

Romans 14:1-15:6 and John Wesley's Sermon on Catholic Spirit

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Introduction

Methodists have been known as active participants in ecumenical movement. Many Methodist Churches, such as that in Britain, U.S.A., Canada, Australia, South India and Hong Kong, have undergone a process of unification with churches of Methodist tradition and/or other traditions. Amongst many other factors, John Wesley's famous sermon 'Catholic Spirit' (1750) probably provides the important spiritual support in the movement. According to Outler, 'Catholic Spirit' "is a charter for a distinctive sort of doctrinal pluralism - one that stands at an equal distance from dogmatism on the one extreme and indifferentism on the other".¹

This catholic spirit is important not only to deal with issues of unity among Christian communities, but also to Christians facing religious pluralism in various contexts. For me, it could have deep implications to the success of 'one country two systems' in Hong Kong which affects seriously the common life of its inhabitants.

Nevertheless, we should not put too much weight on just one piece of work. It is important and indeed justified to find broader foundation for supporting this spirit. As Wesley put much emphases of his teachings on scriptures, it would be more fruitful to broaden this spirit on biblical basis.

The text of 'Catholic Spirit' is II Kings 10:15. Wesley's exposition on this text is quite free and simple. It is the imagery rather than the contents of this text which is most powerful. We wonder whether there is any other text in the Bible which embodies as well as provides a broader base for this spirit. I suggest that Rm. 14:1-15:6 is one of the texts that should be considered.

I. Relationship between 'Catholic Spirit' and Rm. 14:1-15:6

The reasons for considering Rm. 14:1-15:6 as a text to support the message of 'Catholic Spirit' are as follows :

A. Points in correspondence

Before we go into a more detailed analysis of the text, we can see there are at least ten obvious corresponding points between the sermon of 'Catholic

Spirit' (hereinafter referred to as 'CS')
are :

and the text. They

- a. According to love (CS para 1,2; I.14; II.3,4,7,8; III.4,6; Rm. 14:15)
- b. Issue on eating and drinking (CS para I.1, 15; II.2; Rm. 14:2-3, 6, 17, 21, 23)
- c. Bear the difference (CS para I.6, II.4, III.5, Rm.15:1)
- d. Fully convinced in one's own mind (CS para I.9, II.2; Rm. 14:5,22)
- e. Give account to God (CS para I.9; Rm.14:12)
- f. Not to dispute over opinions (CS para II.1, 2; Rm.14:1)
- g. The work of God (CS para II.7; Rm.14:20)
- h. Not wavering/no doubt (CS III.1,2; Rm.22-23)
- i. Building up each other (CS II.6; III.3; Rm.14:19; 15:2)
- j. Partakers of the kingdom of God (CS para III.5; Rm.14:17)

B. The Issue of Worship

One of the main issues addressed in CS is the modes of worship (CS para 4; I.7,8,10; II.2,7; III.2,4). Although there are disputes on the Sitz im Leben of Rm 14:1-15:6², there are growing consensus among many scholars that the situation addressed in Rm. 14:1-15:6 is the communal meal attended by Jewish and Gentile Christians³. In early Christian times, worship and communal meal were probably inseparable (cf. Icor.11:20-22)⁴. Thus, the main issue addressed in CS and Rm. 14:1-15:6 is on worship.

C. Exhortatory rather than Polemical

The sermon of CS is surely exhortatory. However, Paul's use of diatribe in his letter is considered by some scholars as polemical⁵.

Nevertheless, Stowers recent study, The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans (1981), convincingly demonstrates that diatribe is a type of discourse employed in the philosophical school and its form and the way it functions presuppose a teacher-student relationship. Thus, Paul's use of diatribe in Rm. 14:4-5 and 10-12 is not polemical but exhortatory. In fact, Romans is better understood as a letter of 'reconciliation'⁷.

Paul's attitude in Rm. 14:1-15:6, when to compare with Gal.2:11-21, is surely gentle and non-polemical. Since Paul's letters were read in Christian meetings, Rm. 14:1-15:6 would also function as a sermon.

