

XXXIII. Unity in the Church

April 11/12/13, 2017

Romans 15:1-13

Aim: To put aside our differences with Christian brothers on non-essential matters in order to live in harmony, joy, and hope with one another and glorify God.

The quality of our unity either attracts or repels the world. Churches have been known to divide over the smallest matters, such as one that split over a conflict as to where the piano ought to be placed. The story is told of two congregations that were located only a few blocks from each other in a small community. They thought it might be better if they would merge and become one united, larger, and more effective body rather than two struggling churches. Good idea ... but they were not able to pull it off. The problem? They could not agree on how they would recite the Lord's Prayer. One group preferred 'forgive us our trespasses,' while the other group demanded 'forgive us our debts.' So, as the local newspaper reported, 'One church went back to its trespasses while the other returned to its debts.'

A. Please One Another (Romans 15:1-6)

The opening verses of chapter 15 continue Paul's exhortation to the 'weak' and the 'strong' in chapter 14. But the introduction of new vocabulary and new arguments suggest that 15:1 marks a new stage in the discussion. Most significant is the shift from the word 'weak' (*ασθενης, asthenēs*) to describe the 'rigorists' in Rome to the word 'powerless,' 'unable' (*αδυνατος, adunatos*). Thus the paragraph is basically a call to the 'strong' in Rome to follow Christ's example of loving service of others as a means of bringing unity to the church. We find the same pattern of teaching in Phil. 2:1-11, where Paul pleads for believers to follow Christ's example in preferring other's interests to their own in order to bring unity to the community.

1. The Exhortation (15:1-2)

We have at the opening of this paragraph a shift in style. Dominant in the exhortations of chapter 14 is Paul's use of the second person singular to address a representative 'weak' or 'strong' believer. In vv. 1-4, however, Paul uses the first person plural form of address as his mainstay. But this change in style does not signal a change in address: Paul continues to address the 'strong' believers, as he has in 14:13b-23.

a) Bear With Our Neighbor (15:1)

¹We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.

For the first time, he names the strong believers, implicitly including himself among them. The identification comes as no surprise since Paul already has aligned himself with the views of the 'strong' (14:14, 20). The context requires that we delimit the significance of this description to the specific issue that Paul has been discussing: these Christians are 'strong' or 'capable' (*dynatos*) with respect to the faith to believe that certain practices are legitimate for believers. Conversely, then, those whom Paul here designates as the *adynatōn* are believers who are 'incapable' of realizing that their faith in Christ has freed them from certain ritual observances.

For the first and only time Paul refers specifically to the 'strong' (*dunatoi*); that name was only inferred earlier by reference to their counterpart, the 'weak' (14:1). It is striking that Paul begins

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with his appeal to the ‘strong’ and makes greater demands on them throughout this whole passage. The ‘strong’ are to ‘welcome’ the weak (14:1), by ‘not despising’ them (14:3, 10) and, in particular, by abstaining from eating meat in their presence (14:13-23). Not only in Rome then but equally here and now the great principle remains: the strong ‘ought’ to bear the shortcomings of the ‘weak.’ That is their ‘obligation’ (what they ‘ought’ to do) and their ‘gift.’

The call here to please others and not ourselves is directed to the ‘strong’—those who have a broader, more Biblical understanding of their freedom in Christ. This, of course, does not mean the ‘weak’ are exempt from the responsibility of accepting and being patient with the strong, because verse 7 subsequently indicates that both strong and weak are to be accepting. Nevertheless, the greater burden is on the strong. In God’s household strength denotes obligation. An unwillingness to forgo our rights for others indicates we are not so ‘strong’ after all.

Those who pride themselves on their ‘strength’ are obligated (*οφειλω*, *opheilō*), Paul says, to use that strength to ‘bear the weaknesses (*ασθενηματα*, *asthenēmata*)’ of those who are ‘without strength’ in this matter. *Opheilō* has the basic meaning of owing a debt or having a strong obligation. Paul is not urging the ‘strong’ simply to ‘bear with,’ to tolerate or ‘put up with,’ the ‘weak’ and their scruples. For Paul uses this same verb in Gal. 6:2 (and cp. v. 5) in a similar way, urging believers to ‘bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ [i.e., love for one another; cp. 5:14].’ In this light, what Paul is exhorting the ‘strong’ to do is willingly and lovingly to assume for themselves the burden that these weak believers are carrying. This does not necessarily mean that the ‘strong’ are to adopt the scruples of the ‘weak.’ But what it does mean is that they are sympathetically to ‘enter into’ their attitudes, refrain from criticizing and judging them, and do what love would require toward them. Love demands that the ‘strong’ go beyond the distance implied in mere toleration; they are to treat the ‘weak’ as brothers and sisters. Negatively, it means that the ‘strong’ are not to ‘please (*αρεσκω*, *areskō*) themselves.’

