

# The Kingdom of God and Christian Unity and Fellowship: Romans 14:17 in Context

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**Abstract** *Beginning with a reminder of the centrality of the concept of the Kingdom of God for Jesus' ministry and teaching and for the early church, the presentation attempts to show that, despite some contrary voices, the notion of the Kingdom of God is still a very useful and significant category for the present Christian ethical reflection in general, and for Christian unity and fellowship in particular. Being given such a specific and limited purpose for the presentation, after some brief but necessary clarifications about the meaning of the Kingdom of God (sovereignty/reign/ realm – present/future – inward/external – transcendent/immanent), the article offers an exploration of several ways in which the concept of the Kingdom of God is significant for Christian unity and fellowship, from a New Testament/Pauline perspective.*

## Introduction

The concept of “the kingdom of God” has been recognized throughout the history of Christianity as a central element of the Christian message - and this because of its very frequent appearance in the synoptic gospels and for the conviction that it represents the very essence of the message of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> It may not be too strong of a statement to say that, indeed, to fully grasp the mission and identity of Jesus is to grasp the meaning of the kingdom of God:

The kingdom of God ... is the master thought of Jesus. We do not understand his identity, his mission, his practice, his death; we do not understand who

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis C. Duling, “Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992).

Jesus was, what he did, or why he died, if we do not understand what he meant when he uttered the phrase ‘the kingdom of God.’<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this short presentation is not to offer an exposition of the NT teaching on the kingdom of God. Rather, in a much more limited scope, it attempts to point out some elements related to our topic of discussion, namely on the relation of the kingdom of God to unity and fellowship: *How would the concept of the kingdom of God help us, or offer direction for, the unity and fellowship of Christian churches? Or, to put it differently, how would a solid, biblical emphasis on Christian unity and fellowship be grounded on the concept of the kingdom of God?* More specifically, I will explore the way in which the Apostle Paul appeals to this concept in Romans 14:17 in a context in which he deals exactly with Christian unity and fellowship.

### **The Kingdom of God in the Gospels:**

The Greek word for kingdom, *basileia*, is a rather ambiguous term and contains three possible and inseparable senses of sovereignty, reign, and realm, and we find the writers of the NT using each of these senses. The kingdom of God is presented in the gospels under four different aspects: as a dynamic reign or rule (Luke 19:12,15; 23:42, and by “kingship” in John 18:36), as a future apocalyptic order that will be established at the end of the age (Mark 10:23-30), as a present reality among people (Matthew 12:28; Luke 17:20), and as a present realm into which people enter (Col 1:13; Matt 11:11; 21:31; 23:13; Luke 7:28; 11:52; 16:16). But probably one of the most significant, new elements of Jesus’ teaching regarding the “kingdom of God” is that it reveals a seeking God, who does not wait but “has once again become dynamically active in history ... for man’s salvation.”<sup>3</sup> It is also significant that the accent falls not on “kingdom” but on “God”, namely that God is the king: “Thus, ‘the kingdom of God has come near’ means ‘God is taking over as king, and to ‘enter the kingdom of God’ is to come under his rule, to accept him as king.”<sup>4</sup> The kingdom of God is thus a very complex and multifaceted reality which defies a simplistic “either-or” understanding and encompasses present and future, immanent and transcendent, internal and external

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Kuzmič, “Twelve Theses on Kingdom Servanthood for Post-Communist Europe,” *Transformation* 16.1 (1999), 35.

<sup>3</sup> George Eldon Ladd, “The Kingdom of God – Reign or Realm?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81.3 (1962), 238.

<sup>4</sup> R. T. France, “Kingdom of God,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer (London: SPCK, 2005), 420.

aspects of the reign of God.<sup>5</sup> In the biblical teaching on the kingdom of God, the emphasis falls on *God* and not on the kingdom, which means that every aspect of the kingdom must be derived from the nature, character and action of God: a seeking and inviting God, a fatherly God and a judging God.<sup>6</sup>

Even though the Apostle Paul does not use the term much, he gives us several statements concerning the kingdom of God pointing, on the one hand, to its transcendent nature, to a realm beyond death and history: “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 15:50). On the other hand, he also tells us that Christians are already living in the kingdom of God: “the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). For Paul, to be a Christian is synonymous with a life lived under God’s sovereignty, in the power of the Spirit, a life “worthy of the God who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thes 2:11); it is a life lived under the lordship of Christ, within the kingdom of Christ: “[God] received us from the domain of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of His dear Son” (Col 1:13).<sup>7</sup>

