were not merely theological categories, but markers of social status and honor within the first-century Roman hierarchy. He identifies the δυνατοί “strong” as Roman citizens or residents who adopted a dominant Roman lifestyle and viewed dietary and Sabbath practices of the weak likely lower-ranking individuals or those aligned with foreign cultures. Ultimately, Reasoner demonstrates that these two groups were defined by a clash of social identities and cultural expressions of religiosity rather than simple doctrinal disagreements.²¹⁶ In this context, the socially dominant Gentiles were possibly “despising” the socially marginalized Jewish minority. Mark Nanos offers a radical alternative, suggesting the “weak” were actually non-believing Jews within the synagogue system. However, Paul’s insistence that “God has welcomed them” (ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτὸν προσέλαβετο, “for God has received him” 14:3) and that “we are the Lord’s” τοῦ κυρίου ἐσμέν, 14:8 strongly implies that both groups were composed of believers in Jesus.

Reasoner continues to share that in the Roman world, the social elite were strong, who probably possessed citizenship, wealth, and the influence to dictate communal norms. To be strong meant one commanded respect, occupied positions of authority, and functioned as a patron within the house churches. Conversely, the weak were socially marginalized. In common usage, this term referred to those lacking influence, the poor, the enslaved, or, in this specific historical moment, the Jewish Christians who had been disenfranchised by the Edict of Claudius and were only recently permitted to return to their homes in Rome.²¹⁷

On the settings of Romans 14 and 15, Peter–Ben Smith suggests that context for the food was not just about eating. He notes that the first century Greco–Roman world was most in all maintained through communal meals. Moreover, an individual’s identity was significantly influenced not only by their associations but also by their dietary choices. In this context, the early (Jewish) Christian conflict regarding dietary regulations is well–documented, and Seneca’s discomfort regarding his youthful vegetarianism serves as a notable illustration (Ep. 108:32). This was also found among early Christians. At fellowship meetings, there possibly arose controversy. The primary issue concerning the eating of food was particularly meat offered to idols, however,

²¹⁶ Mark Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14:1–15:13 in Context*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 103 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), xxi, 272.

²¹⁷ Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14:1–15:13 in Context*, 272.

other ascetic or early Jewish dietary preferences may have brought controversy or dispute among the members.²¹⁸

Since all meat was refused by the weak, it sounds safe to postulate that the reason may be the same as that in the situation of 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 8:1–13). It was then difficult to obtain meat that had not been sacrificed unto idols.²¹⁹ Paul's words of warning in Rom 14:1, ἀσθενοῦντα τῇ πίστει προσλαμβάνεσθε, "welcome the weak in faith," seem to suggest some attitude that the Gentiles being the "strong" showed towards the Jews for their refusal to join their communal fellowship meals, while the weak, the Jews, also judged those who ate everything, the Gentiles. The use of προσλαμβάνω in the middle voice communicates the idea that the members were to receive their own members in their societies, home, or circle.²²⁰ In the larger context, they were to be received into the Christian fellowship as Rom 14:3 intimates, "for God has received him." The establishment of community meals in the early church was undoubtedly influenced by Jesus' practice of dining with various guests within a Jewish framework. The next sections will look into the issue of observance of days in the Roman church.

A significant debate within scholarship involves the work of Robert J. Karris, who argues that Romans 14–15 is largely a "generic topos" on communal harmony. Karris suggests that Paul was not addressing a specific Roman situation but was providing general ethical guidelines, paraenesis suitable for any congregation.²²¹ However, a cursory reading of Romans 14–15 shows a real historical situation as has been demonstrated above. This passage is unique from the Corinthians situation. While both letters address food and conscience, the specific points of contention reveal distinct historical settings. Unlike the Corinthian dispute, which focused on γνῶσις "knowledge" and the specific problem of εἰδωλόθυτον (meat sacrificed to idols), the Roman dispute focuses on πίστις (faith), ἡμέραι (days), and a more comprehensive abstinence from both meat and wine.

In 1 Cor 8:4, Paul addresses the theological premise that ὅτι οὐδὲν εἶδωλον ἐν κόσμῳ, "an idol has no real existence, a specific intellectual hurdle for the Corinthians. In contrast, the Roman "weak" are not concerned with

²¹⁸ Peter–Ben Smith, "A Symposium in Rom. 14:17? A Note on Paul's Terminology," *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 49, Fasc. 1 (2007):40–43. Smith continues to share that "merely" consuming food and drinks is significantly inadequate when juxtaposed with the social occasion of a meal, of which it constitutes only a fraction. If the use of specific foodstuffs disrupts the community, as indicated in Luk 12:43 and Rom 14:17, it obviously does not improve the situation. Consequently, several writings from the meal-centered first-century Mediterranean context reflect a profound care for hosting meticulously organized dinner parties, with early Christians being no exception, thereby facilitating the enjoyment of complete κοινωνία.

²¹⁹ Anders Nygren, *Commentary on the Romans* (Philadelphia, 1949), 442. Cf. A. M. Hunter, *The*

Epistle to the Romans (London, 1957), 117.

²²⁰ Gary Steven Shogren, "Is the Kingdom of God about Eating and Drinking or Isn't It?" (Romans 14:17), *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 42, Fasc. 3 (July 2000): 240.

²²¹ Robert J. Karris, "Rom 14: 1–15:13 and the Occasion Of Romans," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (April 1973):178.

pagan contamination of meat, but with the broader status of law-observance and ritual purity, leading Paul to frame the issue around the lordship of Christ: ὁ ἐσθίων κυρίῳ ἐσθίει “the one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord,” 14:6. The use of κοινὸν “common” in Rom 14:14, appears to suggest a situation of clean meats mixed with others or not conforming to the kosher laws on meat as was the case of 1 Corinthians 8 even though there are nuances in the worldview of how the meat were seen in both contexts of Corinth and Rome.

The specific emphasis on the “mercy of God” to the Gentiles and the “truth of God” to the Jews correlates directly with the historical demographic shifts of Rome’s population. Paul grounds the Roman resolution in the dual mission of Christ: λέγω γὰρ Χριστὸν διάκονον γεγενῆσθαι περιτομῆς ὑπὲρ ἀληθείας θεοῦ... τὰ δὲ ἔθνη ὑπὲρ ἐλέους δοξάσαι τὸν θεόν “for I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness... and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy,” 15:8–9). This ethnic bilateralism is absent in the more localized “knowledge vs. love” debate of 1 Cor 8:1, where Paul simply states ἡ γνῶσις φυσιοῖ, ἡ δὲ ἀγάπη οἰκοδομεῖ “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” The Roman situation focus on ἡμέραν παρ’ ἡμέραν “one day as better than another” (14:5–6) and the avoidance of οἶνος (wine, 14:21) points to a reintegration of Jewish customs that were likely suppressed during the Claudian exile. Whereas 1 Corinthians 8 may be a response to the social pressures of Greco-Roman temple culture, Romans 14–15 may be a specific pastoral response to the “reintegration crisis” of Jewish Christians returning to a Gentile-dominated church.