Bastazō (‘to bear’) refers to picking up and carrying a burden. Therefore, ‘to bear the weaknesses’ of fellow believers is not simply to tolerate those weaknesses but to help carry them—by not being critical or condescending and by showing respect for sincere views or practices that we may not agree with. The idea is that of showing genuine, loving, and practical consideration for other believers. We are not to argue about minor issues or be critical of those who may still be sensitive about a former religious practice or taboo. The injunction is for mature believers to voluntarily and lovingly refrain from exercising their liberty in ways that might needlessly offend the consciences of less mature brothers and sisters in Christ, those who are without strength.

The right use of Christian liberty, which the strong believer understands and appreciates, often involves self-sacrifice. When our true motivation is to please Christ by helping ‘to bear the weaknesses of those without strength,’ we can expect to forfeit certain legitimate liberties, when exercising them would harm a weaker brother or sister. Apart from that which in itself is sinful, we are divinely freed to do much as we ‘please.’ But the Lord does not grant those freedoms just so we can selfishly ‘please ourselves.’

b) Build Up Our Neighbor (15:2)

²*Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.*

By using the phrase ‘each of us,’ Paul may expand his address to include all the believers in Rome, whether ‘weak’ or ‘strong.’ But the relationship between vv. 1 and 2 – not pleasing

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ourselves/pleasing the neighbor – and the similarity between v. 2 and Paul’s exhortations to the ‘strong’ in 14:13-23 suggest rather that Paul continues in v. 2 to address the ‘strong’ only. The ‘neighbor’ will, then, be the ‘weak’ fellow believer. By using the term ‘neighbor,’ Paul makes clear that he bases his plea to the ‘strong’ on the love command. ‘Neighbor’ (*πλησιον, plēsion*) occurs in the NT 16 times, and all but three are found in quotations of, or allusions to, the love command of Lev. 19:18. The ‘strong’ believer ‘walks in love’ when he or she ‘pleases’ rather than ‘pains’ the ‘weak’ believer (cp. 14:15).

The object of pleasing our ‘neighbor’ is to promote ‘his good’ and ‘his edification,’ even if it requires the sacrifice of some of our own welfare and pleasure, which it often does. It is essentially the same appeal Paul had made earlier in this letter in 14:19.

Picking up another key motif in his earlier exhortation, Paul asserts that the purpose of pleasing others is ‘the good.’ This ‘good’ is the good of the individual ‘weak’ believer: his or her spiritual profit, in contrast to the spiritual harm that the insensitive and selfish behavior of the ‘strong’ might cause (14:15, 20). But Paul defines this ‘good’ more specifically in a second clause: ‘edification,’ or ‘building up.’ What is involved is not the ‘pleasing people’ *rather than God* that Paul elsewhere condemns (Gal. 1:10; Col. 3:22; 1 Th. 2:4, Eph. 6:6), but a ‘pleasing’ fellow believers *rather than ourselves*.

What does Paul mean when he says the strong person is not to please himself but rather ought to ‘please his neighbor for his good’? Paul does not mean we are never to please ourselves, as some have wrongly held. The ‘This is so much fun it must be sinful’ school of thought is wrong. God wants us to have pleasure in life. Moreover, there is a kind of pleasing others of which God does not approve (cp. Gal. 1:10). We are not to be ‘nice guys’ who accommodate men’s sinful ways. What is the pleasing others that Paul enjoins then? It is a determined adjustment of our lifestyle to whatever will contribute to the spiritual good of the other person. We are not to cater to the narrowest member of our fellowship, or to Christians who have over the years hardened themselves in sub-Biblical legalism, or to allow ourselves to be dominated by disordered persons. But there are times when, for the sake of others, we forgo a course of action to which we are perfectly entitled.

Paul’s words to the Galatians (Gal. 1:6-9) seems to be a direct contradiction to Romans 15:1-2, where he writes that we are not to please ourselves but to please our brother. To the Galatians, he says that if he is pleasing man, he cannot be a disciple of God. He is talking about two different types of pleasing. In Galatians he is talking about a sin: compromising or distorting the gospel for the sake of man-pleasing, which has occurred repeatedly down through church history. If we seek the sort of carnal peace that attempts to avoid conflict at any cost, and if we seek to please men rather than God, we are enemies of the gospel. To the Ephesians he wrote against offering mere sight service (Eph. 6:5-6). Those who give sight service work diligently when the eye of the supervisor is directed toward them, but as soon as the boss leaves the worker takes his ease and gives little effort to do what is right. That is man-pleasing of the worst sort, but it is not what Paul is talking about here in Romans. Here Paul is saying that we ought to bear with the scruples of the weak rather than please ourselves. We do not try to please people for the sake of personal gain. That is the principle underlying this discussion about being patient with one another.

