HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

A study on the meaning and function of the Kingdom of God statement in Romans 14:17

Check for updates

Author:
Seo-Jun Kim[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of New Testament Studies, United Graduate School of Theology, Keimyung University, Daegu, Republic of Korea

Corresponding author:
Seo-Jun Kim,
aromaletter@live.co.kr

Dates:
Received: 24 Mar. 2026
Accepted: 04 May 2026
Published: 26 May 2026

How to cite this article:
Kim, S.-J., 2026, 'A study on the meaning and function of the Kingdom of God statement in Romans 14:17', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 82(1), a11404. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v82i1.11404

Copyright:
© 2026. The Author. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Read online:
Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This study investigates the meaning and rhetorical role of the Kingdom of God statement in Romans 14:17 within the wider argument of Romans 14:1–15:13. It argues that Paul's declaration that the Kingdom consists of 'righteousness, peace, and joy' functions as the theological climax of his exhortation to a divided community. Rather than offering a definition of the Kingdom of God, Paul presents these concepts as the essential values that should shape communal life. By comparing this triad with parallels in Jewish and Greco–Roman traditions, the article shows how Paul employs widely recognised ideals of an ordered society while reconfiguring them within a Christological and pneumatological framework. The statement thus serves as a counter-discourse that redirects the Roman believers from disputes over food towards a vision of communal life grounded in Christ's love and realised through the Holy Spirit.

Contribution: This article offers a contextual and rhetorical interpretation of Romans 14:17 within the broader argument of Romans 14:1–15:13. It shows that the triad of righteousness, peace, and joy primarily describes communal realities rather than individual spiritual experiences. By situating Paul's formulation within Jewish and Greco–Roman traditions of the ideal social order, the study clarifies the intellectual background of the passage. At the same time, it highlights Paul's distinctive contribution in integrating these values into the discourse of the Kingdom of God and grounding them in Christ's love and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: Kingdom of God; Romans 14:17; Pauline ethics; righteousness; peace; joy; early Christian community; Holy Spirit.

Introduction

Contemporary societies continue to experience tensions, conflicts and divisions at multiple levels, and the pursuit of peace remains an ongoing challenge. Such dynamics are not limited to political or social structures; they are also evident in communal settings, including the church, which is called to embody unity grounded in the love of Christ. Historical and present realities alike demonstrate that Christian communities are not immune to internal conflicts, often intensified by doctrinal, cultural or socio-political differences. A similar situation is reflected in the Pauline letters, where early Christian communities, situated within the multiethnic and multicultural environment of the Roman Empire, were likewise marked by tensions arising from differing practices and convictions. Romans 14:1–15:13 constitutes one of Paul's most sustained attempts to address such conflicts, particularly disputes over food practices and religious observance.

Within this paraenetic section, Romans 14:17 – 'the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit' – functions as a pivotal statement that both summarises and redirects Paul's exhortation. Scholarly interpretations of Romans 14:17 have developed along several complementary lines. Donfried (1987) situates the Kingdom of God as a fundamental theological horizon underlying Paul's thought, within which ethical exhortation is to be understood. Shogren (2000) reads Romans 14:17 in its immediate context, emphasising its role in relativising food disputes and reorienting the community towards essential values. Theobald (2001b) connects the triad of righteousness, peace, and joy to the Christological foundation of communal life, particularly the love of Christ. Smit (2007) compares the formulation to Greco–Roman symposia discourse, suggesting that the triad reflects culturally recognisable patterns in articulating shared communal values. Although these approaches illuminate important aspects of the text, they often treat the statement in isolation from the immediate rhetorical flow of Romans 14:1–15:13. As a result, the verse is frequently read as a theological summary or ethical principle rather than as part of Paul's argumentative strategy addressing communal conflict.

Moreover, the triad of righteousness, peace, and joy, together with the role of the Holy Spirit, has rarely been examined in a precise and integrated manner within this context.

This article argues that Romans 14:17 functions as the rhetorical climax of Paul's argument in Romans 14:1–15:13, reorienting the community by redefining the Kingdom of God in terms of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά [righteousness, peace, and joy] as fundamentally communal realities. Methodologically, the study adopts a contextual and rhetorical approach, closely analysing the immediate literary context and the argumentative progression of Romans 14:1–15:13, supplemented by a tradition-historical comparison with Jewish and Greco–Roman literature. In particular, it examines how the triad of righteousness, peace, and joy is employed in broader ancient discourses on ideal communal order and situates Paul's formulation within this wider intellectual horizon. This approach situates the Kingdom statement more precisely within Paul's argumentative flow, reassesses individualistic readings of the triad, and clarifies both the continuity and the distinctiveness of Paul's formulation within its broader intellectual context.

Paul's exhortations and the Kingdom of God statement

In Romans 14:1–15:13, Paul exhorts the believers, using diverse theological arguments and rhetorical strategies, to resolve the issue of the Roman church, which was polarised over matters of eating and drinking. In Romans 14:1–12, Paul appeals to the fact that God or Christ has welcomed both the weak and the strong, and that all believers collectively belong to Christ; he simultaneously emphasises the egalitarian standing shared by all believers by invoking the eschatological judgement. The subsequent pericope, Romans 14:13–23, primarily addresses perceptions of food and one's attitude towards fellow brothers and sisters in the light of the love of Christ, thereby presenting the fundamental values that the church community must pursue. In the final section, Romans 15:1–13, Paul once again underscores a love directed towards the benefit of others and highlights God's salvific plan that has called them into unity within the Christian faith.