II. Analysis of Rm.14:1-15:6

A. The Situation of Roman Christians

Much attention has been paid to the issue of whether Paul's letter to Roman was addressed to the situation of Roman, however, there is a growing consensus that Romans should not be treated as different from other Pauline letters which addressed to the concrete situation of letter recipients. The case of Rm.14:1-15:6 is even more evident, it is the passage which probably reflects the concrete situation of Roman Christian.

Since I have done a more detailed study on this passage ¹⁰, I simply present my findings briefly as the following :

1. The evidence that the main issue involves between the 'weak' (Rm. 14:1) and the 'strong' (Rm. 15:1) is clean and unclean foods (Zoinos in 14:14, and Katharos in 14:20) strongly supports the view that the 'weak' were Christians who observed the Mosaic law, no matter whether they were ethnically Jewish or not. The 'strong' were probably the Christians who did not follow the Mosaic law, among whom may be included some ethnic Jews, such as Paul.
2. The situation of the controversy between the 'weak' and the 'strong' is not in general but happened on the specific occasion when the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians worshipped and had communal meals in their house churches. The Jewish Christians did not abstain from meat or wine in general, they were vegetarian only when eating with the Gentile Christians in order to keep the Jewish food laws in such a situation (cf. Dan 1:8-16; Esth 14:17 (LXX); Jud. 12:1-4; Josephus Vitae 14).
3. According to the situation of Roman Jewish, Community ¹³ and the evidence of the Roman Christians in Rm. 16, ¹⁴ it is quite possible that the Roman Christians grouped themselves into different house churches according to their background. These house churches differed in practising Jewish food laws. Their difference caused tension among themselves, especially when members of different house churches joined the worship and communal meal of other house churches.

B. Paul's Teaching in Rm. 14:1-15:6

1. Paul Admonishes the Jewish and the Gentile Christians not to Pass Judgment on One Another (Rm.14:1-13a)

In 14:1f, Paul presupposed that there were cases of individual Jewish Christian who had participated in the communal meals of the Gentile Christian house churches. As they ate only vegetables and abstained from all meat provided by the Gentile Christians, they had disputes and were not welcome by them. The conflict was not only on the Jewish food laws but also the observance of special days according to the OT ceremonial law (cf. 14:5-6).

In dealing with the conflict in Rome, Paul laid down two principles for both the Jewish and the Gentile Christians :

- a. Do not despise or pass judgment upon one another (14:3f, 10, 13a).
- b. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind about his own practice (14:5).

Paul's teaching clearly tried to persuade neither the Gentile Christians to observe the Jewish ceremonial laws nor the Jewish Christians to abandon them, but both to accept the diversified practices. What Paul demanded from them was a change of their attitude toward one another but not their positions. The theological base for Paul's teaching is that they are united in God in their service to the Lord, under the Lordship of Christ, and in their eschatological destiny. They are brothers one to another (Rm. 14:6-12).

In Rm.14:1-13a Paul probably wishes to restore a situation in which Jewish Christians can participate in the worship held at a Gentile Christian house church. They could eat vegetables in the communal meal with no need to dispute with the Gentile Christians. However, then another issue arises : how can Gentile Christians participate in the worship held in a Jewish Christian house church?

2. Paul Admonishes the Gentile Christians not to Put a Stumbling-block or Hindrance in the Way of Building their Relationship with Jewish Christians (Rm. 14:13b-23).