In verse 2 Paul amplifies the ‘obligation’ of the ‘strong’ toward the ‘weak’ in the church. Here Paul reintroduces his keyword ‘up-building’ (*oikodomē*). A church community consists of its

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‘foundation’ (Jesus Christ – 1 Cor. 3:11) and its ‘building’ (people who believe in and act like Jesus Christ). The overriding purpose of all church gatherings is the ‘up-building’ of its individual members as well as of its corporate life. Critical to this is that each member does not ‘please himself’ (v. 1) but seeks to ‘please his neighbor for his good,’ that is, his and the church’s ‘up-building. This principle applies to all members, though in this passage Paul is specifically urging the ‘strong’ to ‘please’ his ‘weak’ brother in Christ.

By ‘up-building’ Paul is not speaking about a growth in church membership. Rather, his concern is the development of Christian character as one group of members sensitively and unselfishly ‘pleases’ those who are ‘weak’ and disadvantaged. Growth in numbers is desirable, but must not be at the expense of the growth in spiritual maturity that accompanies sacrificial engagement with those who are culturally and temperamentally different from us.

2. The Example (15:3-4)

a) *Reproach (15:3)*

³*For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.’*

Paul’s opening words, ‘For *even* the Christ,’ are quite remarkable. ‘The Christ’ is not merely a name but Jesus’ title as God’s anointed king, from the line of David (cp. 1:3). Yet ‘even’ this king, the ‘strongest of the strong,’ did not ‘please Himself’ but bore the infirmities of the weak. His unselfishness and humility can be seen at every point, in His coming, His life, and in His sacrificial death. If ‘even’ our King did not ‘please Himself,’ then, clearly, neither should we who are His people.

So intensely concerned is Paul that we be willing to forgo our rights for the sake of unifying and building up our brothers and sisters that he does something he has not done in any of the preceding fourteen chapters of Romans. He holds up the example of Christ to enforce his argument. How was it that Christ did not please Himself? Though Christ existed in indescribable glory from all eternity and was daily rejoicing in the fellowship of the Godhead in perfect holiness, He left all that for the sake of lost humanity. Our Lord’s earthly life culminated in reproach. ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me,’ says verse 3, quoting the prophecy of Psalm 69:9. He was rejected because He lived the life of God here on earth (Is. 53:3). Whenever we crush the bread of Communion between our teeth and swallow the cup of His blood we cannot escape the fact that He did not please Himself. For Paul, the fact that Christ did not please Himself has everything to do with our deferring to one another for the sake of Christian unity. Paul uses the example in an extended form in Philippians 2.

Paul here moves directly from an exhortation to ‘please the neighbor’ to the example of Christ. The ‘strong’ should not think that their ‘giving into’ others is incompatible with their ‘strength’; for even the Messiah ‘did not please (*ἡρεσεν, ēresen*) himself.’ We might have expected at this point an explicit reference to Christ’s giving of His life for the sake of sinful human beings – the ‘weak’ (cp. 5:6). Instead, after a typical introductory formula, Paul puts words from Ps. 69:9b on the lips of Jesus: ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you have fallen on me.’ ‘Me’ in the quotation is Christ; ‘you’ is God – Paul has Jesus saying that the reproaches, or insults, of people that were directed at God fell on Himself instead. Why Paul uses this particular quotation is not clear since we have no reason to think that the ‘strong’ were enduring ‘reproaches.’ Probably Paul viewed it as a convenient way to: 1) make clear that the sufferings

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of Christ were ordained by God and in His service; and 2) allude to Jesus' supreme example of service on the cross. For the reference to Christ's 'not pleasing Himself' is almost certainly to the crucifixion. NT writers often apply language from Ps. 69 to the passion of Jesus (cp. Mt. 27:34, 48; Mk. 15:35-36; Lk. 23:36; Jn. 19:28-29; 2:17; 15:25; Acts 1:20; Rom. 11:9), and Paul probably thinks of the 'reproaches' born by Christ as those tauntings Jesus endured at the time of His crucifixion.

b) Hope (15:4)

⁴*For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

In a brief detour from his main argument, Paul reminds his readers that the use he has just made of the OT is entirely appropriate: 'for whatever was written beforehand was written for our instruction.' Paul here crisply enunciates a conviction basic to his ministry and to the early church generally. The OT, though no longer a source of direct moral imperative (6:14, 15; 7:4), continues to play a central role in helping Christians to understand the climax of salvation history and their responsibilities as the New Covenant people of God.