In Romans, Paul’s language and argument demonstrate that the letter is not a generic ethical treatise but a pastoral epistle aimed at unifying a divided community of Jews and Gentiles for the sake of the gospel. He explicitly addresses both groups using terms such as Ἰουδαῖος (Rom 2:17; 3:1, “τὸ πλεονεκτήσιον τοῦ Ἰουδαίου,” “the advantage of the Jew”) and ἔθνη (Rom 11:13), showing their real presence in the congregation. At the same time, he emphasizes their theological equality: God is the God of both Jews and Gentiles (Rom 3:29–30), and “there is no distinction” between them (Rom 10:12). This concern for unity becomes especially clear in his pastoral appeals he seeks “mutual encouragement” among believers (Rom 1:11–12), addresses conflicts between the “weak” and the “strong” (Rom 14:1–15:7), and exhorts them to “accept one another” just as Christ has accepted them (Rom 15:7). His prayer that they may live “in harmony... with one voice glorify God” (Rom 15:5–6) further underscores this goal. Taken together, these references show that Romans is intentionally written to reconcile and unify a diverse community, so that both Jews and Gentiles may stand together in advancing the gospel. This suggests that Romans is not a generic ethical treatise but an epistle written to address a real historical situation that centered on unity the Roman community for the sake of the gospel.

This study argues that Romans 14–15 is a targeted response to the post-Claudian reintegration crisis in Rome. Following the Edict of Claudius, returning Jewish Christians the “weak” utilized dietary laws and feast days as vital Social Identity markers to resist assimilation. Paul addresses this tension by presenting Christ as the ultimate paradigm of self-denial one who “did not please himself” (15:3) but died to become “Lord of both the dead and the living” (14:9). By prioritizing the “strong” (the social elite), Paul strategically leverages their social power to subordinate individual rights to communal harmony. This

unity was a missiological imperative. For Rome to serve as the staging ground for Paul's mission to Spain (15:24), the church had to resolve its ethnic divisions. Only a church unified in "one voice" (15:6) could effectively patronize the global expansion of the gospel to the West. Thus, the passage is not a generic ethical treatise, but a calculated effort to stabilize a fractured community for the sake of the mission.

3. Worldviews of the Roman Church Regarding Observations of Days and Food

Romans 14:1–15:13 begins with a plea to the "strong" and the "weak" on disputes over dietary customs and the observance of days. It is also a plea for common worship, advocating for mutual acceptance and unity. Since the disputes are mainly on food (14:2–4, 6b, 14–23), and days (14:5–6a) and wine (14:17, 21), Paul probably had in mind communal meals which were related to common worship.²²² Romans is replete with evidence of both Jewish and Gentile Christians in the Roman house churches.²²³ C. K. Barret notes that there were some Jewish Christians in Rome when Paul wrote to the church in A. D. 57 and this has been explained above in the case of a real situation in the Roman house churches. That was also the case when he arrived in the city around A.D. 60. There was an established synagogue with only a second-hand knowledge of Christianity.²²⁴

Evidence from the passage on the use of *λάχανον* "vegetable" in 14:2, the observance of special days (14:6), and the eating of meat and wine (14:21) seem to suggest Jewish dietary law or abstinence from food. The difference between this argument of Paul in Rom 14–15:13 and 1 Tim 4:1–5 is that in Romans, Paul argues that one can decide to eat or not and there was no need for judgment or despising a brother, while in 1 Timothy, believers were advised to eat food as has been created by God. The case of Romans was meat and that of 1 Tim was abstinence from food in general, which sounded more ascetic than an issue that was related to clean or unclean meat. In sum, the situation of whether to eat or not in Romans and 1 Timothy appears different.

The term *ἀσθενέω* as used in the New Testament, could mean physically or spiritually weak. Hence, *ἀσθενέω* could be used figuratively or literally.²²⁵ Daniel Berchie and Elijah Baidoo observe that literally, *ἀσθενέω* could mean physical sickness (Matt 10:8; 25:39; John 11:1ff; Acts 9:37; Phil 2:26ff.). In a

²²² Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles*, 177.

²²³ Evidence of Gentile Christians (1:13, 11:13, 15:15–16). Evidence for Jewish Christians (2:17, 3:1–2, 7:1). Evidence of a mixed Jewish–Gentile Church (3:29–30, 9:24, 10:12, 15:8–9).

²²⁴ C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, International Critical Commentary (ICC), 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998): 2:1241–42.

²²⁵ Walter Bauer, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BAGD), trans. and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd ed., rev. and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (1979), s.v. *ἀσθενέω*.

figurative sense, ἀσθενέω can be used in reference to the one who is weak in faith (Rom 4:19; 14:1f; 2 Cor 11:29).²²⁶ The argument that Paul makes here is that the one that has grown in faith and is strong decides to eat all things but the weak decides to eat only vegetables. What does Paul mean to eat all things here? One explanation on why the term weak and strong, Douglas J. Moo observes:

A correct estimation of the problem that Paul is addressing must recognize the exact significance of the phrase “the one whose faith is weak.” A more literal rendering would be “the one who is weak with respect to faith.” Almost certainly, this does not mean “a Christian who does not have much faith.” In verse 2, Paul refers to the person whose “faith allows them to eat anything,” as opposed to the one whose “faith is weak,” who eats only vegetables. In other words, the issue is not who has the most faith. The issue is who thinks that his or her faith lets him or her do this or that. The weak in faith were not necessarily Christians who were more immature in their faith than the strong; they were Christians who did not recognize that the faith they had enabled them to do certain things. The strong, on the other hand, thought that their faith did give them the right to, for instance, eat meat and drink wine.²²⁷

Kevin B. McCrudden adds to this argument and observes that the most definitive evidence indicating a conflict on food matters is Paul’s employment of the word κοινον in verse 14. The word, κοινον serves as a technical term prevalent in Hellenistic Judaism to denote ritual impurity. The “weak” may have thought that the communal meat was improperly killed or linked to pagan sacrifices.²²⁸ Arland J. Hultgren also adds that the “weak” comprised a core of Jewish Christians who maintained traditions related to cultic and dietary practices, along with certain Gentiles who embraced these customs, while the “strong” consisted of Gentile Christians and other individuals of Jewish descent who did not adhere to them.²²⁹ From the argument on the historical situation already presented in this paper, it may be safe to argue that the “weak” were the Jewish Christians. The “strong,” who were the Gentile Christians, therefore, might be the Gentiles who did not care about these laws and ate the meat from the market in Rome.

4. The Worldview on ἡμέρα “Day” in Romans 14:5–6

Romans 14:5–6 introduces a dispute over the observance of days (ἡμέρα), a term appearing four times within this unit and consistently framed within a context of religious evaluation. In his analysis of this passage, Young argues that because the “strong” Gentiles consistently precede the “weak”

²²⁶ Daniel Berchie and Elijah Baidoo, “A Reading of ‘Oil’ (James 5:14) in the Ghanaian Christian Ministry,” *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*, vol.7, no. 1 (2017): 40–41.

²²⁷ Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 181.