### **Jesus, the Kingdom and Christian Unity**

There is not any doubt that the kingdom of God has been the main theological theme of Jesus’ preaching through which he announced God’s active intervention and rule over the world. Indeed, as Mark announces it in Mark 1:15, the kingdom of God is the very content of the Gospel.<sup>8</sup> Jesus, however, did not simply proclaim the kingdom of God but he actually *manifested and embodied it* in a unique way. That is why Paul is then able to describe Jesus as the content of the gospel (Rom 1), as he understands that somehow, Jesus himself defines the kingdom of God. Indeed, we can say that “Jesus himself is the meaning and content of the kingdom.”<sup>9</sup> This is a logical point from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ found in the NT: since the kingdom of God refers to the activity of God on behalf of his people, we can only know this activity perfectly in the person and work of Jesus. Any attempt, therefore, to define and/or explain a particular ethical aspect

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<sup>5</sup> See particularly Welker, “The reign of God” (pp. 605-512), who makes this very strong point. There is also a complex set of meanings that define this concept. G.E. Ladd, for example, offers several facets of the kingdom as: a present realm of blessings, a present gift of life, the gift of salvation, the gift of forgiveness and righteousness; in *A Theology of the New Testament* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 68-78.

<sup>6</sup> See Ladd, *Theology of NT*, 79-88.

<sup>7</sup> See G.B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*. Completed and edited by L.D. Hurst (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 129-135.

<sup>8</sup> See I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 78.

<sup>9</sup> Hauerwas, 132.

of the Kingdom can only be made with reference to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Kingdom starts as the hope of a people called by God, which for Christians is defined by the life and death of the crucified Christ. The universal scope of the Kingdom is rooted in the universal scope of God's reign. What we can know of this God and his Kingdom is always given through the history of Israel filtered through the light of Jesus' cross. It is the continuing claim in the Gospels that Yahweh continues to prove himself King through the work of Jesus. For through Jesus we see God's continuing rule over nature and history as they are reclaimed by his good order. Jesus does not simply proclaim the coming of the Kingdom, but he manifests its presence through his exorcisms and healing ministry.<sup>10</sup>

A particular aspect of Jesus' manifestation of the kingdom is the way in which he forms a particular people around him. If indeed, the "Kingdom of God is a category which presumes and creates a people," then we see that in and through Jesus a people is being shaped which are truly citizens of the kingdom by their acceptance and transmission of *God's forgiveness and grace*.<sup>11</sup> It is only within the kingdom that people accept forgiveness and are enabled to extend forgiveness to others. It is this forgiveness and acceptance, among the primary gifts received and being shared, that makes Christian unity and fellowship possible and required! In the parable of forgiveness (Matt 18:23-35) Jesus shows clearly that we must pass on to those around us the gift of forgiveness we have ourselves experienced. Kummel notes:

Here, *the experience of God's love* in the encounter with Jesus is quite clearly *the precondition and the enabling of obedience* to the demand of God proclaimed by Jesus. ...the capacity for love is the result of the divine love which has been received. Because Jesus thus lets God's demand be grounded in the reality of God's eschatological loving action which man encounters, he can sum up all God's demand in the commandment of love for God and for one's neighbor (Mk 12:28ff.)... the response to the encounter with God in Jesus and to the promise of the kingdom of God can only be love for God which is actualized in love for one's neighbor.<sup>12</sup>

*Thus, to strive for Christian unity is not an option for Christian churches but a necessary aspect of living within the same kingdom and having the same Lord, Jesus*

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<sup>10</sup> Hauerwas, 133.

<sup>11</sup> Hauerwas, 133.

<sup>12</sup> W.G. Kummel, *The Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 55 (italics added).

*Christ*. It is the very unity and fellowship among Christians that expresses and/or manifests the presence of the Kingdom of God among the kingdoms of this world. The presence of God's kingdom is not a utopia but a reality we are required to embody in the world. It is the presence of Christ among us, through His Spirit, that is both the indication of the presence of God's kingdom and the call to make manifest that presence in the world. But Jesus Christ is not only the presence of the kingdom. He is also the ground for our future hope in the ultimate fulfillment of the kingdom of God.