Having mentioned Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament in Psalm 69:9, he cannot resist adding *parenthetically* how helpful the Scriptures are. The application is inescapable: believers are to be well acquainted with the Old Testament Scriptures. The message to preachers is clear: preach from both the Old and New Testaments. The ultimate result will be 'hope,' that which most strikingly distinguishes the true Christian from his pagan neighbor.

The instruction Christians gain from the Scriptures has many purposes. One of these, Paul asserts in the second part of the verse, is that 'we might have hope' (*ελπιδα εχωμεν, elpida exōmen*). Reading the OT and seeing its fulfillment in Christ and the church fosters the believer's hope, a hope that is accompanied by the ability to 'bear up' under the pressure of spiritual hostile and irritating circumstances.

I know of nothing more comforting to the soul than the Word of God. When my soul is cast down (and it is cast down from time to time, as everyone's is), there is no greater panacea than to immerse myself in the Word of God. Here Paul speaks of the comfort of the Scriptures in order that we might have hope. Without the patience and comfort that is delivered to our hearts by the Word of God, we would be like the rest of the world—without hope.

3. The Encouragement (15:5-6)

Verses 5-6 contain a 'prayer-wish,' a prayer of intercession that Paul offers to God and records for the benefit of the Roman Christian. By sharing the contents of his prayer with the Romans, Paul uses it as an indirect means of exhortation. With this prayer, then, Paul returns to his central concern throughout 14:1-15:13: restoring the unity of the Roman church.

In verses 5&6 Paul returns to his main theme with a prayer-wish. First he prays for unity, and then for worship.

a) Live in Harmony (15:5)

⁵*May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus...*

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Paul links this ‘prayer-wish’ to v. 4 by addressing God as ‘the God of endurance and comfort,’ or we may legitimately paraphrase, ‘the God who is the source of endurance and comfort.’ Calvin says, ‘God alone is doubtless the author of patience and of consolation; for He conveys both to our hearts by His Spirit: yet He employs His word as the instrument.’ Paul signals his intent to being bringing his exhortation to the ‘strong’ and the weak’ to a conclusion by using a second person plural verb to address the entire community and by introducing the ‘one another’ theme that occurs at crucial junctures in the exhortation (cp. 14:13a; 15:7).

Verse 5 contains Paul’s desire for unity. The emphasis here is not that we see everything eye to eye, but rather that we regard one another with minds that are filled with and focused on the Lord as we follow Jesus Christ.

Paul prays specifically that God might give to the Roman Christians the ability ‘to think the same thing’ (*το αυτο φρονειν, to auto phronein*). In light of Paul’s insistence that both the ‘strong’ and the ‘weak’ respect one another’s views on the debated issues, we must not think that Paul prays that the two groups may come to the same opinion on these issues. He is, rather, asking God to give them, despite their differences of opinion, a common perspective and purpose. Paul’s concern is not, at least primarily, that the believers in Rome all hold the same opinion of these ‘matters indifferent’; but that they remain united in their devotion of the Lord Jesus and to His service in the world. The unity, therefore, as Paul prays, should be ‘according to Christ Jesus.’

Even the things that God *demand*s of us He gives us by His sovereign grace. Paradoxically, it is God gives the ‘perseverance’ He requires as well as the ‘encouragement.’ Just as verse 4 is essentially a call to rely on God’s power through His Word, verse 5 is essentially a call to rely on His power through prayer. In this benediction, Paul prays that the Lord would grant his fellow-believers in Rome ‘to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus.’ As with perseverance and encouragement, the harmony God requires, He will also provide. In this call, the apostle is speaking of unity in regard to matters on which the Bible is silent or which are no longer valid. It is disagreement about nonessentially issues that causes the conflict between strong and weak believers. Paul therefore continues to call on believers, despite their differing views, to be in loving, spiritual, and brotherly harmony ‘with one another according to’ their common Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. The fulfillment of this command is by God’s power.

b) Glorify the Father (15:6)

...⁶*that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul concludes his prayer-wish by expressing his desire for *unified worship*. The apostle understands that worship will not be what it is meant to be unless there is unity. Calvin puts it this way: ‘The unity of His servants is so much esteemed by God, that He will not have His glory sounded forth amidst discords and contentions.’

The consummate purpose of Christian unity, however, is not to please other believers, as essential as that is, but to please the Lord, both inwardly and outwardly and both individually and corporately. It is only when His people are in ‘one accord’ and worship Him ‘with one voice’ that they truly and fully ‘glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.’