²²⁸ Kevin B. McCrudden, “Judgment and Life for the Lord: Occasion and Theology of Romans 14,1–15,13,” *Biblica*, vol. 86, no. 2 (2005): 230.

²²⁹ Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 496.

Jewish Christians throughout the broader chapter, a strong-first sequence must also apply to verses 5–6 (14:2a–2b; 14:3a–3b; 14:5a–5b; 14:6a–6c; 14:22a–23a). This means the phrase ὃς μὲν κρινεῖ ἡμέραν παρ’ ἡμέραν, “one person esteem a day over another day” refers to the strong while, ὃς δὲ κρινεῖ πᾶσαν ἡμέραν “but the other person on the hand esteems every day” refers to the weak. In his view of verses 5–6, this sequence suggests that the “strong” selectively emphasized specific Jewish feast days for communal fellowship, whereas the “weak” maintained a more comprehensive observance of all festival days.²³⁰ However, Young’s alternative paradigm strains historical probability. It is far more plausible that the returning Jewish minority insisted their ancestral days merited a distinct evaluation, while the dominant Gentile majority treated every day as functionally identical. The table below presents Young’s suggestion of the “strong first,” then “weak second” order with some suggestions form the study:

5. The Strong and the Weak Order in Romans 14–15²³¹

Reference	The “Strong” (First Position)	The “Weak” (Second Position)	Agreement with Young
14:2	ὃς μὲν πιστεύει φαγεῖν πάντα: “one person believes he may eat anything”	ὁ δὲ ἀσθενῶν λάχανα ἐσθίει, “the weak person eats only vegetables”	Yes
14:3	ὁ ἐσθίων τὸν μὴ ἐσθίοντα μὴ ἐξουθενείτω: “let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains”	ὁ δὲ μὴ ἐσθίων τὸν ἐσθίοντα μὴ κρινέτω, “let not the one who abstains” pass judgment on the one who eats”	Yes
14:5–6	The Weak (First) ὃς μὲν γὰρ κρίνει ἡμέραν παρ’ ἡμέραν:, “one person esteems one day as better than another”	The Strong (Second) ὃς δὲ κρίνει πᾶσαν ἡμέραν, “another esteems all days” ὁ ἐσθίων κυρίῳ ἐσθίει	No, reversed.

²³⁰ Young, “Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting”: 56.

²³¹ This table is adapted from Young, “Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting,”: 56. However, it may be argued one cannot argue for a strict order: “strong first, then weak” in Romans 14–15. The Greek text is from the: Aland, Barbara, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds. *Novum Testamentum Graece*. 28th ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012. Translations are mine.

	ὁ φρονῶν τὴν ἡμέραν κυρίῳ φρονεῖ: “the one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord”	“the one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord”	
14:10	The Weak (First) Σὺ δὲ τί κρίνεις τὸν ἀδελφόν σου; “and why do you judge you brother?”	The Strong (Second) ἢ καὶ σὺ τί ἐξουθενεῖς τὸν ἀδελφόν σου; “or why do you despise your brother?”	No, reversed. Also supported by Young
14:22–23	μακάριος ὁ μὴ κρίνων ἑαυτόν, “blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself”	ὁ δὲ διακρινόμενος ἐὰν φάγη κατακέκριται, “but the one who has doubts is condemned if he eats”	Yes
15:1	ὀφείλομεν δὲ ἡμεῖς οἱ δυνατοί: “we who are strong have an obligation...”	καὶ μὴ ἑαυτοῖς ἀρέσκειν, “and not to please ourselves”	Yes

Young argues the verb κρίνω “to judge” or “evaluate” in 14:5 carries an identical positive meaning in both Rom 14:5a and 14:5b, suggesting both groups actively observed days in different ways.²³² This bear more weight than its grammar allows. From the syntax of the passage, κρίνω denotes mental evaluation rather than ritual practice: The present indicative aspect of κρίνω points to a sustained, habitual judgment rather than an isolated choice, reflecting established convictions within the community. The syntax uses a deliberate adversative construction (μεν...δε) to contrast two opposing positions. The first phrase, ἡμεραν παρ’ ἡμεραν, denotes a person isolating a specific temporal segment as intrinsically superior. In contrast, πασαν ἡμεραν lacks any comparative element, conveying that every day is viewed equally. The literal Greek wording of verse 5b simply translates to “one regards every day”; it cannot be twisted to mean that the strong actively disregarded a feast day through a competing form of observance. This non-ritual focus is confirmed by Paul’s concluding exhortation, ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ νοῷ πληροφροεῖσθω “let each be fully convinced in his own mind” which appeals strictly to personal conviction and establishes that the two parties held fundamentally differing opinions about the significance of time.

²³² Young, “Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting”: 70.

This study proposes that Paul executes a strategic structural reversal within verses 5–6, positioning the “weak” in the first clause (ὁς μὲν) and the “strong” in the second (ὁς δέ). While this study concurs with Young regarding the broader strong-first pattern of Romans 14, verses 5–6 represent a deliberate, pastoral pivot. Paul’s sudden focus on internal motivation in verse 6 acts as a pastoral shield. By disrupting his usual sequence, Paul thrusts the vulnerable conscience of the marginalized Jewish minority into the immediate spotlight. This asymmetry is telling because Paul explicitly validates the day-observer but includes no corresponding clause for a day-disregarder. Had he intended to portray both groups as practicing distinct day-observances, verse 6 would be the natural place to do so. Instead, the asymmetrical wording suggests that only the weak are characterized by special day observance, while the strong did not observe days at all. By leading with the weak, Paul validates the sincerity of their devotion before the dominant Gentile group can dismiss or weaponize their scrupulous practices as empty legalism.

This reversed reading creates a precise structural symmetry between dietary restrictions and sacred days. Romans 14:5–6 focuses specifically on the “weak” party; one may look at the rhetorical symmetry Paul establishes between dietary restrictions and the observance of sacred days. In verse 14: 2, Paul explicitly defines the ὁ ἀσθενῶν “the weak” as the one who restricts their diet to vegetables. When he pivots to the “observance of days” in verse 6, he employs an identical syntactic structure to link the person who “observes the day” (ὁ φρονῶν τὴν ἡμέραν) with the person who “does not eat meat” (ὁ μὴ ἐσθίων). By grouping these two behaviors under the same theological umbrella, Paul identifies the day-observer as the same individual who feels a conscientious need to maintain traditional religious boundaries by eating only vegetables, thereby situating the “weak” at the center of this specific passage. These Christians used dietary laws and feast dietary laws and feast days as essential social markers to prevent cultural assimilation.

This argument rests upon three interlocking pillars, beginning with a precise textual definition where “the weak” are defined by their felt boundary markers, such as separating clean foods from unclean and distinguishing sacred times from ordinary spaces. This leads directly to historical plausibility, as identifying the “weak” as the subject of the first position correctly aligns them with the clause that isolates specific days as distinct, while the “strong” naturally correspond to the comprehensive evaluation of every day (πασαν ἡμέραν) through a flat, Christocentric worldview. Finally, this alignment reveals Paul’s overarching pastoral strategy, explaining exactly why he breaks his layout rhythm precisely at this point to protect the minority party.