Paul initiates his exhortation by addressing the strong, urging them to welcome those who are weak in faith and to refrain from passing judgement; the substance of this exhortation forms the central axis of Romans 14:1–15:13. Although this exhortation begins by addressing the strong (v. 1), it soon develops into a mutual exhortation (vv. 3, 13) and continues through to the final conclusion of the pericope (15:7). Generally, προσλαμβάνειν refers to the act of taking or receiving an object or a person (Danker et al. 2000:878–879). However, the nuance this word carries in 14:1 is not merely an acceptance in the sense of tolerating another's opinion, but rather welcoming the other person as a member of the same community and entering into fellowship (Shogren 2000: 240–241; Wolter 2019:404). This is confirmed in verse 3, where Paul emphasises that God has welcomed each believer in the Roman church, forming the basis for mutual acceptance. This welcoming of each believer in their total personhood as a member of the church is reiterated in 15:7, with the only change being the subject, which is now Christ [Χριστός].

Next, Paul appeals to the common ground shared by all members of the community, despite their differing stances. That is, every member of the community is a being who belongs to the Lord (vv. 4, 8). Furthermore, this shared belonging signifies living with a shared purpose. The members of the community may hold different positions and engage in different practices regarding days and food. Ultimately, however, as beings who belong to the Lord, they all live their lives for the Lord; even their differing convictions and practices share this exact same purpose. Paul's intention in reminding them of this identical mode of existence and sense of purpose shared by all members is clear. The emphasis that all community members ultimately live for the Lord serves as a warning against asserting only one's own position as being for the Lord, while simultaneously laying the foundation for mutual respect towards members holding different stances (Theobald 2001a:145–146).

In Romans 14:10–12, Paul mentions one more common ground shared by both the weak and the strong in faith. This is the judgement seat of God, before which everyone will eventually stand. Thereby, Paul's argument expands beyond the Christian's belonging and mode of existence to the issue of eschatological judgement – that is, the final evaluation. The reason for recalling this final judgement of God is evident, as demonstrated by the introduction of verse 10. Paul views the problem of community members criticising and judging one another as an act of forgetting God's final judgement. As Paul states, all people will ultimately stand before the judgement seat of God and must be evaluated for their deeds. Paul has already clarified in verse 4, through the analogy of judging another's servant, that judging one another transgresses the proper boundaries of a member of the community. The reference to the judgement seat of God [βῆμα τοῦ θεοῦ] in verses 10–13 similarly relativises the value of human judgement while emphasising the accountability of community members for their words and actions (Gäckle 2005:411–412).

The following is that the crucial theological rationale Paul introduces to resolve the community's conflict and division is the death of Christ (14:15). The reference to Christ's death reminds them of the love of Christ received by members of the community. The 'brother' [ἀδελφός] who is grieved over matters of eating and drinking is a being whom Christ loved to the point of giving up his life (cf. Rom 5:8; Gal 2:20; 2 Cor 5:14). Thus, the reference to Christ's death demonstrates how precious each community member is, and furthermore, provides clear guidelines for ethical behaviour (Gäckle 2005:416; Theobald 2001b:498; Wolter 2019:378–379). Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 8:11, Paul addresses those who assert their freedom in eating by recalling Christ's death for the salvation of the weak, demanding an attitude worthy of such a death. For Paul, the death of Christ thus establishes

the existential value of the community's members and serves as the foundation for building a new communal order based on love.

Following the reference to Christ's death, another vital theological rationale presented by Paul concerns the essence of the Kingdom of God: The Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy (14:17). The purpose of this simple yet unequivocal statement regarding the Kingdom of God is not to disparage the value of eating and drinking (Barclay 2001:58; Shogren 2009:239). Rather, it presents an ultimate value that the community must collectively pursue – one that is loftier and more critical than the dietary disputes that had become a source of contention. The Kingdom statement in Romans 14:17 synthesises and subsumes the preceding points within the broader theological discourse on the Kingdom of God and its inherent values, while laying the groundwork for subsequent exhortations on communal harmony (Moo 2018:872; Smit 2007:45–46; Theobald 2001b:489). In this respect, Romans 14:17 constitutes the rhetorical climax of the entire pericope of Romans 14:1–15:13 and occupies the fulcrum of Paul's argumentation.

The Kingdom of God as a counter-discourse

Including Romans 14:17, explicit references to the Kingdom of God appear in exactly seven places across the Pauline epistles: 1 Thessalonians 2:11–12; Galatians 5:21; 1 Corinthians 4:20; 6:9–10 (twice); 15:50; and Romans 14:17. Although this frequency is lower compared to the Synoptic Gospels, where the Kingdom of God serves as the central theme of Jesus' proclamation and ministry, the significance of the Kingdom motif within the Pauline epistles cannot be underestimated (contra Theobald 2001b:489). Even when the exact phrase is not explicitly mentioned, Paul's gospel and his entire theology stand on a continuum with the grand theological discourse of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus (Gäckle 2018:135). Moreover, just as his contemporary Jews lived by confessing the kingship of God, as attested in the Old Testament and various Jewish literature, this concept forms the bedrock of his thought (Donfried 1987:176–177; Gäckle 2018:142–143). The reason the Kingdom of God appears somewhat receded in the Pauline epistles compared to Jesus' proclamation is that the homiletic emphasis had shifted towards present and future salvation through Christ.