Unity among the Roman Christians is important, and Paul uses many words seeking to encourage it. But this unity has a more important ultimate object: the glory of ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Only when the Roman community is united, only when the Christians in Rome can act ‘with one accord’ (*ομοθυμαδον, omothumadon*) and speak ‘with one

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voice' (*εν ενι στοματι, en eni stomata*), will they be able to glorify God in the way that He deserves to be glorified. Divisions in the church over nonessentials diverts precious time and energy from its basic mission: the proclamation of the gospel and the glorifying of God.

We impoverish our worship and offer poor praise to God by stubbornness and lack of love to fellow believers. But, oh how beautiful the worship is when we worship together in unity (cp. Psalm 133). It is no small thing to be asked to forgo legitimate rights for the building up of brothers and sisters. This is demanding, but perfectly reasonable and possible because Christ did it. And, secondly, it is indispensable to true worship.

B. Welcome One Another (Romans 15:7-13)

The opening words express the main point of this paragraph: 'receive one another.' Paul thereby returns to the theme with which he opened his exhortation to the 'weak' and the 'strong' (cp. 14:1). But there is an important difference: in 14:1, he urged the Roman community to 'receive the person who is weak in faith.' Here, however, he exhorts every believer to receive every other believer. Paul concludes with a 'wish-prayer.' The whole paragraph, with its opening basic command, reference to Christ and Scripture in support of the command, and concluding prayer, closely resembles 15:1-6.

The similarity of 15:7a to 14:1 suggests that Paul intends 15:7-13 to be the conclusion to his exhortation to the 'weak' and the 'strong.' Paul makes allusions to some of the larger themes of the letter as a means of buttressing his final appeal to the 'strong' and the 'weak.' He sets the local conflict in Rome against the panorama of salvation history in order to stimulate them to obedience. This exhortation to the two groups in the Roman church is not the main driving force of the letter; but it is one of the key converging motivations that led Paul to write about the gospel the way he has in Romans.

Paul's emphasis on the inclusion within the people of God of both Jews and Gentiles is not, then, simply an exemplary parallel to the problem of the 'weak' and the 'strong'; it gets to the heart of the problem. For while some of the 'strong' were Jews (e.g., Paul himself) and some of the 'weak' may have been Gentiles, the dividing line between these two groups was basically the issue of the continuing applicability of the Jewish law. And this made it inevitable that the two parties would split along basically ethnic lines. Paul's 'broadening' of perspective, as he reminds his readers of the New Covenant inclusion of Jews and Gentiles, provides the basic theological undergirding for his plea that the 'strong' and the 'weak' at Rome 'receive one another.'

1. The Exhortation (15:7)

⁷Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

'Therefore' gathers up the threads of Paul's entire exhortation to the 'strong' and to the 'weak.' Similarly, his command that believers in both groups 'receive one another' brings the section to its climax. As in 14:1, 'receive' means more than 'tolerate' or 'give official recognition to'; Paul wants the Roman Christians to accept one another as fellow members of a family, with all the love and concern that should typify brothers and sisters. In 14:3, Paul prohibited 'weak' Christians from judging their 'strong' fellow believers on the grounds that *God* had 'received' them. Now, however, he grounds a similar command on the truth that *Christ* has received you.' Here we have yet another instance of Paul's close association of God and Christ in this part of

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Romans. The final phrase, ‘to the glory of God,’ is a statement of purpose: ‘in order that God might be glorified.’ Perhaps we should attaché the phrase to the initial imperative, ‘receive one another.’

Proslambanō (‘accept,’ ‘welcome,’ ‘receive’) is an intensified form of *lambanō* and carries the meaning of receiving something or someone to oneself with special concern. Paul does not mention specific types of believers in this verse. He is speaking to the strong and to the weak, to Gentiles and to Jews. *All* believers are called to ‘accept one another’ in the fullest and deepest sense, to treat each other with love and understanding, ‘just as Christ also accepted us.’

Although Christians had been in Rome for a quarter of a century, there does not appear to have been a single and unified ‘church’ gathering that included both Jews and Gentiles. The first believers in Rome were probably Jews returning from the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem who most likely continued belonging to the various synagogues in the city. Gentile Christians may have been few in those early years. In AD 49, however, Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome so that even after his death in AD 54 they may not have regained the numerical ascendancy of the earlier years. Christians of both groups in more recent times appear to have been scattered across a number of house groups, as suggested by the greetings at the end of the letter (16:3-16). As well as the absence of a common meeting place, there were also cultural barriers between Jews and Gentiles. Christian conversion alone did not sweep away the prejudices these races felt towards each other. God’s plan, however, was to unite Gentiles with Jews under their common king, the Messiah/Christ. That plan must find a practical expression in a common gathering which to that moment had not been realized in Rome (see 15:5-6). One of Paul’s purposes in writing Romans was to bring together in ‘one body’ these hitherto separated and alienated groups. For this reason Paul admonishes Jewish and Gentile believers, ‘Welcome one another,’ in the common gathering as both groups with ‘one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (v. 6).