It is significant to point out that the focus on Jesus as the manifestation and hope of the kingdom enables us to overcome the temptation and danger of conceiving the kingdom as a set of ideals or an ideal realm which we must proclaim and realize. Thus, to live in the kingdom and witness to its presence does not mean to implement a particular form of theocratic government, or that we should realize the kingdom in this world. Rather, to be a citizen of the kingdom of God is defined by our faithfulness to the true King, Jesus Christ and by our witness to the new life of peace that Christ has made, and is making, possible in this world. To understand the kingdom in these terms indeed has concrete ethical implications for our Christian life in the world, as Stanley Hauerwas remarkably states:

...The eschatological nature of the Kingdom as embodied in the ministry of Jesus does have immediate ethical implications. It does so not in the sense that the image of 'kingship' means that Christians should favor monarchy over democracy or vice versa, but in the sense that we are a people who have become part of a peaceable Kingdom that has been made possible by the life and death of Jesus Christ. It is not our task to make the 'world' the Kingdom; but it is our task to be a people who can witness to the world what it means to be so confident of the Lord of this world that we wish for no more than our daily bread. It is not as if we are the Kingdom, or that the church is even the beginning of the Kingdom, but that as a people Christians can begin to point to the fact that the Kingdom has been and is present in our midst.<sup>13</sup>

Such an understanding of the manifestation of the kingdom among us gives us the strength and courage to be a different community – one who challenges the world of violence and rejection with a message and commitment to peace, acceptance and forgiveness. Such is the community which has Jesus as its true King. We should hear today the strong echoes of Paul's plea to the Christians in Rome that it will only be through their unity and obedience to Jesus that they will confess that Christ is the true Lord of the world.

Paul is in agreement with the gospel writers on this: to belong to the kingdom of God means to find ourselves in the same story of Christ – which is the

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<sup>13</sup> Hauerwas, 134.

ongoing story of God's redemption and reconciliation in the world. In Romans 6, Paul provides us with what is probably one of the most explicit statements regarding the dynamic of the believers' incorporation into the same story of Christ. This is how Paul envisaged the Christian life: a life lived with Christ and participating actively in the same story of God's redemption of the world. It is a story which gives us not only the framework of life but also provides us with the ability and courage to live for the true King, in a world which does not know who that King is. To enter this particular story is to embark on a particular journey, together with all those who recognize the voice of the King and Lord Jesus, which means to be a particular community grounded in the life of Christ and shaped by his example. It is in the life and witness of such a community that the kingdom of God is made manifest in this world. This community, whose character is being shaped by the story of Christ, manifests the fruits of the Spirit who empowers us to live the new reality of God's kingdom: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). These are manifestations of the kingdom in contrast to the dominant characteristics of a world who does not know Christ, the King: "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal 5:19-21).

Since we are very much aware that the unity of Christian churches will never be realized (cannot be realized) alongside institutional structures, it is only the risen Christ, his lordship over all of us, that represents the ultimate source of our unity. Despite our different formulations of our statements of faith, it is our deep faith in Jesus Christ, through his Spirit, which gives us the proper ground for an authentic fellowship and compels us to strive for unity. It is our commitment to Christ and our participation in the kingdom of God which unites us and enables us to transcend the barriers that separate us.

*A proper, workable and real unity* cannot be based on a "theological minimalism" nor on a "missional utilitarianism." Rather, a biblical model of unity can only be based on our common love for and devotion to Jesus Christ, on our concern for the other, on a shared commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ who is the head of the church, a unity based on our common partnership and agency in the kingdom of God. Our common witness to the kingdom of God, coming forth from the unity we each have with Christ, is the key to unity. Jesus' own prayer in John 17 reveals the truth that our unity is evidence of the presence of the kingdom of God in the life of the church and, as such, should be a witness to the world about God's saving activity. It is exactly the love we have each received from the Father that the world needs to receive from the churches; it is the love that the believers

have for each other that will be a witness to the world. It may not be too much to affirm that this witness to the kingdom of God in word and deed is the fundamental task of the church in the world, just as this was Jesus' fundamental task. Love and unity, then, are indispensable markers of the task of the church and the unity of churches would be an important and effective witness to the kingdom of God, a unity pointing to the real King and Lord of the world. It will only be as we begin to focus beyond our own local communities that we will be able to see the big picture of the kingdom of God and realize that we all belong to the same kingdom and Jesus is our King.<sup>14</sup>

One of the twelve theses that Peter Kuzmič put forward for an understanding of kingdom servanthood was that "servants of the King are concerned for the unity of all God's people." I think it is appropriate, since he could not attend this consultation, that I offer at least an extended quote from his argument:

Because there is only one King, there is only one – his – kingdom; because there is only one head, there is only one church. I don't own a church, I am not the head of the church, neither are you. Christ is the founder and the head of the church and we are just members – bodies. Under his headship, under his lordship we will work together. We, our churches and we as servant leaders, need to continually ask ourselves the painful question: 'How can a sinful and divided church announce to the world the gospel of salvation and reconciliation?' It pleases our Lord that we love each other as brothers and co-servants of his. The problem of the evangelical family is that it is dysfunctional, fragmented, and has too much in-fighting. We must develop a non-sectarian ecclesiology in order to be a witness to our society. That will practically mean less independence and more interdependence; less competition and more cooperation – to move from competing to complementing; less ambition to lead and more willingness to follow and serve; less of a drive to dominate and more of an ability and willingness to develop – a primary task of us teachers; less of a need to control and more of a willingness to contribute and facilitate; less self-seeking and self-serving power and more empowerment of others; less to talk and more to listen; less empire-building and more kingdom-seeking; be better stewards of resources and avoid the sinful waste and duplication in evidence everywhere.<sup>15</sup>

The very nature of our communities and of the mission of our churches as servants of the rightful King of the world is another impetus towards cooperation and unity among churches. Here is how Peter Kuzmič puts it:

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<sup>14</sup> See Bertil Eksrom, "The Kingdom of God and the Church Today," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 27.4 (2003): 292-305.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Kuzmič, "Twelve Theses on Kingdom Servanthood for Post-Communist Europe," *Transformation* 16.1 (1999), 38.

The church is the community of the King. The true nature and mission of the church is to be marked by humble service, and a recognition that we can claim no ownership of the things and people that belong to God alone. We are called to be his humble servants, always ready to obey his command and to do his will. Whatever exists outside this attitude has no right to be called the church of Jesus Christ for it is out of tune with the kingdom of God. The kingdom demands commitment and obedience in service, following the model of the Servant-King. And so the nature and mission of the church can be rightly understood, lived and practised only in right relation to its founder and head, Jesus Christ, and in accordance with his central message about the kingdom of God. Only the church that is deeply rooted in and wholly faithful to the divine purposes disclosed in Christ will be sustained by the power of his Spirit, and effectively able to reach out in service and mission to a needy world.<sup>16</sup>

The basic message of the kingdom of God is as relevant today as it was when Jesus proclaimed it. However, the church in every generation may not simply repeat the language of the kingdom but must find the most appropriate forms to express the same essence of the message of the kingdom in such a way that it will be understood.<sup>17</sup> For a model of how to do that, we can now turn to the Apostle Paul.

### **Paul, the Kingdom of God and Christian Unity: Romans 14:17 in Context**

Even though it may seem strange to go to Paul for reference to the kingdom of God,<sup>18</sup> it might, in fact, be a logical step for us to do since Paul is among the first to attempt to use and redefine the concept of the kingdom of God in a different context than the Jewish one. In his “antithetical style of definition” in Romans 14:17, Paul “intended to bring out some corollary of the kingdom within a particular situation.”<sup>19</sup> Namely, he wanted to show the way in which the kingdom of God represents the measure of character and conduct for the Christians in Rome – “righteousness, peace and joy” is the standard of the kingdom. These are all bound throughout a law of love which was exemplified by, and grounded on, the story of Christ, and this is another way to explain the criterion of the king-

<sup>16</sup> Kuzmič, 35.

<sup>17</sup> See Caragounis, C. C., “Kingdom of God,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* edited by J. B. Green S. McKnight, & I. H. Marshall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 429.

<sup>18</sup> The Apostle Paul only made about 14 references to the kingdom of God compared with about 121 references in the synoptic gospels. Most of Paul’s references point to “inheriting the kingdom” (1 Thes 2:12; 2 Thes 1:5; Gal 5:21; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 15:50; Eph 5:5) while two references seem to be his own invention and present the kingdom in a couplet formula: “the kingdom of God is not x but y” (1 Cor 4:20 and in Rom 14:17). See Gary Steven Shogren, “Is The Kingdom of God About Eating and Drinking or Isn’t It?” (Romans 14:17), *Novum Testamentum XLII.3* (2000): 238-256.

<sup>19</sup> Shogren, 239.



dom. As long as these characteristics of the kingdom are manifested, the other things, including food and drink, “have become matters of indifference in God’s realm.”<sup>20</sup>

***The Context of Romans.*** Paul addresses a very complex situation in Rome. It is clear from the letter that one of the major problems confronting the Roman Christians had to do with their differences, dissensions, and even divisions among various groups (particularly but not exclusively among the Jewish and Gentile believers), vis-à-vis such issues as ethnicity, religious practice (observance of dietary rules, of special days, and of Jewish laws), and relationships with others within and outside of the Christian community. This background explains Paul’s interest in reconciliation, peace, love, unity, and welcome – as he attempts not simply to put an end to any conflict and reconcile different groups<sup>21</sup> but, especially, to articulate so forcefully the inner logic of the gospel as being incompatible with such behavior. For Paul, these misunderstandings and inappropriate conduct were not only a sign of the failure of the Christian community but a departure from, and a denial of, the very essence of the gospel.

