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## 4 THE STRONG, THE WEAK, AND THE COVID-19 VACCINE: READING ROMANS 14 IN MALAWI

### *Abstract*

When the COVID-19 pandemic came, it killed millions of people and ravaged national economies, leaving many societies more vulnerable than before the Pandemic. However, beyond economic and social complexities, the Pandemic has also left in its wake religious and theological controversies. For example, in Malawi, the COVID-19 vaccine has polarised the religious community, with others accepting it as God-given while others reject it as Satanic. This chapter examines Romans 14:1-12 in the context of the COVID-19 vaccine controversy in Malawi. It argues that in contexts like Malawi, where sharp theological differences over the COVID-19 vaccine subsist, Paul's representation of weak and strong Christians in Romans 14:1-12 provides a framework through which Christians can negotiate the polarising effect of the COVID-19 vaccine. After examining the meaning of Romans 14:1-12 in the context of Paul Greco-Roman auditors, the chapter explores the implications of Paul's 'strong and weak' framework for a local Christians' response to the COVID-19 vaccine controversy in Malawi. Through this analysis, the chapter contributes to the body of knowledge on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malawi and, by implication, the relationship between religion and health in Africa.

**Keywords:** Paul, Romans 14, Weak, Strong, COVID-19 Vaccine, Malawi

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 disease is one of the most complex pandemics the world has ever experienced. Its effects have been widespread and abysmal, affecting nearly all aspects of human existence. The Pandemic has ravaged national economies and left, in its wake, not just economic and social complexities but religious and theological controversies. As religious

communities attempt to cope with the Pandemic, they have developed different and sometimes conflicting perspectives on the meaning of the Pandemic and their appropriate response to it. The chapter examines Romans 14:1-23 in the context of the COVID-19 vaccine controversy in Malawi, where conflicting theological viewpoints on Malawi's COVID-19 vaccine have the potential to affect vaccine uptake. In this chapter, we argue that in a country with a majority Christian population, Paul's representation of the weak and the strong Christians in Romans 14 provides a framework through which Christians in Malawi can negotiate the polarising effect of the COVID-19 vaccine controversy. The application of Paul's approach to conflict resolution in Rom 14 to the Malawi context is made within the broader context of the African philosophy of *ubuntu* which emphasises the importance of community, communion and the common good. Methodologically, our reading of Rom 14:1-23 in Malawi is informed by African Biblical Hermeneutics (ABH), which emphasises the importance of establishing a dialogue between the world of text and that of African readers and, through appropriation, enables the text to solve African problems (MBENGU 2011:4). The chapter has two sections. The first section examines Rom 14:1-23 in its social setting and its implications for Paul's Roman auditors. The second section re-assesses the COVID-19 vaccine theological controversies in Malawi in light of Romans 14:1-23. It is noteworthy that Rom 14:1-23 oscillates between eating and observing special days. This chapter, however, concentrates on the question of abstinence and meat-eating in the Roman church (14:1-4). This choice is based on the supposed correlation between ingestion and vaccine injection in that they involve substance intake into the body.

## The Weak and the Strong in the Roman Church

The application of controversial Pauline texts in specific contemporary situations that are equally contentious is always a difficult task. The task becomes more complex when the identity of the weak and strong in Romans 14 remain a subject of heated debate in scholarship. In the literary structure of Paul's letter to the Church in Rome, chapter 14 belongs to the hortatory of the letter 12:1–15:13. The major thematic thrust of the section is Christian living. Two views have, however, dominated the search for the context of the controversy in Romans 14. Most scholars trace the challenge

of the weak and strong in the Roman church to the Jewish-Gentile differences over the observance of Jewish dietary requirements and special holidays. While the specific contexts of the conflict in dietary observance remain elusive, the conflicts likely took place in household contexts where Gentiles and Jews met and shared a common meal (SPITALER 2009:45). It is also likely that, due to the Gentile predominance in the Roman church, more communal meals would have been held in Gentile households. It is therefore expected that concerned with the potential for contamination in the preparation of the meals, especially where the meat came from the pagan temples, the Jews preferred to eat vegetables (YOUNG 2016:55). This suggests the abstainers went to the fellowship gatherings but did not partake in the totality of the ritual meal. By refusing to participate fully in the household meals, ‘they spoiled the gathering’ (SPITALER 2009:46).