2. The Example (15:8-12)

In concluding this long exhortation on Christian unity, which began in chapter 14, Paul moves from the call to be willing to deny ourselves in order to please others to the call to accept one another. Again Christ is the example. The primary example here is Christ’s acceptance of the Jews (v. 8). Christ’s becoming a ‘servant’ to Israel reveals the length to which He went to meet the Jews’ needs. But He also accepted Gentiles. In verses 9-12 Paul quotes four Old Testament Scriptures that predicted that the Gentiles would respond to God’s grace and acceptance.

a) *Christ Brings God’s Blessing (15:8-9a)*

The sense-redundant opening verb, ‘I say,’ has a rhetorical purpose, signifying that what follows is an especially solemn doctrinal declaration. This declaration, found in vv. 8-9a and supported with scriptural citations in vv. 9b-12, summarizes one of the central motifs of the letter: that God has fulfilled the promise of the Abrahamic covenant by bringing Gentiles into the people of God through the gospel. Paul reminds the Roman Christians of this truth in order to encourage them to ‘receive one another.’ For the barrier between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ is at root the barrier between Jew and Gentile, a barrier that Christ’s ministry dismantled. Paul makes this clear by showing that Christ provided both for the fulfillment of God’s promises to the Jews (v. 8) and for the inclusion of the Gentiles in glorifying God (v. 9a). Paul desires to maintain a critical theological balance basic to his argument in Romans: the equality of Jew and Gentile and the salvation-historical priority of the Jew (e.g., 1:16b; the gospel is ‘for all who believe,’ but ‘for

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the Jew first’). Paul accomplishes this here by using parallel statements to describe the benefit that both Jews and Gentiles derive from Christ’s mission – promises made to the Jewish patriarchs are confirmed and Gentiles are enabled to glorify God for His mercy to them – while at the same time subordinating the blessing of the Gentiles to Christ’s mission to the Jews in confirmation of God’s faithfulness.

Mention of Christ as the ‘welcomer’ of Jews and Gentiles prompts Paul to make a statement about Christ that is as grand as it is unnoticed and neglected.

(1) To the Jews (15:8)

⁸*For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs...*

Paul’s assertion that Christ has become a servant to ‘the circumcision,’ the Jews, reflects Jesus’ own sense of calling ‘to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Mt. 15:24), a calling that Paul alludes to by asserting that Christ was ‘born under the law that He might redeem those under the law’ (Gal. 4:4b-5a). But by using a perfect tense – ‘has become’ (*γεγενησθαι*, *gegenēsthai*) – Paul implies that Christ’s ministry to Jews is not confined to His earthly life or sacrificial death, but continues even now, as the benefits of His death are appropriated by Jews. This ministry, Paul goes on to say, was ‘for the sake of the truth of God,’ or, as we might paraphrase, ‘in order to show that God is faithful.’ Paul elaborates this idea in a purpose clause: ‘to confirm (*βεβαιωω*, *bebaioō*) the promises to the fathers.’

The tense of the verb ‘made’ (*gegenesthai*) means that Christ became and remains the minister (*diakonos*) to the Jewish people. Christ’s continuing ‘ministry’ to Jews occurred first as His apostles, including Paul, preached to Jewish people in Palestine and in the Diaspora. Since Christ remains minister to the Jewish people, it follows that there should be a continuing ministry to them.

(2) To the Gentiles (15:9a)

⁹*...and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.*

Matching God’s purpose in confirming His promises made to the Jews is God’s purpose in causing the Gentiles to glorify God ‘for the sake of His mercy,’ that is, because of the mercy that He has shown to them (see 11:29-30 especially).

b) Scripture Confirms God’s Blessing (15:9b-12)

Paul uses his customary ‘as it is written’ to introduce a series of four OT quotations. Common to all the quotations is the link-word ‘Gentiles,’ and the first three also feature the praise of God. These elements suggest that Paul may intend the quotations to provide OT support for his assertion in v. 9a about the Gentiles glorifying God. But the second quotation, from Dt. 32:43, links Gentiles and Jews together in the praise of God, while the fourth, from Is. 11:1, bases the Gentiles’ hope in God on the Jewish Messiah. Probably, then, the quotations support vv. 8-9a as a whole. Paul cites every part of the OT – the ‘writings’ (vv. 9b and 11), the ‘law’ (v. 10), and the ‘prophets’ (v. 12) – to show that the inclusion of Gentiles with Jews in the praise of God has always been part of God’s purposes.