Seen from this perspective, chapters 12-15 represent Paul’s attempt to correct possible misunderstandings and distortions of the gospel, and in his appeal for “unity in the church, and stability in society,”<sup>22</sup> he explicates the inherent implications of the gospel. One of the major problems that Paul is addressing in Romans 14-15 is that the believers have allowed their different attitudes regarding food and drink not simply to become central issues in their communities but to allow them to determine their life and conduct in detriment of the real fellowship with all believers. This attitude hindered the Christians in Rome to have a full fellowship with each other since each group was doubtful of the status of the other who was considered unfit for fellowship.

In *Romans 12-13* Paul expresses, in more concrete terms, the issues of how one should relate to fellow believers within the community (12:1-13) and to outsiders (12:14-13:7). On the one hand, Paul calls the believers to accept one another and express their love in mutual service as is appropriate for the members of “one body in Christ” (12:3-8). On the other hand, they are to behave accordingly towards outsiders: to bless the persecutors, to resist vengeance, to live peaceably with all, and to overcome evil by doing good. Significantly, there is no double standard, one for behavior within the community and one for life

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<sup>20</sup> Shogren, 239.

<sup>21</sup> Wedderburn, *Reasons for Romans*, 64-65 and 140-142.

<sup>22</sup> Philip H. Towner, “Romans 13:1-7 and Paul’s Missiological Perspective: A Call to Political Quietism or Transformation?” in Sven Soderlund and N.T. Wright (eds.) *Romans and the People of God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 153-5.

in the public arena; both dimensions of Christian living form an integral whole in Paul's mind.<sup>23</sup> He emphasizes a specific, transforming and loving attitude towards everyone, including enemies. Indeed, the tone of the whole chapter is given by Paul's summary statement, in the first two verses (12:1-2), about the nature of their new communal life: a life of self-giving love in service of others.<sup>24</sup> With these preliminary remarks, we are now ready for a closer look at his argument.

In *Romans 14-15* Paul addresses a specific issue that arose in the Christian communities in Rome, namely the clash between "the weak" and "the strong" (most probably between various groups of believers of Jewish and Gentile provenience),<sup>25</sup> having to do with their respective different convictions and practices regarding particular foods and the keeping of special days.<sup>26</sup> As is clear from the letter, there were believers in Rome who had taken arrogant attitudes and had shown strong tendencies towards pride and high self-esteem, based on their different religious commitments, ethnic background, and cultural superiority. The problem Paul has with such behavior does not have to do so much with the various differences between their convictions and practices, but rather with the negative alteration of the internal dynamic of the community in ways incompatible with the gospel. To judge or despise the other, or to be a stumbling block for others, are practices of exclusion which Paul describes as sinful because they destroy the relationships between the members of the community, which is the body of Christ. In his response, Paul tries to promote a sense of solidarity and unity; and he does that not by imposing uniformity but rather by legitimizing different ethical convictions and practices, thus enabling the believers to renounce criticism and judgment over each other. Identifying with "the strong," and insist-

<sup>23</sup> Towner, "Romans," 153-4.

<sup>24</sup> Commenting on the nature of the believers' new life, John Ziesler writes: "it is living as a perpetual sacrifice of oneself to God, being inwardly changed so as to belong to the new reality, and so as to exist solely for God and his will." *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London: Trinity Press International, 1989), 290.

<sup>25</sup> Caution should be shown in defining the exact identity of the "weak" and the "strong." This has been a matter of dispute, and none of the groups is to be easily classified as either "Jewish" or "Gentile." It is interesting that in these two chapters Paul does not use the word "Jew" or "Gentile" until the conclusion in 15:7-13. Paul as a Jewish Christian identifies himself with "the strong."

<sup>26</sup> Against Karris, for example, who sees Romans 14-15 addressed to a hypothetical situation. Robert J. Karris, "Romans 14:1—15:13 and the Occasion of Romans," in *The Romans Debate*, edited by K. P. Donfried (Peabody: Hendrickson, rev. ed., 1991), 65-84. For a similar position see Paul Sampley, "The Weak and the Strong: Paul's Careful and Crafty Rhetorical Strategy in Romans 14:1-15:13," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Studies in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, edited by L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 40-52. For him the categories of "weak" and "strong" have "no objective referents in the Romans congregations." Ibid.

ing that they should follow the example of Christ rather than please themselves (15:1-6), Paul's major concern is not to defend and/or reject the legitimacy of the arguments brought forth by the "weak" and the "strong," but rather to urge them to "pursue what makes for peace and mutual uplifting" (4:19). Peace and mutual acceptance expressed in a life of genuine love for others represent Paul's central concern in this last section of the letter.