A minority dissenting view holds that, other than viewing the conflict in terms of Jewish-Gentile differences, the designation of weak and strong reflects varying individual tests over what is essential within the Jewish-Gentile mix of the Roman church. In this case, in Rom 14:1-23, Paul is not addressing a particular Jewish-Gentile controversy over food and special days. Instead, the admonitions in chapter 14 are part of Paul’s general paraenesis on Christian living traceable from 12:1–15:13 (MORRIS 1988:457). It needs to be noted that there were also strict Gentile non-meeting groups in the Greco-Roman world, such as the Orphics and Pythagoreans (WALTERS & PORTMES 2001:14). This suggests that the Roman situation was more complex than is generally held and that an uncritical ascription of vegetarianism and meat eating to Jews and Gentiles, respectively cannot quickly resolve the matter. As MORTENSEN (2018:329) has argued, it is also possible that Gentile proselytes in Rome continued with their Jewish commitments after accepting Jesus and, therefore, judged non-observant Gentiles. Yet, while the two positions above have merit in themselves, what was at issue in the Roman church, and essential for a contextual reading of Rom 14, was the existence of different preferences (whether group or individual) over what to eat and not to eat and that these differences had the potential for spoiling the fellowship of the church.

The gravity of the lack of fellowship over meals for the Roman community’s overall health is underscored by the relationship-building significance of meals in antiquity. Studies in Greco-Roman commensality demonstrate that meals had exclusive or inclusive significance. Meals had

a putative aim of ‘making-friends’ and determined who was included or excluded from the social group (BRAUN 2007:52). Eating and drinking together was a confirmation of fellowship and mutual social obligation (BRAUN 2007:47).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, if communal meals were a sign of who were friends or foes then, in any communal household context, like that of the Christ-groups in Rome, individual or group preferences were likely to affect community fellowship.

Also pertinent to understanding Romans 14 concerns the reason Paul classifies the faith of the abstainers as weak (v. 14) and that of the meat eaters as strong (v. 1). Such an understanding is important for applying the meaning of the two categories in particular contemporary contexts. Some scholars like REASONER associate the idea of the weak with ‘obsessive scrupulousness’ (REASONER 1999:54), probably traceable to the meticulous Jewish application of the law. Horace’s reference to ‘a small man of weakness, one of many’ who does not wish to speak on the Sabbath helps to place Paul’s reference to the weakness of faith not just in a Jewish context but also in the general concern for ritual purity characteristic of the abstainers.<sup>2</sup> However, what makes the faith strong or weak in the Roman context? BARCLAY rightly argues that the abstainers’ faith is weak because it is integrally connected to one particular set of cultural norms, whose removal put it under threat (BARCLAY 2013:202). These are comparable to Cicero’s morally weak person, who has an intense belief that something should be avoided when it should actually not be avoided. (Cicero, Tusc. Disp. 4.26. Cf. WITHERINGTON 2004:33). On the other hand, according to BARCLAY, the faith of the strong is strong because they have been able to disassociate their faith in Christ from every norm and value. Thus, for them, eating and drinking are not central to their relationship with Jesus (14:14, 17). These practices were *adiaphora* to their faith and, therefore, matters of preference.

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<sup>1</sup> A Pompeian graffiti announcement that ‘the man with whom I do not dine is a barbarian to me’ (BRAUN 2007:47)

<sup>2</sup> Horace in Satires 1.9.68-72 describes an interesting conversation that transpired in Rome and is of relevance to our discussion of Romans 14. One person refuses to talk to another and adds, “Today is the thirtieth sabbath. Would you affront the circumcised Jews?” The other replies, “I have no scruples.” The first rejoins, “But I have. I am a somewhat weaker brother, one of the many. I will talk another day.” (Cf. WITHERINGTON, 2004:33)

However, from Rom 14:3, 10, it is apparent that for Paul, the problem in the Roman church did not lie in the existence of individual preferences over what to eat or not to eat. The real problem instead lay in the interpersonal attitudes that arose from these divergent tastes. Two key words characterise the respective attitudes of each group toward each other, which Paul admonishes against. The first word is ἐξουθενέω, which means to despise but also carries with it nuances of looking down upon (Lk 18:9), rejecting (Acts 4:11) or disregarding. The second word, κρίνω, has the sense of separating, putting asunder, and distinguishing, which makes it close in meaning to ἀφορίζω, which means ‘to mark off by boundaries.’ Paul uses the word κρίνω extensively in his discourse against his detractors (1 Cor 3), where he urges them not to judge him but to let God be the judge (1 Cor 4:5). The reference to the problem of interpersonal disparagement and judgement (Rom 14:3) which is also echoed in Lk 6:37-42 mirrors a broken community. Such a community cannot reflect the ethos of a Christian community.