Paul's references to the Kingdom of God can be understood fundamentally in a futuristic dimension, employed almost synonymously with eschatological salvation or eternal life (Lopez 2011:453; Moo 2018:872–873; Wolter 2019:380). In its application, however, the concept is inextricably linked to highly concrete, practical issues of the community and the ethical lives of the believers (Gäckle 2018:147–148; Shogren 2000:240; Theobald 2001b:499). Texts such as Galatians 5:21 and 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 illustrate this aspect well. These passages feature the common expression 'inherit the Kingdom of God' [βασιλεία θεοῦ κληρονομεῖν] and enumerate various impious and immoral acts and attitudes that exclude one from such an inheritance. Although 1 Corinthians 15:50 does not mention specific actions or attitudes, the earthly life represented by 'flesh and blood' [σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα] in this text likely signifies a mode of existence detached from the Christian faith, grounded in the hope of resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 15:32–34). Similarly, in 1 Thessalonians 2:11–12, Paul does not treat the Kingdom of God in the abstract, but rather relates it directly to the believers' calling to walk in a manner worthy of that Kingdom (cf. Th 2 2:5). In the case of 1 Corinthians 4:20, which, alongside Romans 14:17, employs what is termed an '*antithetische Definitionsstil* [antithetical definitional style] (Haufe 1985:469), the concept of the Kingdom of God functions not so much to designate a future locus of salvation per se, but rather as a reference point conveying the value of true faith, thereby demanding commensurate behaviour from the believers.

In Romans 14:17, the Kingdom of God also appears to point to a future locus of salvation – the eschatological future in which God's ideal sovereign rule is realised. Nevertheless, the concept of the Kingdom of God, along with the three values that characterise it (δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, χαρά), directly correlates with the pressing realities of the Roman church, serving as an ideal communal model for the church to strive to actualise. The Roman church, fraught with criticism and dispute over matters of eating and drinking, finds itself in a state utterly devoid of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά – the core values constituting the Kingdom of God. In such a context, declaring that the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy, is not aimed at providing a mere lexical definition of the Kingdom. Rather, Paul's Kingdom statement unequivocally demonstrates the higher values that the church community must hold fast to, transcending the dietary disputes (Haufe 1985:469; Shogren 2000:240; Toney 2008:100). In this regard, Paul's Kingdom of God statement and his presentation of its core values can be characterised as a counter-discourse, normatively presenting to the Roman believers the vision of the community they are called to build.

The character of the Kingdom of God statement as such a counter-discourse becomes even more apparent when examined in connection with the various arguments preceding and following it. Above all, this rhetorical strategy – which transcends debates over the rightness or wrongness of eating and drinking to emphasise the essence of the Kingdom of God, namely, God's sovereign rule – can be identified in the earlier references to the sovereignty and judgement of God or Christ. This emphasis continues in the verses subsequent to the Kingdom statement. Indeed, diverse theological foundations connected to the concept of God's sovereign rule are already detectable in the references to God, who has called various people as members of the community (14:3); God, who as the final judge of all will ultimately evaluate both the weak and the strong (14:10–12); and God, who not only created all things good (14:14, 20) but also receives the praise and glory of all nations (15:6, 9–11).

These foundations are equally evident in the references to Christ, who not only gifted new life to all members of the community through his death on the cross (14:15) but also serves as the Lord and ultimate purpose of their lives (14:6–9, 18). It is upon these robust theological foundations that Paul presents the communal values and virtues that all members of the Roman church must jointly pursue through the triad of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά.

What, then, is the specific meaning of the three concepts – δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά – that constitute the central axis of this counter-discourse directed at the conflict and division within the Roman church? As emphasised above, the meaning of these three concepts cannot be isolated from the context of the pericope examined thus far. That is, these three concepts must be understood not as expressions of an individual's internal state or emotion (contra Fitzmyer 2008:697; Theobald 2001b:491,500; Wilckens 2008:93; Ziesler 1972:208), but as descriptors setting forth the vision of the ideal community that the Roman church is called to pursue. In this regard, δικαιοσύνη designates a right attitude and right relationship towards fellow community members; εἰρήνη points to a peaceful relationship among community members (cf. Rom 12:18); and χαρά signifies the joy that manifests in a community where such righteousness and peace have been actualised (Barrett 1991:243; Moo 2018:874). A point warranting particular attention here is the fact that the motif of εἰρήνη segues directly into the exhortation of 14:19. Within the context of this pericope, εἰρήνη serves as the focal point among the three concepts, encompassing all the exhortations – such as mutual acceptance, consideration, and understanding grounded in the love of Christ – that Paul emphasises in the surrounding paragraphs.

In grasping the meaning of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά, Paul's exhortation to love [ἀγάπη] in Romans 14:15 must also be taken into consideration. This is because the Kingdom of God statement in Romans 14:17 is effectively an amplified version of the exhortation to love in Romans 14:15 (Theobald 2001b:498). As noted earlier, the exhortation to love in Romans 14:15 is grounded in the love of Christ, who gave up his life for all members of the community. Taking into account its correlation with this exhortation to love, δικαιοσύνη can be seen to mean not merely a right attitude or relationship based on law and order, but one erected upon the love of Christ. Likewise, εἰρήνη does not signify a generic peace predicated on forensic order, but rather a peaceful relationship wherein one can lay down one's own legitimately held claims in order to stand together with someone holding an opposing view. χαρά, too, points not to a joy based on justice, order or triumph, but to a joy rooted in mutual love and respect. In this respect, the communal meanings of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά here are distinctly differentiated from their usage elsewhere in the Pauline epistles, where they frequently denote a state or emotion possessed by an individual within the realm of faith.

Although Paul never explicitly identifies the church as the Kingdom of God, the correlation between the Kingdom and the Roman church becomes unmistakable when, as examined above, he declares the essential nature of the Kingdom to a congregation embroiled in conflict and division (Gäckle 2018:152). The church is the earthly community that confesses that Christ – who died on the cross and was raised – is seated at the right hand of God, ruling as Lord over the present age (Rom 8:34). As a community that continually places its trust in the royal dominion delegated to Christ and anticipates its consummation, the church serves as the locus where the order of the Kingdom of God, founded upon the love of Christ, is embodied on earth (1 Cor 15:24). Through the Kingdom statement in Romans 14:17, Paul hopes that the Roman church will once again reaffirm this teleological orientation and, transcending conflict and strife, become a community that actualises the essential values of the Kingdom of God: δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά.