The main point of the first paragraph of Romans 14 (vv.1-12) is simply that expressed in v.3a: "those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat." This point is then repeated towards the end of the section, in v. 10a. These instructions are then offered a strong theological basis. Paul begins by giving the essential reason why passing judgment and despising are unacceptable – "for God has welcomed them" (3b); and then he further elaborates this basis by pointing out that every believer is a servant of Christ, the Lord (vv.4-9), and that each will give an account before God's judgment seat (vv.10b-12).

That both sides have experienced God's "welcome" was the basic message of 3:21-5:11, which would result in "righteousness," "grace," "peace," "joy," and "hope" (5:1-5) to which Paul most probably alludes here. This is confirmed by Paul's concise description of the key characteristics of "the kingdom of God" as "...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" in 14:17 "in terms that exactly summarize 5:1-5."<sup>27</sup> If this is true, then for Paul, to despise and/or judge the other is not to live out the essence of the gospel which calls for a constant concern to honor and serve the Lord (vv.6-9). What defines the Christian community is a life lived not "to himself" but "to the Lord" (vv.7-8). By his death and resurrection, Christ became the Lord of the whole world, and to honor and serve the Lord means to live in harmony and unity, differences notwithstanding. Indeed, there is place for diversity as long as everyone's conscience is pure (v.5) and allows for various forms of expression of the Christian truth. To live according to the logic of the gospel and in light of the life of Christ is to be community oriented. Everyone is to nurture and embody reconciling practices – harmony and solidarity, peace, love, and regard for others – which enhance and enrich life together. But at the same time, the community is to maintain and manifest a degree of difference among its members as the "body" metaphor illustrates (12:4-8). In other words, we can say that Paul encourages the diversity of gifts and practices while he insists on the fundamental value of love and regard for the other, that he stresses the need for corporate solidarity while acknowledging the presence of differences and diversity.<sup>28</sup> In the concrete context of chapters 14-15, their

<sup>27</sup> Wright, *Romans*, 736.

<sup>28</sup> Horrell dedicates an entire book to highlighting the value of corporate solidarity and difference

freedom should not be a license to despise or judge the other. On the contrary they should live out their differences in such a manner as to bring honor to the Lord and thanks to God (v.6). The frequent references to Jesus Christ as Lord in a section so concerned with the unity of the church across traditional barriers might be an indication that Paul is also concerned with the Christian witness to the lordship of Christ in the wider world.<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere Paul expressed exactly this fact about the nature and mission of the church: to declare to the principalities and powers that the coming together of Jews and Gentiles in one community is the great act of God's reconciliation of the world through the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph.3:10). A possible division along ethnic or cultural lines within the churches in Rome would show that they are still conformed to the patterns of this world and have not been transformed by this gospel of reconciliation.

In the second part of the chapter (vv.13-23), Paul goes a step further in his argument. Merely refraining from judgment is not enough; Christians are encouraged to "never put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another" (v.13). This would be an intentional decision on the part of the "strong" to use their freedom in such a way as to avoid causing spiritual harm to the "weak" (13b, 15ac, 20-21), to let love determine their conduct (v.15) while their highest concern should be to "pursue what makes for peace and for mutual uplifting" (v.19).

**In verse 17 Paul states: "for the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."** Since he usually does not use the expression "kingdom of God," its use here may indicate Paul's dependence on a tradition emphasizing Jesus' own teaching on the true nature of the kingdom.<sup>30</sup> Significant in this instance, however, is Paul's emphasis on the fact that the essential characteristics of the kingdom reflect an adequate dynamic of relationships among the believers, whereby "righteousness" indicates a proper conduct towards the other and "peace" similarly refers to the horizontal, social dimension, a fact clearly shown by the qualification in v.19 (see also 12:18).<sup>31</sup> If this is, indeed, a summary of the passage in chapter 5:1-5, as it seems to bring together

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as fundamental to Paul's ethics: *Solidarity and Difference: Towards a Contemporary Appropriation of Pauline Ethics* (London: T&T Clark, 2005). As he rightly points out, these aspects are crucial for any social or political ethics. Elsewhere he states: "the central challenge to any ethical theory, at least from a Pauline perspective, is to show how it proposes to engender such human solidarity ... how to nurture a sense of community while also ensuring that difference and diversity are not obliterated in a drive to conformity and sameness." Horrell, "Peaceable," 92-3.