In Rm.14:13b, Paul changes his use of first person plural (krinomen) in v.13a to second personal plural (krinate) in v.13b. He probably directs his exhortation explicitly to the 'strong', that is the Gentile Christians. Paul admonishes them not to place a stumbling-block (proskomma) in hindrance (skandlon) in the way of a brother. It is noteworthy that in the NT, proskomma and skandalon are linked together only in three cases : Rm. 9:33, here and I Peter 2:8. In other two cases, they are part of the

quotation from Is.8:14. In its original context 'the stone of stumbling and rock of offence' are concerned with a lack of faith.¹⁵ The 'stone' and 'rock' which represent Christ, to whom Christians have faith, is the crucial test between belonging to the people of God or being excluded from it.¹⁶ However, in Rm. 14:13b, proskomma and skandalon are not part of a quotation and the words 'stone' and 'rock' are missing. In Rm. 9:33 and I Peter 2:8, the 'stumbling' and 'offence' are inevitable, but in Rm 14:13b they are avoidable and should not be put in the way of a brother. The issue in Rm. 14:13b is concerned with the observance of Jewish food laws (vv 14f, 17, 20f, 23) but not faith in Christ. To Paul, these two issues are not at the same level of importance. Whether to observe the Jewish food laws or not is not essential for salvation. Of course, Paul understood that the observance of Jewish food laws is optional for the Gentile Christians, but it is essential for the Jewish Christians to keep their Jewish identity and to maintain their relationship with the Jewish community.

Thus, in Rm.14-13b, Paul's teaching to the Gentile Christians in the context of the controversy between in Jewish and the Gentile Christian is as follows :

- a. faith in Christ and observance of Jewish food laws are not of the same level of importance and they are not incompatible;
- b. do not make the issue of the observance of the Jewish food laws a test of faith for the Jewish Christians; and
- c. while the issue of the observance of the Jewish food laws is essential to Jewish identity, it can be a stumbling block and hindrance to Jewish Christians. If the Gentile Christians put the issue as a test of faith for the Jewish Christians, it will force the Jewish Christians either to abandon their faith in Christ or to become apostates from the Jewish community. This choice is not necessary. A Jewish Christian can simultaneously be a Jew and a Christian.

After Paul has directed the serious exhortation in v.13b to the Gentile Christians, he immediately uses two strong first person singular verbs (oida and pepeismai) to confirm that the understanding of the Gentile Christians about the invalidity of the Jewish food laws. However, Paul makes it clear that the essential issue is not about food but the relationship between people. The principle is simple : "Do not, for the sake of something not-essential, destroy the work of God" (v.20a). In order to make it crystal clear, Paul defines it in both negative and positive ways:

- a. It is right that everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make others fall by what he eats (v.20 cf I Cor8:8-13).

- b. it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything by which your brother stumbles (v. 21b)

Paul supports his teaching by appealing to the principle of love (v.15a), the death of Christ (v.15b), the need to avoid causing spiritual ruin of a brother (v.15c) and the nature of the kingdom of God (v.17).

Furthermore, Paul demands that the Gentile Christians should be aware of the limit of their freedom in the Gospel (v.16) for the sake of building up a peaceful and close relationship with the Jewish Christians (v.19)¹⁷. In other words, Paul admonishes the Gentile Christians to accept the practice of Jewish Christians on Jewish food laws even though they are wrong in the understanding. Even further, Paul asks them to restrict their freedom which seems to suggest that it would be good if the Gentile Christians can accommodate themselves to the practice of Jewish food laws in the presence of Jewish Christians in their own house church (see discussion on Rm. 15:1-4 below).

Paul's teaching seems to be very extraordinary. How can Paul asks the 'right' to accommodate to the 'wrong' but not asks the 'wrong' to be corrected to the 'right'?

For Paul, the principle is clear. If something which is essential for those who are wrong but not essential to those who are right, then let those right restricts their freedom to accept and to accommodate themselves to those who are wrong. This has to be done on the principle of love and the utmost importance is the relationship between brothers (and sisters).