Δικαιοσύνη, Εἰρήνη, and Χαρά as virtues of an ideal community

It is not difficult to find instances in various ancient Greco–Roman texts in which the triad of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά is employed to denote the virtues of an ideal community. Beyond the Pauline epistles, the Old Testament and Jewish literature, along with a wide array of Greco–Roman writings, treat these three concepts as paramount values that an ideal community must strive to actualise. Examining ancient texts that exhibit similar usages of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά significantly aids in understanding the tradition-historical background of Paul's Kingdom of God statement and its precise meaning within the context of Romans. This endeavour goes beyond merely comparing Paul's usage with that of other ancient literatures to identify superficial commonalities and differences. Rather, it provides a crucial foundation for discerning the origins of Paul's Kingdom statement and the specific theological intent behind his configuration of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά as the core values of the Kingdom of God.

The Old Testament and Jewish literature

In the Old Testament and Jewish literature, δικαιοσύνη is very frequently mentioned as a core value of ideal sovereign rule. Legal stipulations specify that δικαιοσύνη must be realised in the governance and judgements of leaders (LXX Lv 19:15), and the realisation of δικαιοσύνη frequently appears as a crucial criterion when depicting a monarchy that approximates ideal sovereign rule (LXX 2 Sm 8:15; 1 Ki 10:9; 1 Chr 18:14; 2 Chr 9:8; Ps 71:2–3, 7; Is 39:8; 48:18; Jr 22:3, 15; Ezk 45:9; Wis 1:1; Sir 9:17) (Irons 2015:126–130; Kim 2023:98–108). Regarding Romans 14:17, the most intriguing texts are those where δικαιοσύνη is mentioned in connection with God's sovereign rule. LXX Psalms 88:15 and 96:2 clearly proclaim that δικαιοσύνη and κρίμα constitute the foundation of the throne from which God rules. LXX Isaiah 5:16 similarly emphasises that δικαιοσύνη and κρίμα are the fundamental principles of divine governance. God, who created light and darkness and governs the heavens, the earth, and all things in the world, causes δικαιοσύνη to abound in the midst of Israel

as their Saviour (LXX Is 33:5; 45:8; 60:17; Ps 84:10–11; Jr 9:23). In prophecies concerning the restoration of the Kingdom of God through the coming Messiah – the descendant of David –δικαιοσύνη is frequently cited as the fundamental governing order of the restored Kingdom. The Messiah, the future Saviour, is the one who establishes and maintains his Kingdom with δικαιοσύνη, and his righteous rule will endure eternally in the world (LXX Is 9:7; 11:5; 32:17; Jr 23:5; Pss. Sol. 17:29, 37, 40; 18:7).

Εἰρήνη is also frequently used in the Old Testament and Jewish literature to denote the ideal state of a monarchy (LXX 1 Ki 4:24–25; 5:12; 2 Ki 20:19; 1 Chr 22:9; 2 Chr 14:6–7; 20:3; 1 Macc 13:30; 14:10–11). Εἰρήνη is established within a nation when an earthly king governs well, guided by wisdom and the fear of God; ultimately, however, it is a gift bestowed by God (Dinkler 1962; Von Rad 1964). There are also numerous passages where εἰρήνη is mentioned in the context of God's sovereign rule. LXX Isaiah 45:7 declares the Creator God as the ruler of the world, proclaiming him to be the 'maker of peace' [ὁ ποιῶν εἰρήνην]. LXX Isaiah 52:7 and 54:13 are representative texts announcing the Kingdom of God to be consummated in the future, where εἰρήνη is likewise cited as a core value. Furthermore, εἰρήνη is the quintessential blessing that God bestows upon his people (Ps 28:11; Is 32:17; 39:8; 48:18; 54:10; 60:17). Like δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη is also employed to depict the ideal sovereign rule of the coming Messiah who succeeds the Davidic dynasty (Is 9:6–7; Ps 71:3, 7; 84:8, 10; Pss. Sol. 17:28). In addition, although εἰρήνη is not explicitly mentioned, LXX Isaiah 11:6–9 beautifully portrays the era of peace to be realised through the Messiah using evocative imagery ('The wolf shall dwell with the lamb ...'). Among various texts, those of particular note regarding Romans 14:17 are the passages where εἰρήνη is mentioned alongside δικαιοσύνη in relation to God's sovereign rule or the ideal sovereign rule of the messianic age: Psalms 71:7; 84:10–11; Isaiah 9:6–7; 32:16–18; 39:8; 48:18; 60:17; Baruch 5:4.