When we look at the original contexts of these passages we notice that these Scriptures were really prophesying Christ’s rule over the Gentiles. The first and fourth Scriptures open up what

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Paul is really saying. In the first text King David sings praises to God rejoicing that the ‘nations’ (Gentiles) have been put under God’s rule (Ps. 18:47/2 Sam. 22:48). In the fourth text, King David is that ‘root of Jesse’ who ‘will arise’ to ‘rule the Gentiles.’ These texts focused on David connect back to the *credo* in the opening greeting where the Son of God ‘came from the seed of David’ (1:3). From texts two and three we hear the encouragement to both Israel and the Gentiles to rejoice in God.

(1) Psalm 18:49 (15:9b)

As it is written, ‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.’

The first quotation is from Ps. 18:49, or possibly 2 Sam. 22:40. Paul may cite this text simply because it speaks of God being ‘praised’ among the Gentiles. But the speaker is David, and it is possible that Paul read the psalm typologically (as in his use of Ps. 69 in v. 3). Thus Paul may cite the verse as a claim of the risen Christ. And this possibility gains credence when we note the context of the verse that Paul quotes. For David’s praise of God ‘among the Gentiles’ is stimulated by the fact that God has given him victory over Gentile nations. God has made him ‘the head of the nations,’ so that a ‘people whom I had no known served me’ (v. 43). It would fit Paul’s purposes perfectly if he were attributing to Christ this praise of God for the subduing of the Gentiles under His messianic rule. Through His death and resurrection, Gentiles who had not known the righteous rule of the Lord can now be brought into submission to Him, glorifying Him for His mercy to them. This opening quotation would then match the last in the series, both focusing on the way in which the Jewish king/Messiah has brought Gentiles into submission.

(2) Deuteronomy 32:43 (15:10)

¹⁰*And again it is said, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.’*

This second quotation is from Dt. 32:43 in the Septuagint version or from a text similar to it. Like Ps. 18:49, this text speaks about the praise of God for His acts in subduing other nations/enemies. But an advance from the first quotation is evident, for the Gentiles are now themselves praising God – and doing it ‘with His people,’ namely, Israel. So what the OT text calls on the Gentiles to do, they now, through God’s mercy to them in the gospel, are able to do – join Israel in praise of God.

(3) Psalm 117:1 (15:11)

¹¹*And again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.’*

‘And again’ picks up the formula used in v. 10. Paul quotes another OT verse – Ps. 117:1 – that calls on Gentiles to praise ‘the Lord.’ It is surely no accident that the second (and only other) verse of this psalm cites God’s ‘mercy’ (*eleos*) and ‘truth’ (*alētheia*) as reasons for this praise (cp. vv. 8-9a).

(4) Isaiah 11:10 (15:12)

¹²*And again Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.’*

Paul varies his introductory formula by citing the author of the next quotation (Is. 11:10). Paul’s wording is again very close to the LXX, although in this case the LXX differs from the MT. For the Hebrew speaks of the root of Jesse standing ‘as a signal to the people’ and of the Gentiles

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‘inquiring’ of Him. With its reference to the shoot of Jesse ‘arising’ – a possible allusion to Jesus’ resurrection – to ‘rule’ the Gentiles and to the Gentiles’ ‘hoping’ – a key word in this section (cp. vv. 4, 12) – the LXX rendering obviously suits Paul’s purposes better than the MT. Nevertheless, the basic meaning of the text is the same in both versions; either would allow Paul to make the point he wants to make: that the Gentiles’ participation in the praise of God (vv. 9b-11) comes as a result of the work of the ‘root of Jesse,’ a messianic designation. Increasing the appropriateness of the quotation for Paul is the immediately following reference in Isaiah 11 to God’s gathering of the ‘remnant’ of Israel from among the nations.

From these four texts we learn: 1) ‘Great David’s greater son, the Christ, will rule not only His own people Israel but also the Gentile nations; 2) this Christ will praise God that He rules over the Gentiles; 3) the Gentiles in turn will rejoice and praise Christ for His rule over them. In other words, these four passages point to the long-awaited joyful rule of God’s Christ, the son of David, over the peoples of the Jews and the Gentiles.