Ultimately, this reversed reading provides a seamless fit for the post-Claudian reintegration crisis. Returning Jewish Christians were navigating a thriving, Gentile-dominated house church network that had spent five years operating independently of Torah customs. In this socio-religious climate, the minority Jewish believers utilized ancestral festival days such as Passover, Pentecost, or Trumpets as vital social identity markers to resist cultural assimilation and maintain covenant continuity.²³³ In the Roman context, keeping kosher and observing feast days were not merely matters of abstract

²³³ Young, “Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting”: 70.

piety; they were essential social mechanisms for preserving Jewish-Christian identity within a dominant Greco-Roman culture. When the “strong” dismissed these practices as mere matters of opinion, they threatened the very social boundaries that defined the weak. Recognizing these practices as identity-maintenance moves the conflict beyond a simple disagreement over legalism, framing it instead as a profound struggle over the definition of Christian social identity.

6. Meaning of ἡμέρα “Day” in Romans 14:5–6

The use of ἡμέρα in Rom 14:5, leaves the precise meaning of the word formally indeterminate, but context and the broader New Testament may help determine its meaning. Historically, interpreters have debated whether this term references the seventh-day Sabbath or broader Jewish ceremonial feasts. The word “day” has been interpreted variously in scholarly debate. The views are: the observance versus non-observance which explains that the “weak” are committed to a specific Jewish liturgical calendar, while the “strong” feel completely free from such obligations, treating every day of the week as ordinary or of equal, non-religious significance.²³⁴ The Sabbath abolition view also observes that the Jewish Sabbath is the primary day in question. Scholars holding this view argue that Paul explicitly sets aside the Sabbath, treating its observance as non-obligatory.²³⁵ The other view known as the metaphorical-Sabbatizing view argues that the phrase “regards every day” should be interpreted metaphorically as sabbatizing the whole week. It posits that rather than observing a specific holy day, the individual extends the sanctity of the

²³⁴ John M. G. Barclay, “Do We Undermine the Law? A Study of Romans 14.1-15.6,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law: The Third Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 293; John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 513; R. A. Culpepper, “God’s Righteousness in the Life of His People Romans 12-15,” *RevExp* 73 (1976): 460; Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 182; Robert Jewett, *Christian Tolerance: Paul’s Message to the Modern Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 131; Eduard Lohse, *Der Brief an die Römer*, KEK 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 371; Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), 181, 353.

²³⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, WBC 38B (Dallas: Word, 1988), 805; Volker Gäckle, *Die Starken und die Schwachen in Korinth und in Rom: zu Herkunft und Funktion der Antithese in 1 Kor 8,1-11,1 und in Röm 14,1-15,13*, WUNT 2/200 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 358, 36; Klaus Haacker, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer*, 3rd ed., THNT 6 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), 316-17; Wayne Meeks, “Judgment and the Brother: Romans 14:1-15:3,” in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament: Essays in Honor of E. Earle Ellis*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Otto Betz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 292; Douglas J. Moo, *Romans: From Biblical Text, to Contemporary Life*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 449-53; Raphael Rodriguez, *If You Call Yourself a Jew: Reappraising Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 268-74; Brian Rosner, “Paul’s Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 214; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT 6 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 715-16; Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul’s Rhetoric in its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 405; Carl N. Toney, *Paul’s Inclusive Ethic*, WUNT 2/252 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 61–63

Sabbath to all days of the week through their ethical life.²³⁶ Some also view the day to be an argument on Sunday versus the Sabbath where the weak viewed Jewish Sabbath as the sacred day of worship while the strong viewed Sunday as the day of rest under the Lordship of Christ. This brought the observance of the Jewish Sabbath and those who gather instead on Sunday as Sacred days.²³⁷ The observance of Sunday as sacred day in the passage appears to far from the argumentation of Paul. Others also assert that Pagan principles may have infiltrated the Christian church in Rome. They are referenced in Paul's Epistles to the Galatians and the Ephesians. Adherents of the Orphic Mystery cult and the Pythagoreans seemingly practiced vegetarianism. Gnostic concepts were also widespread in the first century across many regions of the Empire. Their proclivities for asceticism may have garnered some adherents in Rome.²³⁸ There appears to be no indication in Rom 14:5–6, that Paul makes reference to specific fasting days of pagan origin.

As has been aforementioned, Young argues the word in 14:5–6, refers to Jewish feast days, basing on the verb κρινω in Rom 14:5 posits that the verb carries positive attitude towards the observance of the day by both the “weak” and the “strong.” He further argues that the “strong” were selective in choosing some of the Jewish days like the Pentecost, the Sabbath, and the Passover.²³⁹ Others have also view the use of ἡμερα to be referring to fasting days during which the consumption of certain foods was prohibited.²⁴⁰ Raoul Dederen observes that: On the identity of the day based on the context of Romans 14–15, Raoul Dederen observes:

No attempt at a reliable interpretation of Rom 14:5 can be made without a careful examination of the context. A cursory reading of Romans 14 indicates that there existed in the Christian community of Rome a controversy in connection with both diet and the observance of certain days. In fact, the matter of “esteeming one day as better than another” seems to be merely interjected into a passage which has to do entirely with a controversy that existed in the Roman community on

²³⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed., TNTC (London: Tyndale, 1985), 23; Klaus Haacker, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer*, 3rd ed., THNT 6 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), 314; Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 845; Willy Rordorf, *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church*, trans. A. A. K. Graham (E.T. London: SCM, 1968), 102–5; Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles*, CRINT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990), 245–49; Herold Weiss, “Paul and the Judging of Days,” *ZNW* 86 (1995): 142–48; Dieter Zeller, *Der Brief an die Römer: Übersetzt und erklärt*, RNT (Regensburg: Pustet, 1985), 225.

²³⁷ Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak*:149; Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God*, trans. Siegfried Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 254–55.

²³⁸ See Raoul Dederen, “On Esteeming One Day Better Than Another.”

²³⁹ Young, “Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting,” 56, 70.

²⁴⁰ See Raoul Dederen, “On Esteeming One Day Better Than Another.”

the matter of meat-eating versus vegetarianism and abstinence from wine (see vss. 1, 21).²⁴¹

A closer lexical and contextual evaluation indicates that the seventh-day Sabbath may not be the primary subject of Rom 14:5–6. Lexically, *ἡμέρα* lacks a fixed categorical definition, functioning instead as a flexible temporal container whose specific meaning depends entirely upon its accompanying modifiers. While the term can denote twelve hours of daylight, a 24-hour civil day, or an extended eschatological epoch, it is never used as a standalone technical title for the weekly Sabbath in the New Testament. Whenever the Sabbath is intended, the text explicitly employs the technical term *σαββατον*, or couples *ἡμέρα* with direct qualifiers, such as “the day of the sabbath” (*ἡ ἡμερα τῶν σαββατων*).²⁴²

Paul’s deliberate linguistic strategy in Rom 14:5–6, demonstrates that the generic word *ἡμέρα* does not relegate the weekly Sabbath to a matter of personal opinion or theological abrogation. While Col 2:16 appears to suggest that Paul possessed and utilized the precise, technical vocabulary (*σαββάτων*) necessary to explicitly target Jewish sacred rests specifically the ceremonial festival Sabbaths that served as a ‘shadow of things to come’ (Col 2:17), he conspicuously avoids this terminology in Rom 14:5. Instead, Paul relies on the unqualified, non-technical noun *ἡμέρα* “day” a term never used independently in the New Testament to denote the Sabbath. This calculated lexical shift confirms that the dispute among the Roman house churches did not concern the core weekly or ceremonial Sabbaths, but rather probably a word he chose to use in place with these words observed by the “weak” that was tied to the communal meals controversy. This day may point refer to other Jewish feast days.