Χαρά is similarly one of the quintessential markers frequently appearing in the Old Testament and Jewish literature to depict the state of an ideal monarchy. Regarding God's sovereign rule, LXX Psalms 20:1, 32:1, and 96:11 celebrate the χαρά that accompanies divine governance. These psalms articulate this χαρά across diverse dimensions: sometimes as the χαρά of the righteous or the Israelite community, and at other times as a cosmic χαρά shared by all creation (Goldingay 2006:466–470; Kraus 1993:287–289). In the LXX Isaiah 12:3 and 55:12, χαρά is also mentioned when describing the redeemed community upon the actualisation of God's sovereign rule. Χαρά is also frequently cited in relation to the messianic rule that will consummate the Kingdom of God in the future. Here, χαρά describes the actualisation of the ideal monarchy brought about by the appearance of the Messiah, which is effectively synonymous with the state of salvation (LXX Is 55:12; 61:10; Pss. Sol. 14:2). Conversely, χαρά is also invoked within the context of judgement against a fallen Israel that has deviated from God's expectations (LXX Is 32:13; Jl 1:12; Jr 16:9; 25:10). Among the mentioned texts, LXX Isaiah 32:13 is particularly noteworthy regarding the triad of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά. The immediate context of this passage presents the era of restoration through messianic rule as the result of the working of God's Spirit [πνεῦμα] (v. 15), portraying it as an epoch of righteousness [δικαιοσύνη] and peace [εἰρήνη] (vv. 16–18). These two characteristics bear a striking resemblance to the Kingdom of God statement in Romans 14:17. In addition to LXX Isaiah 32:13–18, another noteworthy passage concerning the combination of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά is LXX Isaiah 9:3–7. Although it uses εὐφροσύνη and εὐφραίνειν instead of χαρά, this text – along with LXX Isaiah 32:13–18 – warrants serious consideration as a conceptual background for Romans 14:17.

Greco–Roman literature

Beyond the Old Testament and Jewish literature, δικαιοσύνη is frequently mentioned as a crucial virtue that establishes the fundamental order of a community in ancient Greco–Roman philosophical texts that discussing the foundational order of entities such as the state. This is particularly evident in the works of Plato and Aristotle. Plato posits four virtues necessary for establishing a state community – σοφία, ἀνδρεία, σωφροσύνη, and δικαιοσύνη [wisdom, courage, self-control, and righteousness] – among which δικαιοσύνη is the most paramount virtue, functioning as the principle that preserves the other virtues and regulates the relationships and order of all classes (Rep. IV.427d–433d) (ed. Ferrari 2007). According to Plato, δικαιοσύνη is achieved when the three constituent classes of the state – the producers [δημιουργοί], the auxiliaries [φύλακες], and the rulers [ἄρχοντες] – remain faithful to their respective roles and attain harmony (Rep. IV.433a–434c). Aristotle likewise defines δικαιοσύνη, among the various virtues, as the perfect virtue that establishes the order of the community (EN V.1129b–1130a). As a virtue directed towards others, δικαιοσύνη transcends the individual's internal dimension to aim at the happiness of others and the common good (EN V.1129b–1130a). Going beyond the personal level, δικαιοσύνη is the foundational principle that enables the constitution of the state through correct distribution and rectification (Curzer 2012). The Stoics also understand δικαιοσύνη as a relational virtue that goes beyond individual morality to establish and sustain the community. Chrysippus defines δικαιοσύνη as the virtue that distributes to each and forms the community (Stob., Anth. 2.7.5), and Seneca emphasises that iustitia is a virtue that refrains from asserting its own rights for the sake of the common good (De ben. II.21.1; Ep. 95.52). For Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, δικαιοσύνη is an ethical imperative stemming from the realisation that human beings are fundamentally communal entities (Forschner 1995). A life devoid of δικαιοσύνη leads not only to the destruction of the community but also to the destruction of oneself (Epict., Diss. I.9.1–3; II.10.14; Marc. Aur., Med. VI.30; IX.23).

Εἰρήνη, though perhaps not as prominently as δικαιοσύνη, is also mentioned as an element of ideal governing order in Greco–Roman philosophy, history, and other literature. For Plato, the ultimate goal of the state's legislation and education lies in εἰρήνη (Leg. I.628d; 630c; 666e; 714c; 715a). In a similar

vein to Plato, Aristotle maintains that both the purpose of the state's existence and the educational curriculum should be oriented toward εἰρήνη (Pol. VII.1333a; VIII.1337a). In addition to εἰρήνη, Plato and Aristotle, across numerous texts, cite concepts such as ὁμόνοια and ἀσφάλεια as critical values in political philosophy for the internal order and stability of the community (Schofield 1999). According to Plato and Aristotle, the harmony and stability of the community derive from righteous governance according to the law and communal consensus (Rep. IV.431d–432a; V.739b–740a; Leg. I.628d–629a; IV.715c–716a; EN IX.1155a–1156a; Pol. V.1301a; 1302a–1303b; 1313a; 1333a). Stoic philosophers also depict the ideal state of the community by linking δικαιοσύνη and εἰρήνη. Epictetus states, 'Where there is law [ὁ νόμος] and justice [τὸ δίκαιον], there is also peace [εἰρήνη]' (Diss. I.12.7), clarifying that εἰρήνη is the natural outcome of governance predicated on justice. Seneca and Cicero likewise critique the Roman Empire's pursuit of stability through violence, emphasising a peace [*pax*] instead based on justice [*iustitia*] (Marc. Aur., Med. IV.23; Cic., Off. I.35–36; Rep. III.23).

Lastly, compared to the Old Testament and Jewish literature, χαρά is less frequently mentioned in ancient Greco–Roman literature as a manifestation of the realisation of ideal governance in the state or society. Plato employs εὐδαιμονία rather than χαρά to express the state of a community where a righteous order is established. For Plato, εὐδαιμονία transcends mere subjective satisfaction on an individual level; it is an expression denoting the ultimate telos of the state (Rep. IX.580b–588a) (Horn 2020). Aristotle also uses εὐδαιμονία instead of χαρά, making it clear that the ultimate good toward which the state aims is a communal εὐδαιμονία (EN I.1094b; Pol. III.1280b–1281a). According to Aristotle, a political order based on δικαιοσύνη – that is, a community from which injustice, imbalance and unfairness have been maximally excluded – brings about ὁμόνοια, which serves as the foundation for achieving εὐδαιμονία (Pol. VII.1323b–1324a) (Ackrill 1997). Stoic philosophers similarly rarely mention χαρά in connection with the governing order of the community. Nevertheless, there are significant instances where it is mentioned within the discourse of communal governance. Epictetus discusses χαρά within the context of preserving communal order (Diss. IV.4.4–6), and Seneca notes that justice [*iustitia*] brings about stability (tutus, stabilis) and peace [*pax*], which consequently results in joy [*laetitia*] (De vit. beat. 4.1–3). Although Seneca's text does not sequentially list the three values of righteousness, peace, and joy in a single sentence, it is significant that these values appear together in depicting the ideal state of a community.