3. Paul Admonishes the Gentile Christians to Please the Jewish Christians (Rm.15:1-6)

In 15:1 Paul identifies himself with the 'strong' (Gentile Christians) and uses the emphatic verb opheito to denote that the Gentile Christians have an 'inescapable obligation' to help to bear the burden of Jewish Christians. Paul forcefully admonishes the Gentile Christians ~~not~~ to please their 'neighbour' with the appeal to the example of Christ and to the OT. In the situation of the Roman Christian community, Paul's teaching probably asks the Gentile Christians to follow the practice of the Jewish Christians on the occasion when the Jewish Christians participate in the communal meal held at the Gentile Christian house church. In such a situation, if they eat only vegetables together with the Jewish Christians and not put them into test of faith, there is no doubt that the Jewish Christians will be pleased. In return, the Jewish Christian will be happy to invite and accept the Gentile Christians to worship and have meal in the Jewish Christian house churches (Rm. 15:7-13).

Paul's teaching in Rm. 14:1-15:6 does not contradict his position as stated in Gal 2:11-14. In Galatian, the issue at stake is whether the Gentile Christians should live fully according to the Jewish way of life.¹⁸ More precisely, the issue is whether a Gentile Christian should become a Jew if he is to become a member of God's people. Paul opposes this position strongly. However, in Rm. 14:1-15:6, he clearly states his view on the Jewish food laws (14:14) which are essential for the Jews to preserve their Jewish identity but not essential to the Christian faith and it is optional for those who have faith in Christ. The heart of the matter is that the observance of the Jewish way when eating a meal on specific occasions by the Gentile Christians would contribute to the unity of the Jewish and the Gentile Christians in Rome.

Paul's position in Rm. 14:1-15:6 is also in line with his missionary as principle revealed in ICor 9:19-22 which not only shapes his missionary work but probably also shapes the aspiration and the very style of his life.

III. Implications of Paul's Teaching To John Wesley

In Wesley's Sermon Register (14th January, 1747 to 25th December, 1761) edited by N. Curnock in The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. Vol. VIII (pp. 169-252), there were 21 entries of passages selected from Rm. 14:1-15:6. However, there were only 3 verses from Rm. 14, they were 14:7 (4 entries), 14:17 (5 entries) and 14:23 (2 entries); and also 3 verses from Rm. 15:1-6, they were 15:4 (1 entry), 15:5 (1 entry), 15:5, etc (2 entries), 15:5,6 (5 entries) and 15:6 (1 entry). Among the extant 151 sermons,¹⁹ there were only two sermons using 14:10 and 15:2 as the texts (17 out of 151 sermons use passages from Romans) respectively.²⁰

While we suggest that Paul's teaching in Rm. 14:1-15:⁶ could be considered as a base to support Wesley's CS, there is no such evidence in Wesley's extant sermons. According to Outler, the sermon on Rm. 14:10 "The Great Assize" is concerned about "the Christian life as lived under God's constant judgment and oriented toward his final judgment".²¹ The sermon on Rm. 15:2 "On Pleasing All Men" is dealing with issues related to Christian discipline. Wesley's task is "to provide his people with an alternative description of good manners appropriate to their Christian experience of grace"²² Neither of them deals with the issues in CS. Wesley's use of Bible in preaching is surely an interesting issue which we should pay more attention to. The historical distance between Wesley and us accounts for different approaches in studying and using the Bible, as well as the different *issues concerned*.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that in John Wesley's Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament (Preface on 4th January, 1754), his understanding of the passage (Rm. 14:1-15:6) is not far from the growing consensus of our contemporaries. He

identifies the issues at stake as “needless scruples” (14:1), “the food law”(14:2), “Jewish festivals” (14:5) and the relation between “Jews and Gentile” (15:6).²³

From our above analysis of the passage, we find that Paul and Wesley are common in the following points :

1. the uppermost importance is the relationship between one another,
2. not to dispute over opinions,
3. not to change one’s own position but to change attitude towards one another,
4. do not let non-essential things affect those that are essential,
5. the common base of Christian practice is love.