Also, given that Paul regularly participated in weekly Sabbath synagogue services throughout his missionary journeys (Acts 13:14, 17:2, 15:21, 18:4), even among the gentiles, it is highly improbable that he would relegate a core Decalogue commandment to a secondary matter of mere “opinion” (*διαλογισμος*) without explicitly naming it and providing an exhaustive theological justification. In Acts 18:4, Paul reasoned in the Synagogue among the Jews and Greeks on the Sabbath in Corinth. This place and other occurrences in Acts, appears to suggest that the Jews did not have Sabbath observance as an issue of controversy to be included in the use of *ἡμέρα* in Rom 14:5. Therefore, Rom 14:5 functions strictly as a pastoral “conscience clause” for diverse, non-essential devotional practices, leaving the divine institution of the weekly Sabbath entirely intact and uncompromised by Paul’s theological reflection.

Furthermore, identifying the days as secondary Jewish festal observances provides a coherent explanation for their inclusion within a dietary dispute, as major Jewish festivals, such as Passover, Pentecost, or Trumpets

²⁴¹ Raoul Dederen, “On Esteeming One Day Better Than Another,”

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/theology-christian-philosophy-pubs/index.8.html>.

²⁴² BADG, s.vv, *ἡμέρα, σαββατον*.”

were intrinsically tied to specific communal meals and ritual eating practices.²⁴³ The phrase *ἡμέραν παρ' ἡμέραν* indicates that the “weak” minority prioritized these specific ancestral festival days to maintain covenant continuity and resist cultural assimilation, whereas the strong majority viewed all days within the same uniform category (*πασαν ἡμέραν*).

The structural reversal proposed in this study clarifies Paul’s pastoral response to this tension. The command for each person to be “fully convinced in his own mind” (*καστος ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ νοῖ πληροφορεῖσθω*) serves as a protective measure tailored to the psychological state of the scrupulous. While the “strong” possess a sense of theological freedom that views all times as intrinsically uniform under the Lordship of Christ, the “weak” are navigated by a doubting conscience (*διακρινόμενος*) that fears divine disapproval. By shifting the focus from external cultic regulations to internal conviction, Paul validates the spiritual agency of the returning Jewish Christians, creating a “conscience clause” that protects their vulnerable devotion from the social coercion of the dominant Gentile majority.

According to Paul, Roman Christians meticulously observed specific days, a practice that, to our knowledge, was not common among any pagan religion. These backgrounds fail to meet the historical conditions of the text. Roman Christians were meticulously observing specific holy days, a localized practice that was not characteristic of contemporary pagan religious movements. Instead, the historical background points squarely to a Jewish matrix, with the debate centering on ceremonial feasts, voluntary fasting days, or the Sabbath. A cursory reading of Paul’s argument in Romans 14 and his position shows he was not referring to the Seventh-day Sabbath but the Jewish ceremonial feast or Sabbaths. It appears clear in Romans and elsewhere that Paul held in high esteem the Decalogue that features the Seventh-day Sabbath (Rom 7:12, 13:8–10; 15:1–13; Acts 17:2; cf. Luk 4:16).²⁴⁴

Rather than adjudicating between the two parties or declaring the objective relevance of sacred times, Paul reframes the issue through a chiasmic and adversative theological pivot: *ὁ φρονῶν τὴν ἡμέραν κυρίῳ φρονεῖ· καὶ ὁ ἐσθίων κυρίῳ ἐσθίει*, “the one who observes the day, observes it to/for the Lord and the one who eats, eats to/for the Lord.” The repetition of *κυρίῳ* “to the Lord” establishes Christ as the referential center of both practices, shifting the evaluation from the objective status of the days to the internal motivation of the participants. This pastoral shield prepares the ground for the mutual acceptance demanded in chapter 15, where the strong are commanded to “bear” (*βασταζειν*) the “failings” (*ἀσθενήματα*) of the weak. By demonstrating that the weak’s elevation of festival days is a legitimate expression of devotion, Paul frames their struggles not as stubborn legalism, but as the burden of a sensitive conscience that the “strong” must share through exemplary empathy. Ultimately, Paul subordinates individual calendrical preferences to the higher priorities of communal edification and relational responsibility, ensuring that

²⁴³ Young, “Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting,” 56.

²⁴⁴ See Raoul Dederen, “On Esteeming One Day Better Than Another.”

the Roman house churches could function as a cohesive, multi-ethnic launching pad for his western mission.

7. The Worldviews on Food in Romans 14:2, 14, 20

Paul's argument, οἶδα καὶ πέπεισμαι ἐν κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ ὅτι οὐδὲν κοινὸν δι' ἑαυτοῦ "I know and I am persuaded in Christ that nothing is common in itself" in Rom 14:14 has been interpreted variously. Moo suggests the "weak" were influenced by Torah-based Jewish asceticism. While the Torah does not categorically restrict meat or wine, many Jews in pagan cultures refrained from meat due to uncertainties about its preparation according to Mosaic law, and they rarely drank wine because it was often associated with pagan libations or prepared in ways that violated kosher regulations. Daniel's refusal to defile himself with the royal food and wine in Babylon (Dan 1:8; cf. Jewish Second Temple literature) exemplifies this practice.²⁴⁵ Wright contends that Paul's statement in Rom 14:4 points to a shift away from Old Testament ceremonial laws, including dietary restrictions, toward a focus on faith in Christ.²⁴⁶

Dunn also argues that the distinction between clean and unclean foods, as delineated in Levitical law, is no longer relevant within the new covenant community. Schreiner asserts that Paul here in Rom 14:14 is teaching that the Mosaic food laws are no longer binding, emphasizing Christian liberty in matters of diet.²⁴⁷ Ernst Käsemann notes that some pagan religions encouraged asceticism and regarded certain days as especially significant, but he argues that Paul's language and arguments point more convincingly to Jewish rather than pagan concerns. Käsemann, along with many scholars, finds strong parallels between Romans 14:1–15:13 and 1 Corinthians 8–10, suggesting that the issue centers around meat sacrificed to idols and ritual defilement.²⁴⁸

The Roman congregations consisted of Gentile and Jewish believers, and some were concerned that not all the food brought to the common table on the festival days was kosher. To avoid the risk of "pollution" (v. 14) some took the pragmatic option of eating only greens and drinking only water. This behavior was restricted to the fellowship meals; it was not their dietary habit in general.²⁴⁹ Gentiles, the majority, likely brought most of the shared dinners'

²⁴⁵ Moo, *Encountering Romans*, 180. Moo, in his work on Romans, argues that Paul considered all foods clean, interpreting Rom 14:20 "All food is clean" as a declaration of the abolition of dietary distinctions; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 859.