As can be ascertained from the various Greco–Roman texts examined above, Paul was not the first to employ the three concepts of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά as the core concepts of ideal communal governance. Instances that define these three concepts as the ideal values and state of a community can be found extensively throughout the Old Testament, Jewish literature, and various writings of the Greco–Roman period. This fact reveals that the Kingdom of God statement and its value formulation in Romans 14:17 were not unfamiliar to either Jews or Gentiles, as they could be identified within their respective cultures and thought worlds. In other words, δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά serve as a highly useful meta-concept that transcends the diverse traditions, beliefs and customs of the recipients in the Roman church, enabling them to envision an ideal community overflowing with peace and joy founded upon a righteous order.

However, as observed above, while one can find texts such as LXX Isaiah 9:3–7 and 32:13–18 where δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά are mentioned together in relation to the ideology of God's sovereign rule or the Messiah's eschatological reign, there is no extant text that couples the specific expression ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ with the triad of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά to explicitly present the essence of the Kingdom of God through these three concepts. Furthermore, appending ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ at the conclusion to emphasise the importance of divine power and intervention bestowed from without – rather than leaving the realisation of the Kingdom's essential values solely to human will or effort – is also Paul's unique contribution. In this respect, the Kingdom of God statement in Romans 14:17 is undoubtedly Paul's own uniquely creative formulation. Paul effectively synthesised the various values handed down sporadically across ancient traditions into the grand discourse of the Kingdom of God, thereby establishing it as an ethical framework for the ideal community.

The Holy Spirit and δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, χαρά

The phrase ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ, appended to the end of the Kingdom of God statement in Romans 14:17, further elucidates the present significance of this declaration for the specific situation of the Roman church. As previously noted, the vision of the Kingdom of God – characterised by righteousness, peace, and joy – fundamentally points to the future actualisation of God's sovereign rule. Simultaneously, however, the three values delineating the essence of the Kingdom included in Paul's statement – δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά – present an ideal communal model for the Roman church to emulate, thereby linking the Kingdom statement to the practical realities of the congregation. Along with the presentation of these values, the phrase ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ similarly positions the Kingdom of God not merely as a spatial realm confined to a futuristic, celestial dimension, but as an ideal communal model that must be realised here and now on earth through the active working of the Holy Spirit (Horn 1992a; Wolter 2021).

Some scholars interpret ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ as subordinate solely to the immediately preceding noun, χαρά (Dunn 1988; Fitzmyer 2008); however, there is no distinct textual evidence to support such a restricted reading. Given the syntactical structure of the sentence, it is far more natural to view the phrase as modifying all three preceding nouns: δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά (Jewett 2007; Longenecker 2016; Moo 2018; Shogren 2000; Theobald 2001b; Wilckens 2008; Wolter 2019). Indeed, apart from χαρά, the δικαιοσύνη and εἰρήνη that Paul cites as core elements of the Kingdom of God are likewise realities that cannot be actualised in the present world apart

from the working of the Spirit. Specifically, Galatians 5:22, which lists both εἰρήνη and χαρά together as the fruit of the Spirit [ὁ καρπὸς τοῦ πνεύματός], clearly demonstrates that εἰρήνη, no less than χαρά, belongs to the sphere of the Spirit's operation. Furthermore, in Romans 15:13, where χαρά and εἰρήνη are again mentioned together, Paul identifies these two values as the quintessential contents of the blessing wrought by the Spirit. Although the reference to 'the power of the Holy Spirit' [δύναμις πνεύματος ἁγίου] here is directly linked to ἐν τῇ ἐλπίδι, the power of the Spirit is inextricably related to the 'God of Hope' [ὁ θεὸς τῆς ἐλπίδος] who brings about χαρά and εἰρήνη, and this nexus subsequently converges in the expression 'in believing' [ἐν τῷ πιστεύειν]. In addition, 1 Corinthians 6:11 features a construction similar to Romans 14:17, where a series of three expressions is followed by a concluding reference to the Spirit (ἀλλ' ἀπελούσασθε, ἀλλ' ἡγιάσθητε, ἀλλ' ἐδικαιώθητε ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἐν τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν) [But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God]. Such structural parallels provide further grounds for interpreting the phrase ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ in Romans 14:17 as modifying δικαιοσύνη and εἰρήνη as well as χαρά.

As the phrase ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ clearly demonstrates, the ideal vision of the Kingdom of God towards which the Roman believers must strive is not something attainable through mere human effort. Rather, all of this is entirely a gift that can be experienced in the present solely within the sphere of the Spirit's operation. Although in a different context, Paul asserts in Romans 8:4 that when believers walk according to the Spirit, the requirement of the law – namely, δικαίωμα – will be fulfilled in their lives. Continuing in 8:9 and thereafter, Paul maintains that δικαιοσύνη and ζωή are rendered possible through the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:30). As previously examined, εἰρήνη is cited as a fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, and in Romans 8:6, it is again intimately linked to the working of the Spirit. Likewise, according to Galatians 5:22, χαρά is a fruit of the Spirit to be experienced within his operation – a point further corroborated by the phrasing χαρᾶς πνεύματος ἁγίου in 1 Thessalonians 1:6 (Cranfield 1979; Moo 2018; Wilckens 2008; Wolter 2019).