It is striking that although he would typically identify with the strong (Rom 15: 1), in resolving the community challenges rocking the Roman church, Paul sides with neither group. He, instead, takes a third route. His argument is that inter-communal relationships should not be determined by disputable matters (διαλογισμῶ) (14:1b). In other words, among the Roman Christians, matters of diet (or calendar) cannot be part of the criterion for defining the structure of the assembly (MORTENSEN, 1918:331). Where the matter cannot be sorted through an objective criterion, the antidote is mutual respect and tolerance among the members. The basis of this mutuality is derived from each group’s relationship with God: God has accepted both the weak and the strong (14:3). The Greek word used is προσλαμβάνω, meaning to accept or take along. It suggests that God takes seriously both those who hedge their faith with norms and practices and those who do not see the need to hedge their faith.

The rhetorical question in v. 4, ‘who are you to judge?’ emphasises the pointlessness of judging each other, especially if the Lord will ἵστημι (uphold) every respective orientation. In this case, instead of name-calling, each group should be confirmed in their minds the rightness of their action. They should, therefore, not change or be pressured to change because of other peoples’ preferences (v. 5b). The reason for the maintenance of the status quo is because each of them eats ‘unto the Lord to

whom they are both responsible (v. 6-8). Yet the more significant burden of responsibility to ensure peace and protection of the weak lies with the strong (v. 1). This is because their ability to disassociate their faith in Christ from every norm and value (BARCLAY 2013:202) implies that they would rarely be affected by the action and judgmental attitude of the abstainers. Yet, on the other hand, because their faith is integrally connected to a set of cultural norms, questioning and despising the practices of the weak and requiring a possible change of their behaviour would threaten their faith (Barclay 2013:202). Because of the delicate nature of the Roman community, the best attitude for each Christian should be one of pursuance of what makes for peace and mutual upbringing (v. 18-19). Each group should avoid practices that would endanger the other's faith.

## Reading Romans 14 in Malawi

A responsible contextual reading of Rom 14 requires an adequate understanding of the social context of its contemporary Malawian audience and their possible continuities with the text's audience. This understanding helps to create a dialogue between the text and the African context and, through appropriation, establishes how the text can help solve particular African problems (MBENGU 2011:14). Malawi is a Southern African country that shares borders with Mozambique, Tanzania, and Zambia. The country's religious demography portrays a Christian concentration of 77.3% (NSO 1918). The majority of Malawian Christians belong to the mainline churches, while 7.6% belong to the Pentecostal brand of Christianity (US State Department 2019). While the mainline churches portray a balanced theological outlook on social reality, the Pentecostals are usually theologically radical. For example, the Pentecostal response to witchcraft is typically dramatic. In many cases, it involves vehement exorcisms and the burning of charms (VAN DER MEER 2011).

On the other hand, the mainline theological response to witchcraft is usually low-key and nonchalant. In addition, most Pentecostal Christians display the endemic belief that demonic forces are at work at every level of society (ENGLUND 2007:478). This perception makes its members suspicious of any strange phenomena. These characteristics identify the Pentecostals with the conscientious members of the Roman church concerned with anything associated with spiritual contamination, notably the

food pollution of idol feasts (WITHERINGTON 2004:332). Therefore, although the Pentecostals are a minority, their fervent approach to spirituality and preoccupation with the nitty-gritties of faith characterise them as the most conspicuous and outspoken section of the Christian community whose theological pronouncements have a significant impact on public perceptions and attitudes.

Another inherent characteristic of Malawian religious cosmology, and perhaps African Christianity in general, is the intricate relationship between faith and sacred spaces. Faith finds its explicit expression in spatial contexts. As a result of this understanding, faithful attendance of worship in designated religious spaces is a demonstration of faith (TENGATENGA 2021). Since the gathered community is of paramount importance, anything that would negate individual presence in sacred spaces is subject to be branded demonic and anti-Christian. While this perception is endemic to the Malawian church in general Malawi, it is more conspicuous among Pentecostals, where church income and, by implication, the economic rights of the clergy are tied to the church gathering.

Given the above context, the emergence of COVID-19 and the consequent lockdown created a mix of socio-religious challenges that essentially polarised the Christian response to the Pandemic between mainline and Pentecostal churches. At first, since the lockdown distorted the religious cosmology of the Malawian church, both the mainline and Pentecostal churches resented the COVID-19 preventive measures and, in some cases, threatened to disobey (MAWERENGA & KNOETZE 2022:3). After proper coordination with the Malawi Government, the mainline churches eventually towed the conventional line. However, even amidst the confusion brought in by the Pandemic, the theological response of the mainline churches was characteristically moderate, emphasising hope amidst despair. When the COVID-19 vaccine emerged on the scene, the mainline churches encouraged Christians to demonstrate their love of neighbours by being vaccinated (ECM 2021).