²⁴⁶ N.T. Wright, *Romans*, The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. 10 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 766. See also Schreiner, *Romans*, 723.

²⁴⁷ Dunn, *Romans* 9–16, 806. Dunn suggests that Paul's statements reflect a move away from traditional Jewish dietary laws, emphasizing that "nothing is unclean in itself" (Rom 14:14).

²⁴⁸ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 369.

²⁴⁹ Young, "Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting," 70.

food. This applies whether Gentile Christians brought their own food or wealthy donors provided it.²⁵⁰ While Jews did eat with Gentiles, there is a psychological and halakhic distinction between a Jewish dinner provided to Gentiles in a Jewish home and a non-kosher meal served by Gentiles in a pagan environment.²⁵¹

Paul argues that He is persuaded that nothing is unclean by itself. He goes on to make a case that anyone who considers anything “common” in 14:14, to him it is common. Before this verse, in verse 13, he places the caution that no longer should they judge one another and never be a stumbling block. He argues in 14:20 that everything is clean. To Paul, the weightier matters are to make sure the believers in Rome live the gospel and not to dwell on unnecessary issues like meat, which, in God’s worldview, there is nothing wrong. This following sections reviews the views on the use of οὐδὲν κοινὸν “nothing is common.” Paul’s use of κοινὸν instead of ἀκάθαρτος “unclean” in this text is key for understanding what Paul meant.

In BDAG ἀκάθαρτος refers to what is intrinsically unclean or impure, whether in a ritual or moral sense, as seen in uses like “unclean spirits” (e.g., Mark 1:23; Acts 5:16). By contrast, κοινός fundamentally means “common” and only secondarily “defiled,” describing something not inherently impure but rendered profane or ritually unfit, as in Mark 7:2 and Acts 10:14. The distinction is evident in passages like Acts 10:14 and here Rom 14:14, where κοινός can be denied as intrinsic “nothing is κοινόν in itself” while ἀκάθαρτος denotes impurity that belongs to the thing itself. It appears that in classical Greek, in the LXX, and during the NT times, the word κοινός meant something that was made unclean ritually but not unclean in itself.²⁵²

Paul’s deliberate use of κοινός in Rom 14:14, rather than ἀκάθαρτος, aligns with the broader biblical and the LXX distinction seen, for example, in

²⁵⁰ John M. G. Barclay, “Money and Meetings: Group Formation among Diaspora Jews and Early Christians,” in Vereine, Synagogen und Gemeinden im kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien, ed. Andreas Gutsfeld and Dietrich-Alex Koch, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 25 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 120; Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 148.

²⁵¹ Bengt Holmberg, “The Life in the Diaspora Synagogues: An Evaluation,” in *The Ancient Synagogue*, 230. See also E. P. Sanders, “Jewish Association with Gentiles and Galatians 2:11–14,” in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul and John in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Robert T. Fortna and Beverly R. Gaventa (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 178; Tomson, “Table Fellowship of Jews and Gentiles,” 230–36; Neil Elliott, “Asceticism among the ‘Weak’ and ‘Strong’ in Romans 14–15,” in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Routledge, 1999), 237.

²⁵² BDAG, s.vv. “ἀκάθαρτος,” “κοινός.” BDAG notes that κοινός means “to make (ritually) unclean, defile,” and highlights that in certain manuscript traditions (e.g., Codex Bezae, D), it is used in passages like Matt 15:11, 18, and 20 with the sense of rendering something defiled through association or practice. This usage reflects a broader semantic range in which defilement is not intrinsic but acquired or relational, comparable to parallels such as Diodorus Siculus (5.33.5). Thus, the term emphasizes defilement as a result of contact or behavior rather than inherent impurity. See also, Johan Lust, Erik Eynikel, and Katrin Hauspie, comps., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003), s.v. “κοινός”

Lev 10:10 (LXX), which differentiates between holy and common (κοινόν) and “unclean (ἀκάθαρτον) and clean (καθαρόν) indicating that he is addressing perceived or relational defilement rather than intrinsic impurity as defined by Mosaic law (cf. Leviticus 11), and thus reframing the issue of food within a theological rather than purely cultic category. This distinction is echoed in the New Testament. In Acts 10:14–15, Peter says, “I have never eaten anything that is common (κοινόν) or unclean (ἀκάθαρτον),” and God replies, “what God has made clean, do not call common.” Here, Peter differentiates between ritual impurity by association (κοινός) and inherent impurity (ἀκάθαρτος), and God’s response points to a new understanding of ritual boundaries in Christ.

Similarly, in Mark 7:2, 5, 15, 18, 20, 23, Jesus addresses the Pharisees’ concerns about eating with “defiled (κοινᾶς) hands” and clarifies that defilement is not intrinsic to the food itself but results from external factors. By choosing κοινός in Rom 14:14, Paul highlights that the concern in view is about ritual sensitivity and social context food rendered objectionable through contact or association rather than any abolition of the Mosaic distinctions between clean and unclean. This is further underlined by Paul’s affirmation in Rom 14:20 that “everything is clean (καθαρόν),” and his overall concern to prioritize conscience, mutual acceptance, and the unity of the church over disputes about ritual status. Building on this, Paul asserts in Rom 14:14, “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is common (κοινόν) in itself, but it is common for anyone who thinks it common.” The construction οὐδὲν κοινὸν δι’ ἑαυτοῦ “nothing is common by itself” emphasizes the intrinsic neutrality of food, while the clause, εἰ μὴ τῷ λογιζομένῳ τι κοινὸν εἶναι “except to the one who considers it common” highlights that defilement is not objective but arises from personal conscience and perception.

A strong conceptual and lexical parallel to this distinction appears in 1 Corinthians 8–10, where Paul addresses the issue of food associated with idols. In 1 Cor 8:4, he asserts that “nothing” (οὐδέν) an idol represents has real existence, echoing the ontological neutrality expressed in Rom 14:14 (οὐδὲν κοινὸν δι’ ἑαυτοῦ). Yet, despite this theological conviction, Paul acknowledges in 1 Cor 8:7 that not all possess this knowledge, and some, through prior associations with idols, experience defilement (μολύνω) in their conscience when they eat. Significantly, in 1 Cor 10:25–27, Paul permits the eating of all meat sold in the marketplace without raising questions of conscience, reinforcing that the issue is not inherent impurity but relational and contextual perception. This parallel strengthens the case that Paul consistently distinguishes between intrinsic impurity and perceived or relational defilement, thereby confirming that the concerns of the “weak” in Romans 14 are best understood within the framework of ritual sensitivity in a pagan environment rather than adherence to inherently binding food prohibitions.