How, then, can one explain the concrete correlation between the working of the Holy Spirit and the realisation of the three values of the Kingdom of God: δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά? In other words, what does it specifically signify for these three values to be actualised within the community through the Spirit? To understand this pneumatological operation, one must first recognise Paul's premise that every Christian is fundamentally a recipient of the Spirit (Wolter 2021). This Spirit, as the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Christ, indwells believers and guides their lives (Rom 8:4ff.; Gal 5:16ff.). Naturally, this indwelling and guidance of the Spirit apply not only on an individual level but also on an ecclesial level. This is because the church is a community composed of individuals who have received the Spirit, and this community of believers likewise exists within the operation of the one Spirit (Fee 1994; Horn 1992b; Wolter 2021). The realisation of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη and χαρά through the working of the Spirit signifies that the members of the church, having received the Spirit, follow the Spirit's guidance to practice the very love that God or Christ has already demonstrated towards them (Rom 14:15; 15:7). This is, in fact, nothing other than serving Christ (14:18) and glorifying God (15:7).

Ultimately, it is necessary to recall that for Paul, the Holy Spirit – much like God and Christ – is frequently cited as the primary agent of the ministry of unification. Addressing the Corinthian church, which was fraught with conflict over spiritual gifts, Paul emphasises the presence of the 'same Spirit' that underlies the diversity of gifts (1 Cor 12:4ff.). Inasmuch as all believers in Corinth were baptised by one Spirit to form the one body of Christ, they must build one another up in mutual care and respect, transcending the distinctions between Jew or Greek, slave or free (1 Cor 12:12ff.). Galatians 3:27–28 similarly underscores the working of the Spirit, who brings about unity by surmounting all differences. Furthermore, the central theme of the so-called 'reasonable worship' in Romans 12:1ff. is also the preservation of communal unity within the operation of the Spirit. In Romans 14:1–15:13, Paul addresses this issue with a specific focus on the concrete situations faced by the members of the Roman church. At the very heart of this hortatory section, he ultimately asserts that the path to communal restoration lies in obedience to the guidance of the Spirit, which makes all members one (Rom 8:4, 13–14; Gal 5:16).

Conclusion

Amid the conflict and division between the 'weak' and the 'strong' within the Roman church, Paul reminds the community in Romans 14:17 of the essential nature of the Kingdom of God. This simple yet powerful declaration – that the Kingdom of God consists in righteousness, peace, and joy – is intricately connected to the macrostructure of Romans 14:1–15:13 to Paul's other exhortations, and to the theological foundations that underpin them. Specifically, the grand discourse of the Kingdom of God is linked to the concepts of Christ's redemptive work, sovereignty and lordship (Rom 14:6–9; 15:3, 7), as well as to references regarding God's works of creation, salvation and judgement (Rom 14:3, 10–12, 14, 20; 15:5–6). Correspondingly, the three values constituting the Kingdom – righteousness, peace, and joy – align with the recurring messages throughout the pericope concerning mutual acceptance and respect based on the love of Christ (Rom 14:1, 3–4, 13), along with the calls for peace and harmony (Rom 14:19; 15:1–2, 7). In this manner, the Kingdom of God statement in Romans 14:17 comprehensively embraces Paul's preceding and succeeding exhortations, functioning as a counter-discourse that delineates the vision of the community toward which the Roman church must strive.

The role of Paul's Kingdom statement as such a counter-discourse becomes even more evident when the meanings of the three core values he presents are read within the context

of his exhortations to the Roman believers. The three core concepts of righteousness, peace, and joy represent precisely what the Roman church – confronted with strife and division over matters of eating and drinking – was failing to experience; conversely, they clearly illuminate the common teleological goal that the church must pursue and actualise. These three concepts certainly do not denote subjective states or emotions enjoyed by an individual in faith; rather, they are the markers that emerge when a new community, founded upon faith in Christ and the impartation of the Spirit, builds up an ideal community akin to the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, as examined earlier, the combination of these three concepts exhibits parallel formulations across various ancient Greco–Roman traditions. This signifies that Paul integrated universal values – comprehensible to anyone and transcending diverse traditions, beliefs and customs of the community members – into the grand discourse of the Kingdom of God, presenting them as the communal ideal. However, Paul's unique contribution lies in his coupling of the formula ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ with the specific triad of δικαιοσύνη, εἰρήνη, and χαρά; his emphasis that the realisation of these three values is not the result of mere human effort but a gift wrought within the working of the Spirit; and his restructuring of this entire framework upon a Christological foundation centred on the love of Christ.

Finally, I wish to briefly append the contemporary significance and challenge posed by Paul's Kingdom statement. As noted earlier, today we witness escalating conflicts and tensions both within and between nations across the globe, with numerous regions suffering under the agony of division and war. In such circumstances, the Kingdom statement bequeathed by Paul possesses the potential to operate as a universal principle, extending its relevance beyond the mere boundaries of the church. This is because beneath Paul's religious language lie meta-values and principles that are entirely applicable to socio-political discourse. Righteousness, peace, and joy are values that must take precedence over any custom, tradition or belief wherever human communities exist; the same holds true for the mutual acceptance, respect and love that Paul advocates to undergird these values. Even in today's secularised society, where the religious and cultural influence of Christianity may be marginal, this is precisely why we must contemplate how the legacy left by Paul can be philosophically and culturally recovered.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author, Seo-Jun Kim, declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Seo-Jun Kim: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing-original draft, Writing- review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research was supported by the Bisa Research Grant (no. 20240492) of Keimyung University.