However, there are also some differences between Paul and Wesley, of which Paul’s teaching may enrich Wesley’s message of CS :

1. Paul is aware of the power relationship between two groups, he identified himself with the ‘strong’ who have more freedom to maneuver and ask them to restrict their freedom in order to accommodate the ‘weak’. Wesley does not seem to be aware of the power relationship between the different groups of people. This may be one of the reasons why he overlooks the situation of the ‘papists’ in the eighteenth century and does not apply fully his understanding of catholic spirit to Catholics.²⁴
2. Paul does not only differentiates between things that are essential and that are not, he also differentiates between “ to whom” they are. He accepts the practices of the ‘weak’ for the practices are essential to them but not to the ‘strong’, even though the ‘weak’ are wrong in their understanding. Baxter’s suggestion that “to agree a way of union and accommodation they should come as near together as they possibly can in their principles, and where they cannot, still to unite as far as possible in their practice, even though on different principles. Where that cannot be, yet they should agree on the most loving, peaceable course in carrying out our different practices, so that we may have unity in things necessary, liberty in things unnecessary, and charity in all”²⁵ is close to the spirit of Paul.
3. Paul does not intend to correct the wrong understanding and practices of the ‘weak’ but rather asks the ‘strong’ who are right to accept and to accommodate themselves to the ‘weak’. For Wesley, he does not demand different groups to change their practices, but he has a strong sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and expect the ‘wrong’ be corrected (CS para II 4-6). Although his demand of correction applies to himself, it indicates that this would naturally apply to others who are ‘wrong’.

The above observations are by no means exhaustive, but could have implications to Wesley's teaching and so broaden the foundation and scope of Methodists understanding of catholic spirit.

Conclusion:

Implications to our Contexts

In a pluralistic world which is a global village that we live in, we have to face the challenge of seeking the common ground and accepting the differences at the same time. Wesley's message on catholic spirit is not only relevant to dealing with differences between Christians, but also that of different religions, ideologies, cultural values and political systems. If we hope that John Wesley's wisdom is relevant to our age, we should broaden this foundation and enrich his teachings from wider spiritual sources so that Methodists could contribute ourselves in constructing personal and social relationships within the Church, to the world and to the nature.

Notes :

1. Outler, WJW Vol. 2, Sermons II: 34-70, P.80
2. See discussion in LO (1988:138-143; cf Watson (1986:95) and Barclay (1996: 292)
3. See Minear (1971:9), Barclay (1996:291), cf LO (1988:139f)
4. See Cullmann (1950:14ff) and Moule (1961:18-46)
5. See Bultmann (1910)
6. Stowers (1981:75ff).
7. See Davies (1978:130); Haacker (1988) f.
8. See Donfried (1991)
9. Marxen (1964); Minear (1971); Schmithals (1975); Kaesemann (1980); Stuhlmacher (1986 and 1989: 219f); Dunn (1988).
10. LO (1988: 137-191)
11. Pace Karris (1973); Barrett (1962:257f); Raeisaenen (1983:48), Bassler (1984:56f); Meeks (1987:293); Zieslar (1989:325f)
12. So Watson (1986: 94f), Barclay (1996:291)
13. See Leon (1960), Wiefel (1970) and Lo (1988:70-136)
14. For the problem of Rm. 16 as part of Romans, see Gamble (1977) and Lampe and Stuhlmacher (1989:224-6) (1985)
15. See Kaiser (1963:118) and Lindars (1961:176)
16. See Lindars (1961:177)
17. See Cranfield (1979:725)
18. See Dunn (1983:31f)
19. WJW Vols 1-4
20. Among the 151 sermons, 37 use texts from OT and 114 from NT. The sermon on Rm. 14:10 is Sermon 15 in WJW vol. 1, pp. 354-375, "The

Great Assize" (Feb 27, 1758) and the one on Rm. 15:2 is sermon 100 in WJW vol. 3, pp. 415-426, "On Pleasing All Men" (May 22, 1787).

21. See WJW vol. 1, pp. 354f
22. See WJW vol. 3, p.415
23. Wesley, Explanatory Notes, pp. 239-241
24. See discussion in Butler (1995).
25. Baxter (1830:15)

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