This nuance provides a crucial interpretive key to the dietary dispute in Romans 14–15. Paul is not dismantling the category of inherent impurity as defined in the Mosaic law but is instead reframing the issue around matters of ritual contamination within a mixed Jewish-Gentile context. The use of κοινός coheres with concerns about food rendered objectionable through contact with idolatry or improper handling, rather than foods intrinsically prohibited. Consequently, the “weak” are best understood not as legalistic

adherents to obsolete regulations but as conscientious believers seeking to avoid ritual defilement in a Gentile environment. Paul's argument, therefore, relativizes the communal impact of such concerns without dismissing their sincerity, subordinating questions of ritual status to the higher priorities of conscience, mutual edification, and the preservation of unity within the body of Christ.

The dietary argument culminates in the warning of Rom 14:20, the prohibition *μὴ κατάλυε* "do not destroy" employs the present imperative with *μὴ*, conveying a call to cease an ongoing or potentially habitual action, thus intensifying Paul's concern about behaviors that threaten the community. The phrase *τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ* elevates the issue by identifying the community itself as God's redemptive work, while *διὰ βρώμα* uses *διὰ* with the accusative to express cause "because of food," thereby exposing the triviality of the offense in contrast to its serious consequences. The clause functions as a decisive pivot within the argument, subordinating individual liberty in dietary matters to the preservation of communal integrity and aligning ethical conduct with God's overarching redemptive purpose. Paul's admonition is very key: do not destroy the work of God (14:20) for something that is not so important, like whether to eat food sacrificed unto idols or does not conform to kosher laws. In Paul's worldview, these were not issues that were wrong in themselves, but how they were handled brought a difference on matters of living for the gospel and unity of the body of Christ. The next section analyzes Paul's argument on how he addresses the existing worldviews of the "strong" and the "weak" and how he shapes it for the greater good the community and for the ultimate course of the gospel (14:20).

8. Paul's Teaching in Romans 14:1–15:13: An Admonition Per His Worldview on "Day" and "Food"

As has been argued already, in Romans 14, Paul usually addresses the "strong" first, then the "weak."²⁵³ This shows Paul's main concern by presenting the weak as those whom he is making a case for or defending. By addressing the "strong" first, Paul strategically leverages their social influence to ensure the security of the "weak" within the community. In the Greco-Roman cultural milieu, social interactions were strictly governed by a rigid honor-shame hierarchy where the "strong" those possessing status, wealth, and power-expected deference and service from the "weak." By employing the imperative in the middle voice, *προσλαμβάνεσθε* "receive" in 14:1 and 15:7, Paul does not merely suggest a passive tolerance but commands a proactive, public inclusion that grants the marginalized "weak" an equal standing of honor within the community. The "strong" themselves were to be actively involved in receiving the "weak."

This rhetorical strategy culminates in 15:1 with the radical call for the "strong" with the imperatival infinitive, *βαστάζειν* "bear" the failings of the weak. In a society where the elite viewed "bearing" another's burden as the demeaning work of a slave, Paul's instruction serves as a profound Christological subversion of Roman social norms. He effectively redefines

²⁵³ Young, "Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting," 56.

“strength” not as the power to dominate or distance oneself from the “dishonored,” but as the capacity to sacrifice status for the sake of communal cohesion, thereby replacing the pursuit of individual honor with the collective goal of glorifying God.

In Romans 14 and 15, Paul’s exhortations and admonitions target the “strong,” implying that ἀδελφός refers to the “weak brother” (vv. 10b, 13, 15, 21).²⁵⁴ In verse 3, Paul states, ὁ ἐσθίων τὸν μὴ ἐσθίοντα μὴ ἐξουθενείτω, ὁ δὲ μὴ ἐσθίων τὸν ἐσθίοντα μὴ κρινέτω, ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτὸν προσελάβετο, “let the one who eats not despise the one who does not eat, and let not the one who does not eat judge the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.” The second part involves a carefully ordered antithetical parallelism that identifies the social roles of the “strong” and “weak” through their specific practices. Throughout the passage, Paul usually addresses the “strong” first before moving to the “weak” as seen in the sequence of Romans 15:1, where he writes ὁφείλομεν δὲ ἡμεῖς οἱ δυνατοὶ τὰ ἀσθενήματα τῶν ἀδυνάτων βαστάζειν “we who are strong have an obligation to bear the failings of the weak.”

Paul in 14:1 and 15:7 employs an inclusio to envelope his admonition and exhortation for the “strong” and the “weak” bearing with each other, with emphasis on the strong to receive the weak. Romans 14:1–15:7 is framed by the repeated use of the verb προσλαμβάνω “receive” in the present middle imperative at both the opening (14:1) and the closing (15:7). This lexical repetition forms a deliberate rhetorical envelope that unifies the entire section, while the present imperative conveys an ongoing, habitual command, calling the community not to occasional tolerance but to a sustained posture of mutual acceptance.

Within this frame, Paul addresses behaviors of κρίνω “judge” and ἐξουθενέω “despising,” redirecting the community toward a continuous practice of reception. The theological center of this exhortation is anchored in the aorist indicative προσλαμβάνω (14:3), which declares that God has already received the believer; this completed divine action establishes the foundation for the community’s ongoing obligation. In this way, the passage exemplifies Paul’s characteristic indicative–imperative logic, in which divine action grounds ethical demand: because God/Christ has already welcomed believers, the community must continually welcome one another.

The “task-oriented” reveals that Paul’s rhetoric is strategically weighted to address the power dynamics inherent in the Roman house churches. Paul’s primary “task” is to place the burden of reconciliation on the “strong,” who likely held a higher social status and greater freedom within the community. The discourse structure of Romans 14:1–15:13 transitions from prohibiting judgment to mandating sacrificial support (βαστάζω “bear” in 15:1). In the New Testament, βαστάζω frequently carries a literal sense of physically transporting an object or enduring a heavy burden, as seen when the man carries a jar of water in Mark 14:13 or when Jesus carries his own cross in John 19:17. Paul

²⁵⁴ Troels 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, ed. Paul Middleton et al. (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 23–25, 29, quoted in, Norman H. Young, “Romans 14:5–6 in its Social Setting,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, vol. 54, no. 1, (Spring 2016): 56.

employs the term metaphorically in Gal 6:2 to enjoin believers to “bear one another’s burdens,” shifting the focus from physical weight to the communal responsibility of supporting others through their moral and spiritual struggles.

In Rom 15:1, the verb βασιτάζω functions as a specific ethical imperative for the “strong” to move beyond mere tolerance and actively shoulder the infirmities of the “weak,” thereby imitating the self-sacrificial nature of Christ, who did not seek his own pleasure. The flow of the argument makes it clear that Paul is performing a specific pastoral task: he is deconstructing the social hierarchy of the “strong” and redefining “strength” as the capacity to “bear the failings of the weak” (15:1), thereby transforming a source of division into a catalyst for communal stability. Paul states in Rom 15:1, ὁφείλομεν δὲ ἡμεῖς οἱ δυνατοὶ, “we who are strong have an obligation,” is a present active indicative verb that emphasizes ongoing work.