Data availability

The author declares that all data that support this research article and its findings are available in the article and its references.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or the publisher. The author is responsible for the article's results, findings, and content.

References

Ackrill, J.L., 1997, *Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Barclay, J.M.G., 2001, 'Do we undermine the law? A study of Romans 14.1–15.6', in J.D.G. Dunn (ed.), *Paul and the mosaic law*, pp. 287–308, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Barrett, C.K., 1991, *A commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Black, London.

Cranfield, C.E.B., 1979, *A critical and Exegetical commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2, T&T Clark, Edinburgh.

Curzer, H.J., 2012, *Aristotle and the virtues*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Danker, F.W., Bauer, W., Arndt, W.F. & Gingrich, F.W., 2000, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*, in F.W. Danker (ed.), 3rd edn., pp. 878–879, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Dinkler, E., 1962, 'Friede', in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum (RAC)* [Real lexicon for antiquity and Christianity], vol. 8, pp. 300–350, Hiersemann, Stuttgart.

Donfried, K.P., 1987, 'The Kingdom of God in Paul', in W. Willis (ed.), *The Kingdom of God in 20th-century interpretation*, pp. 175–190, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA.

Dunn, J.D.G., 1988, *Romans 9–16*, Word Books, Dallas.

Fee, G.D., 1994, *God's empowering presence: The Holy Spirit in the letters of Paul*, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA.

Ferrari, G.R.F. (ed.), 2007, *The Cambridge companion to Plato's Republic*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Fitzmyer, J.A., 2008, *Romans: A new translation with introduction and commentary*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Gäckle, V., 2005, *Die Starken und die Schwachen in Korinth und in Rom: Zu Herkunft und Funktion der Antithese in 1 Kor 8,1–11,1 und Röm 14,1–15,13* [The strong and the weak in Corinth and Rome: On the origin and function of the antithesis in 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 and Rom 14:1–15:13], Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.

Gäckle, V., 2018, *Das Reich Gottes im Neuen Testament: Auslegungen – Anfragen – Alternativen* [The Kingdom of God in the New Testament: Interpretations – Inquiries – Alternatives], Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.

Goldingay, J., 2006, *Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1–41*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.

Haufe, G., 1985, 'Reich Gottes bei Paulus und in der Jesustradition [Kingdom of God with Paul and in the Jesus tradition]', *New Testament Studies* 31, 467–472. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688500013989

Horn, C., 2020, *Nichtideale Normativität: Die politische Philosophie Platons*, Suhrkamp, Berlin.

Horn, F., 1992a, 'Wandel im Geist: Zur pneumatologischen Begründung der Ethik bei Paulus [Change in the Spirit: On the pneumatological foundation of Paul's ethics]', *Kerygma und Dogma* 38(2), 149–165.

Horn, F., 1992b, *Das Angeld des Geistes: Studien zur paulinischen Pneumatologie* [The Deposit of the Spirit: Studies in Pauline Pneumatology], Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.

Irons, C.L., 2015, *The righteousness of God: A lexical examination of the covenant-faithfulness interpretation*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.

Kim, S.-J., 2023, *Gott ist es ja, der uns für gerecht erklärt: Eine Studie zu den verschiedenen Bedeutungen und Funktionen der δικαι-Termini im Römerbrief*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.

Kraus, H.-J., 1993, *Psalmen 60–150*, 5th edn., Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn.

Lopez, R.A., 2011, 'A study of Pauline passages on inheriting the Kingdom', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168(4), 443–459.

Moo, D.J., 2018, *The letter to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Schofield, M., 1999, *Saving the city: Philosopher-Kings and other classical statesmen*, Routledge, London.

Shogren, G.S., 2000, 'Is the kingdom of God about eating and drinking or isn't it? (Romans 14:17)', *Novum Testamentum* 42(3), 282–294.

Smit, P.-B., 2007, 'A symposium in Rom. 14:17? A note on Paul's terminology', *Novum Testamentum* 49(1), 40–53. https://doi.org/10.1163/004810007X163109

Theobald, M., 2001a, 'Der Einsamkeit des Selbst entnommen – dem Herrn gehörig: Ein christologisches Lehrstück (Röm 14,7-9) [Taken from the loneliness of the self – Belonging to the Lord: A Christological lesson (Romans 14:7–9)]', in *Studien zum Römerbrief* [Studies on Romans], pp. 142–161, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.

Theobald, M., 2001b, 'Erkenntnis und Liebe: Kriterien glaubenskonformen Handelns nach Röm 14,13–23 [Knowledge and love: Criteria for acting in accordance with faith according to Romans 14:13–23]', in *Studien zum Römerbrief* [Studies on Romans], pp. 481–510, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.

Toney, C.N., 2008, *Paul's inclusive ethic: Resolving community conflicts and promoting mission in Romans 14–15*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.

Von Rad, G., 1964, 'εἰρήνη [Peace]', in G. Kittel & G. Friedrich (eds.), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament (ThWNT)* [Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (ThWNT)], vol. 2, pp. 400–420, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart.

Wilckens, U., 2008, *Der Brief an die Römer* [The letter to the Romans], vol. 3, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn.

Wolter, M., 2019, *Der Brief an die Römer* [The letter to the Romans], vol. 2, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.

Wolter, M., 2021, *Paulus: Ein Grundriss seiner Theologie* [Paul: An outline of his theology], Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn.

Ziesler, J.A., 1972, *The meaning of righteousness in Paul: A linguistic and theological enquiry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.