However, the Pentecostal response to the lockdown and the COVID-19 vaccine was characterised by active resistance and intentional polemics. To demonstrate dislike of the course of events, the grouping's representatives sued the Government of Malawi and the umbrella body of the mainline churches (Malawi Council of Churches) for accepting extreme COVID-19 measures. In addition, they developed a sustained polemic

against adherence to the COVID-19 measures, the subsequent COVID vaccine and those that subscribed to mainstream thinking. Not only do they interpret the Pandemic as a sign of end time, they brand the vaccine as the mark of the beast in Rev 13:18 (MAWERENGA & KNOETZE 2022:4). Those accepting to be vaccinated are branded as not true Christians but apostates who have no place in the Kingdom of God. At one point, in a viral video clip, a Pentecostal pastor was seen boisterously claiming that a minister in the church of God who contracts COVID-19 was not a real man of God. In a context where several prominent ministers from both the mainline and Pentecostal churches had died of COVID-19, this caused a public uproar.<sup>3</sup>

Rubal KANOZIA and Ritu ARYA argue that religious leaders spreading conspiracy theories can prove detrimental to vaccination campaigns worldwide as these leaders often have ardent followers (KANOZIA & ARYA 2021). This is probably true of Malawi, where, by September 2022, only 11.8 % (2.25m) of the population had been vaccinated. This is against 4.32 million doses made available to the Malawi government. Eventually, most of these expired on the campaign trail and had to be removed. Social, historical, political, and individual factors such as emotions, values, risk perceptions, and knowledge have been known to contribute to the delayed uptake of vaccines (LARSON ET AL. 2014). However, the religious factor, especially in social settings like Malawi, where considerable religious nativity subsists, can potentially affect the COVID-19 vaccine uptake.

It is worth noting that, like in the Roman context, the main problem in Malawi is not the divergent religious views on the COVID-19 vaccine. The real problem lies in the interpersonal judgements over whether to take the vaccine or not and how this has the potential to affect the country's fight against the Pandemic. However, if Paul is to say anything about the Malawian context, one preliminary issue that needs to be established is whether taking the vaccine has any spiritual bearing on what it means to be a Christians. Does taking the vaccine in it any way negate dependence on God? What is the place of medical science in Christian theology? It can be argued that at its basic level, the COVID-19 vaccine is a health issue rather than an economic or religious one. While health issues can be corporate, especially in contexts of infectious diseases like the

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<sup>3</sup> This Pentecostal minister was made to make a public apology (by the national leadership of the Pentecostal), which he did.

COVID-19 Pandemic, the decision to take the vaccine is primarily personal. That is why, except in specific situations where public health is a significant concern, taking COVID-19 is voluntary and, therefore, personal. All this makes the theological differences over the COVID-19 vaccine in Malawi as *διαλογισμῶ* (14:1b) (disputed matter), which cannot be sorted by despising or judging the other but rather by embracing the differences.

Paul's admonition to the Roman church was that as long as the issue of what to eat or not was *adiaphora* to the Christian faith, then everyone should be confirmed in their minds of the rightness of their position (v. 14b). The validation to maintain status quo is because every Christian, abstainer or meat eater, or in the Malawi context, the anti-vaccine or pro-vaccine, do everything 'unto the Lord' to whom they are also responsible (v. 6-8). It is, therefore, unnecessary in the Malawi context to harangue others into taking one's position on taking or not taking the vaccine. Yet as Paul warns, while individual preferences for what to eat or whether to take the vaccine or not are primary, pursuing what makes for peace and mutual upbringing (14:19) represents the highest form of service to God. The solution Paul offers to the Roman church is for the strong to forgo their preferences in order to build a weaker brother (v. 21). How can Paul's advice apply to the Malawi context where the strong are apparently on the receiving end of judgement? Perhaps here, an appeal needs to be made to Paul's overall message in the chapter, which centres on mutual tolerance and respect among the members.

Thus, in the Malawi context, the solution to Paul's advice would not be for the pro-vaccine Christians to stop getting for the sake of the weaker brother. The answer lies in collective responsibility that ensures the community's general health. The Pauline injunction calls for the contextual application of *ubuntu*, which advocates for the importance of the common good and the values of generosity, hospitality, friendliness, compassion and solidarity (DREYER 2015:196). If one's actions or words are likely to cause another to stumble, either by not taking the vaccine and, therefore, endangering the health of the community or by taking the vaccine and consequently feeling spiritually guilty, then one is not serving the Lord. Thus, Paul's theology of mutuality and tolerance, which resonates with the spirit of *ubuntu* in African culture, provides the theological framework through which the Christian community in Malawi can negotiate the polarising effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and its vaccine.

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