<sup>29</sup> Wright, *Romans*, 739. He also points out that internal conflicts over the implications of the gospel could determine an even greater tension with the Jewish communities and so it will inevitably give ground for persecution from the authorities.

<sup>30</sup> See Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*, 200-07.

<sup>31</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 857.

all its major themes, then Paul provides here a crucial link between practices of reconciliation (unity and acceptance) and the most important theological topics he dealt with previously. This illustrates once again that theology and ethics, faith and praxis, belong inseparably together. “The one who *thus* serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval,” continues Paul in v.18, i.e., those who embody “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” in their life together, are serving Christ in a manner acceptable to God. The imperative in v.19, “let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual uplifting” is a further confirmation that the kingdom of God, that is life “in Christ,” is characterized by a constant concern for the other, for peace and mutual uplifting. In other words, the criteria by which the believers should guide their lives are the central characteristics of the kingdom of God: righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Food and drink, and other “nonessential” aspects should be used and practiced in such a way as to contribute to peace and mutual uplifting.

**In Romans 15:7-13** Paul seems to draw together the entire argument of the letter into a fitting conclusion, in which he also enlarges his previous argument to point to a more comprehensive unity between different groups of Christians in God’s eschatological plan.

“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God” (v.7). While προσλαμβάνεσθε (“welcome”) points to the very same verb in 14:1 indicating that chapters 14-15 are particularly in view here, by the use of ἀλλήλους (“one another”) Paul enlarges his appeal from 14:1 to become a general call to all for mutual acceptance among those who continue to maintain different views and practices. It would only be by their mutual acceptance (and not by exclusion due to their different understandings and practices of their faith) that their life would be “according to Christ Jesus” (15:5). The very reference to the example of Christ (as in v.3) suggests that Paul broadens the scope of his concerns beyond the particular issues of “weak” and “strong” in Rome to the larger purpose of the reconciling nature of the new family of God constituted “in Christ.” It is particular here, in verse 7, that Paul makes explicit one of the most essential points he made throughout the previous chapters, namely that Christ’s work of reconciliation, as he described it especially in chapter 5, is “the crucial basis and model for what the church must now do.”<sup>32</sup> Just as Christ welcomed and

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<sup>32</sup> Wright, *Romans*, 746. To be sure, Paul’s reference here cannot and should not be limited to the work of reconciliation; it refers in a more comprehensive sense to the multifaceted work of Christ, who manifested God’s faithfulness by fulfilling the Jewish promises and by being a blessing for the entire world. Indeed, as the next verses clearly explicate, it was by fulfilling the story of Israel that Christ made it possible for the Gentiles to share in God’s blessings (vv.8-9), in line with God’s intention to have mercy on all, as Paul made clear in Romans 4 where he shows that through Abraham the entire world will be blessed. God’s blessings and favors were not meant for the ethnic Israel alone

reconciled them, so the believers should welcome and reconcile one another. The believers are to “welcome one another” because Christ has welcomed them (v.7b). He has also brought together Jews and Gentiles in the same community (vv.8-9a), according to, and in fulfillment of, God’s promises recorded in the Scriptures (vv.9b-12). A special emphasis is communicated here - the conjunction καθὼς, “just as,” Paul use indicates some sort of comparison, thus highlighting not only the fact of Christ’s welcome but also *the manner* in which he did it.<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, the readers would bear in mind Paul’s exposition of God’s reconciliation and of them being accepted; this was an act of pure grace in which Christ manifested his love towards them while they were weak, sinners, even enemies of God. *In the same manner*, they should manifest their love towards the other, to show the same grace to others that they have been shown by God. On the other hand, Χριστὸς διάκονον γεγενῆσθα “Christ has become a servant” (v.8.a), thus showing God’s mercy to all nations, via Israel (vv.8-9) and has dismantled the barriers that existed between Jews and Gentiles, forming one new community in which both groups share an equal status. *In the same manner*, the believers should live in harmony and service to both Jews and Gentiles, and their welcoming of the other should not be restricted by ethnic lines. Furthermore, Paul advocates a general welcome that should also extend to those with diverse ethical practices.

One more aspect is worth mentioning. For Paul, the kingdom of God – expressed as the lordship of Christ over reality in its entirety – represents God’s “sovereign decision to act within history ... the exercise of God’s royal prerogatives.”<sup>34</sup> This divine prerogative Paul defines throughout his letters, as the work of the Holy Spirit who gives gifts to the church and enables them to live adequately in the kingdom of God. This is why Paul comes to define the kingdom of God as “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). These characteristics being gifts of God to his people, is Paul’s way to say that the kingdom of God is not something that people “build” or “construct” but it is totally God’s work. However, what is distinctive about Pauline teaching is that Christ is reigning now, the kingdom of God is also present, and those who acknowledge his lordship are enabled to manifest, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the characteristics of the kingdom of God – righteousness, peace, joy – and these will enable a true and authentic fellowship of all Christians.