3. The Encouragement (15:13)

¹³*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*

Paul rounds off his exhortation in this paragraph, and his entire exhortation to the ‘strong’ and the ‘weak, with a final ‘prayer-wish.’ In this prayer, Paul brings together many key elements from his exhortation and from the letter as whole. As he did in vv. 5-6, Paul characterizes God in the address of his prayer-wish with a concept drawn from the immediate context. As the Gentiles have now come to ‘set their hope’ on the root of Jesse, so Paul prays to the ‘God who gives hope’ (*ο θεος της ελπιζος, ο theos tēs elpidos*). In praying that this God might ‘fill (*πληρωσαι, plērōsai*) you with all joy and peace as you believe,’ Paul is undoubtedly thinking of the ‘weak’ and the ‘strong’ in the Roman community. He does not want the differing conclusions that they draw from their ‘believing’ in Christ (cp. 14:1-2, 22) to take away that ‘peace’ and ‘joy’ which they should be experiencing as joint participants in the kingdom of God (cp. 14:17). It is only as the ‘God of hope’ fills them with these qualities that they will be able to ‘abound in hope,’ to realize in their community the hope of a new people of God in which Jews and Gentiles praise God with a united voice (cp. 15:6, 7-12). All this can happen, however, only ‘by the power of the Holy Spirit’ (see, again, 14:17).

Paul closes this passage with a beautiful benediction of intercession for all the people of God, not mentioning Jew or Gentile, but addressing the entire, unified Body of Jesus Christ. He petitions ‘the God of hope’ to graciously fill His people with His divine ‘joy and peace’ and ‘hope.’ It expresses the apostle’s deep desire for all believers to have total spiritual satisfaction in their beloved Savior and Lord.

Christ’s astounding example gives mighty force to Paul’s challenge to ‘welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you’ (v. 7). How did Christ welcome you and me? He welcomed us with our many sins, prejudices, and innumerable blind spots. He welcomed us with our psychological shortcomings and cultural naiveté. He welcomed us with our provincialisms. He even welcomed us with our stubbornness. This is how we are to welcome one another.

Are there some legitimate, good things, rightful things, that God is asking us to forgo for the good of our brothers and sisters? Then by all means let us forgo them. Are there some believers

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whom we have been unwilling to accept because they are not our type? God says we must accept them and love them. Let us each covenant to do this now.

The value of this section (14:1-15:13) is not limited to Paul's advice on these specific issues. For Paul here sets forth principles that are applicable to a range of issues that we may loosely classify as *adiaphora*: matters neither required of Christians nor prohibited to them. Carefully defining these *adiaphora* is vital. On the one hand, not all issues can be put into this category. Paul considered certain matters pertaining to the gospel to be basic and non-negotiable, and he fought like a tiger for them (cp. Galatians). To apply Paul's plea for tolerance in this chapter to those issues would be to surrender the heart of Christianity. On the other hand, there are issues that are in this category of 'things indifferent,' and on these Christians are willingly and lovingly to 'agree to disagree.' Inflexible commitment to the basics; complete flexibility on the *adiaphora*: this was the posture of Paul that he would like every one of us to emulate.

Paul makes three specific points, each one built solidly on general theological truth. 1) Paul was a realist: he knew that we have to deal with people 'where they are.' Believers in our day cannot always 'internalize' the liberty of the gospel on all matters – on one or more practices on which the gospel gives freedom, these believers continue to have scruples. Paul would undoubtedly hope that such believers would 'grow out of' their prejudice. But until they do, Paul does not want them to do anything that their consciences are telling them not to do (14:23).

2) For whatever reason (greater spiritual maturity; background; personality), other believers will not share the scruples of these believers. They do not find any bar at all in their conscience to the practice that some of their fellow believers abhor. To them, Paul says: 'Don't use your freedom in a way that brings spiritual harm to a fellow believer' (14:13b, 20-21). Paul is not advocating that any Christian give up his or her liberty (which no human being can take from the believer); he is advocating only that we be willing, for the sake of others, to give up our *exercise* of Christian liberty. In Luther's famous formulation, 'A Christian man is a most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.'

3) Paul's 'bottom line' is the unity of the church. This unity is not to be pursued at any price; but Paul is adamant about not allowing differences among believers about the *adiaphora* to injure the oneness of the body of Christ. The 'weak,' while not enjoying the sense of liberty that the 'strong' have, are not to condemn the 'strong' for exercising that liberty. At the same time, he warns the 'strong' about looking down on the 'weak' (14:3, 10; cp. v. 13a). Paul's theological justification for this warning to both 'weak' and 'strong' is the central Christian affirmation 'Christ is Lord' (14:4-9). Paul expresses this same point positively in the climax of the section: 'Receive one another, just as Christ has received you' (15:7). The same grace that has reached out and brought into the kingdom people from all kinds of races, nations, and backgrounds, and with all kinds of prejudices (see 15:8-12), has also been extended to you. Such differences should never be allowed to disturb the unity of the church.

For next time: Read Romans 15:14-33.