The verb βασιτάζειν “to bear” implies carrying the weaknesses of ἁδύνατα “the weak.” Paul’s syntax emphasizes reciprocal responsibility rather than superiority, requiring the strong to carry others’ burdens. In Rom 5:2, ἕκαστος ἡμῶν “each of us” switches from the strong to everyone, emphasizing universal duty. Paul uses “his neighbor” to highlight community. The phrase “for the good” (εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν) uses the accusative of intent, indicating moral and spiritual benefit. The term “for building up” implies constructive strengthening, emphasizing that acceptance involves active participation in growth, not passive tolerance. Paul employs the aorist indicative to emphasize Christ’s complete life in Rom 5:3 by citing Psalm 69:9. “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me,” confirms that acceptance requires sacrificial connection with the weak. The dative σοι in 5:3 “you” symbolizes Christ’s substitutionary suffering, bearing others’ afflictions instead of seeking personal comfort.

Paul grounds the basis for his teaching with the phrase, διὰ τῆς παρακλήσεως τῶν γραφῶν τὴν ἐλπίδα ἔχωμεν “through the encouragement of the Scriptures we have hope, in Rom 15:4. Paul employs the preposition διὰ with the genitive to denote means or instrumentality, indicating that “encouragement” is mediated through the Scriptures. Within the context of Romans 14–15, the noun παράκλησις reflects a multifaceted concept encompassing exhortation, comfort, and strengthening, as seen across the NT usage (e.g., Acts 13:15; 2 Cor 1:3–4; 1 Thess 2:3).

Thus, παράκλησις functions not only as consolation but as an exhortative and fortifying encouragement that enables the community to endure in unity, guiding them toward mutual acceptance and hope grounded in the authority of the sacred writings. The genitive construction τῶν γραφῶν is best understood as a subjective or source genitive, emphasizing that this encouragement originates from the Scriptures themselves, thereby highlighting their authoritative and formative role in shaping Christian endurance and hope. the Scriptures therefore serve as the means through which God both encourages and sustains believers, particularly amid the tensions between the “weak” and the “strong” over disputable matters such as food and days.

This reminded the Romans that God’s word must govern all decisions and actions. Paul prays for harmony in 15:5, calling God “the God of endurance and encouragement” to emphasize divine unity. Paul indicates that unity is a heavenly gift, not just human effort, using the optative mood, δόη ὑμῖν “may He grant you.” His encouragement “to think the same” shows harmony in

attitude, not uniformity in opinion, expressing the relational sphere in which acceptance must occur.

In 15:6, Paul underlines the ultimate goal of unity: “in order” that with one accord and one voice” expresses the objective of collective worship, while “you may glorify God” indicates the desired end of Christian acceptance. Paul says acceptance leads to God’s glory, and not only social cohesion. In 15:7, Paul urges “therefore, accept one another” using the present imperative, emphasizing ongoing activity. Paul states “just as Christ also” to establish our acceptance through Christ’s welcome of us. The phrase “to the glory of God” serves as a final purpose clause, indicating that acceptance is to ultimately glorify God.

Paul, in Rom 15:8–13, affirms the hope for both Jews and Gentiles by quoting strings of references from the Old Testament passages that argue for the benefit of Christ’s salvific work to both the Jews and the Gentiles.²⁵⁵ The placement of this section after the section (14:1–15:7) is strategic. Paul wants to share with them that they must learn to understand the worldview of God. He has accepted all, why then despise or judge your brother? Verses 8–13 confirm that all are accepted by God and that the one to approve or disapprove is God, and that prerogative does not rest with man. Paul also, earlier on in Rom 14:10–12, makes clear that all will stand before God to be judged, and no one, therefore, has the prerogative to judge or despise.

The theological logic of the passage moves toward a specific “doxological arc” that connects the physical mouth to the spiritual voice. The dispute begins with the “mouth” in a literal sense, what should or should not be eaten (14:2–3)—but Paul’s argument concludes with the “mouth” in a liturgical sense. In Rom 15:6, Paul envisions a community that, with “one heart and one mouth,” glorifies God. This transition is crucial; the ultimate goal of mutual reception is not just social harmony, but unified worship. When the “strong” and “weak” accept one another’s identity markers, the “mouth” that was previously used for criticism or restricted by dietary laws is freed to join a singular, corporate doxology, fulfilling God’s inclusive mission for both Jew and Gentile.

Paul’s argument is governed by a strict discourse-functionalist framework, moving beyond mere lexical studies to examine the progression of his rhetorical strategy. Central to this is the *inclusio* formed by the verb προσλαμβάνω “receive” in 14:1 and 15:7. The use of the middle-voice imperative προσλαμβάνεσθε suggests more than a passive acceptance; it denotes a proactive, personal welcoming into one’s intimate fellowship. According to communal harmony takes precedence over personal conviction. This signals the transition of the argument from an ethical suggestion to a mandatory theological imperative necessitated by the gospel.

9. Conclusion

The study on the “strong” and the “weak” in Rom 14:1–15:13 concludes that Paul’s discourse is a targeted pastoral response to a specific social and historical situation of “reintegration crisis” within the Roman house churches,

²⁵⁵ Deut 32:34; 2 Sam 22:50; Psalm 18:49, 117:1, Isa 11:1, 11 cf. Matt 12:21; 2 Cor 1:20; Rev 5:5, 22:16.

where returning Jewish Christians, the “weak” and Gentile-dominated leadership, the “strong” clashed over dietary laws and sacred days. Paul addresses this tension by employing a rhetorical *inclusio* that unifies the entire section, framed by the repeated use of the present middle imperative *προσλαμβάνω* “receive” in 14:1 and 15:7. This envelope creates a normal, ongoing mandate for mutual acceptance, and it turns the community’s attention away from the destructive practices of “judging” (*κρίνω*) and “despising” (*ἐξουθενέω*). Paul’s use of a strong indicative-imperative logic, anchoring this exhortation in the aorist indicative of the same verb in 14:3 by declaring that God has already received the believer, means that the community is theologically obligated to do the same because God has already welcomed both groups.

The study observes that Paul values the peace of the community and God’s inclusive salvific plan above individual convictions or social status. The work of God’s redemption and the harmony of the community outweigh personal conviction. This movement follows that which shifts the focus from the literal “mouth” (disputes over food and drink) to a liturgical “mouth” where the unified community glorifies God with “one heart and one voice” (15:6). Paul’s vision of ecclesiological unity is transformative because it places personal rights subordinate to the higher priority of mutual edification and the preservation of “the work of God.” This paradigm ensures that the Roman church is not a collection of broken factions but a united multi-ethnic community that can foster the worldwide expansion of the gospel.

Romans 14–15 is contemporary in its blueprint for dealing with diversity in contemporary Christian fellowships. Paul’s injunction that the “strong” use their social power to “bear” the infirmities of the “weak” runs counter to the current emphasis on individual liberty at the expense of communal stability. This study offers three major applications for the contemporary church: priority of love over individual worldviews, active rhetoricity of responsibilities, and a sense of unity for mission and the cause of the gospel.