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but for all nations.

<sup>33</sup> Dunn, Romans 15:7.

<sup>34</sup> Shogren, 253.

## Conclusion

When we pray “your kingdom come” we make known that this prayer is effective, and that we express our readiness to God to let ourselves become agents of God’s renewal in the world.<sup>35</sup> We can thus conclude that the kingdom of God offers us a model for church life in the world, a model grounded in the hope that God’s rule brings a hope which overcomes the despair and inspires to a new, transformed life in the world. When Christians from different churches take the kingdom of God as the ultimate framework of reference, it gives a very strong sense of the same direction and hope that, finally, God’s love will prevail and God will have the final triumph over the world. It is clear that since the kingdom of God is not to be equated with the church, with any church, our focus on it makes us unite toward the same purpose of the extension of God’s reign. When all Christians are aware that they serve the same King and the same kingdom, they will be able to challenge any structure and/or behavior which contradicts or opposes the arrival of the kingdom of God. Thus, any expression of disunity, strife and conflict will be seen as antagonistic to the reality of the kingdom.

The concept of the kingdom of God helps us focus on Jesus and on his lordship over history, over the world, over his church, and so helps us concentrate on what unites us around Christ, on the fact that we are all one “in Christ.” A focus on the kingdom of God will draw our attention towards God and his work and away from our ministries, thus fostering unity because it makes us aware that we all work towards the same goal and have the same mission. When we put the kingdom of God at the center of our effort for unity, then our unity is not built on “projects” or “persons” but on our call to serve God more faithfully.

The kingdom of God represents the proper framework for our fellowship: “The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness, peace and joy” – fundamental elements for a true fellowship. This is probably one of the most relevant passages for our churches today and a crude reminder and challenge that we have allowed things which distinguish us to become more important than the things of the kingdom! Paul’s emphasis should become our own: it is the central concern of the kingdom which should determine our conduct and not the *adiaphora*, “matters in themselves indifferent.” Today, we may not have so many issues with food and drink, but we still have many *adiaphora* which prevent us from fellowship and hinder the manifestation of the kingdom of God in the world.

We have seen that from the very beginning when Jesus first announced the arrival of the kingdom of God in this world, a proper response to the kingdom

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Welker, “The reign of God,” *Theology Today* 49.4 (1993), 515.

meant “a complete reorientation of life around the kingdom of God. All other loyalties and commitments are relativized by the demand of the kingdom.”<sup>36</sup> A rediscovery of the centrality of the kingdom of God (i.e. of the lordship of Christ over reality in its entirety) would give the churches today an opportunity to re-examine their loyalties and commitments and help them, on the one hand, to focus on the essence of the kingdom (“righteousness, peace, joy”) which foster unity and fellowship, and on the other hand, to relativize the “matters of indifference” which point to many differences and might create disunity and prevent fellowship.

The most amazing news that the Apostle Paul gives us is that those who live under the lordship of Christ share in these benefits of the kingdom of God and that they are empowered to act as the agents of the transforming kingdom in the world. Christians from all denominations, are thus enabled to overcome and transcend the differences and various barriers of separation (which are characteristics of this world and not of the kingdom of God) and live in unity as they “seek first the kingdom of God and his justice” and not their own interests.

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<sup>36</sup> Joel B. Green, “Kingdom of God,” in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, edited by David J. Atkinson, and David H. Field (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1995), 531.



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**Sažetak** *Počinjući podsjećanjem na središnje mjesto koncepta kraljevstva Božjeg za Isusovu službu i nauku, i za ranu crkvu, izlaganje nastoji pokazati da je, unatoč nekim protivnim glasovima, pojam kraljevstva Božjeg još uvijek vrlo upotrebljiva i značajna kategorija, općenito za sadašnje kršćansko etičko promišljanje te osobito za kršćansko jedinstvo i zajedništvo. Budući da je zadana takva određena i ograničena svrha izlaganja, nakon nekih kratkih, ali neophodnih pojašnjenja o značenju kraljevstva Božjeg (suverenitet/vladavina/područje – sadašnje/buduće – unutarne/vanjsko – transcendentno/immanentno), članak nudi istraživanje nekoliko načina po kojima je koncept kraljevstva Božjeg značajan za kršćansko jedinstvo i zajedništvo, iz novozavjetne/pavlovske perspektive.*