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The harmony between believers is a most remarkable matter. We probably do not realize the kind of harmony we have. It is not something originating from ourselves. It is not mere outward agreement. It is not the result of being compelled by outside pressure. All this falls far too short of the harmony that is within us and between us. The harmony between believers is the harmony of the Triune God Himself. It is the harmony of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit now installed in our spirits. Their harmony is flowing, moving, and circulating between us. Thus, our oneness is nothing less than God Himself. Any other “oneness” is an insult to this oneness revealed in the Word (John 17:20-23; Eph. 4:3). Indeed, it is an affront to God to have anything else between us (Gen. 11:1-9). He Himself is our inward harmony.

Recently, in fellowshipping from the book of Romans, we have seen something fresh that I believe will cause us to apprehend the meaning of the church in a deeper and more thorough way. Not only so, this fresh revelation will heal us of erroneous or misleading thoughts we may have had about the church. The truth in God’s

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Word will heal us. When the truth comes, we do not need to add to it or take away from it. The Word of God itself sets us free.

Established according to the revelation of the mystery

To properly understand the chapters and verses in Romans, we must see the book as a whole, that is, in a panoramic way. From this view we can grasp what Paul was seeking to do with all the believers in the locality of Rome. As we mentioned, Paul had never been to this city. Also, contrary to the claims of Roman Catholicism, there is no genuine historical evidence that Peter had been there. So the saints in Rome had simply emerged in the city in different ways and had begun meeting in various houses throughout the city.

According to the evidence in the New Testament, there were at least six or seven different home meetings in Rome. That is, there were that many groups of saints gathered there who had differing understandings about the Christian life (Rom. 14:1-3). Moreover, Paul himself eventually came to Rome (Acts 28:14-31), and from his own rented quarters he received “all who came to him.” This gathering with Paul was in addition to the other home meetings mentioned in Romans 16.

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An examination of the names recorded in Romans 16 reveals that the saints in Rome were of Jewish, Greek, and Latin origin. This means that they were from a variety of backgrounds. Because they had not yet been established according to “the revelation of the mystery” (Rom. 16:25-26), they had differences of practice that could automatically isolate them from one another. For example, when a Jew became a believer, this did not necessarily change his cultural practices. According to Acts 21:20, the elders of Jerusalem could point to thousands of Jews who were believers yet who were still “all zealous for the law.” Their zeal included abstaining from unclean foods, having scruples about certain days, and adhering to other ordinances and vows related to Jewish culture (Acts 21:21-24). Yes, they all believed in the Lord Jesus, but at the same time they continued in their religious traditions. Thus, there were various kinds of practices among the saints that tended to shape their church life. Indeed, there is strong evidence that in Rome the saints’ groupings were more according to their traditions than according to the unique oneness of the Body of Christ.

In contrast to the Jewish believers, with their practices, were the Gentile believers, who basically did not have any scruples about eating “unclean” meats and could worship on any day of the week. The Gentiles were

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sinners saved by grace, and from the beginning they knew the freedom of the gospel. They were not bound by religious rules, but were strong in their conscience because they knew their freedom in Christ. Thus, there was a heterogeneous situation, with various kinds of inner convictions among the brothers and sisters.

Paul does not start the book of Romans by saying, “to the church in Rome,” as if there were one church in that city meeting together. Rather, he says, “to all who are in Rome” (Rom. 1:7). This indicates that he was not addressing a situation where the church was practically meeting together in one place, as it was in the city of Corinth (1 Cor. 11:20; 14:23). Paul was addressing saints who were meeting in various households and who had different kinds of emphases in their practice. Nevertheless, he wanted to embrace all the saints, irrespective of their background, culture, and religious scruples. So he very wisely says, “to all who are in Rome.”

Then in Romans 1:11 Paul says, “For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established.” Here, we see that from the beginning of the letter, Paul’s burden is to establish the saints who were meeting in various homes in Rome. They all loved the Lord, and reports of their faith had even been spread abroad (Rom. 1:8). Yet the church life under

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“the revelation of the mystery” had not been established among them. Without this revelation, their relationships in the one Body were still problematic. The saints tended to gather only with those who had identical practices. For example, the nonmeat-eaters were grouping with one another, and the meat-eaters were grouping with one another. Thus, Paul addresses all of them together in order to establish them in a church life of mutually receiving one another, having an expression of one accord and one mouth glorifying God (Rom. 15:5-7).

The thought of establishing the saints is not only at the beginning of Paul’s letter but also at the end. In Romans 16:25 he says, “Now to Him who is able to *establish* you . . .” The Greek word here for “establish” is *sterizo* – *στηρίζω*, which is the same word used in Romans 1:11. It means “to establish, to make stable, to strengthen.” So the beginning and end of the letter indicate that Paul was writing with the specific purpose of establishing the saints. In other words, Paul’s burden was that the Lord would establish all the saints in Rome in such a way that they would be related to one another practically as a testimony of the oneness of the Body of Christ in that city.

When Paul says in Romans 16:25, “Now to Him who is able to establish you,” he says it with the thought that

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God is able to do the establishing along certain lines. Paul defines those lines as being “according to my gospel.” Thus, the ability of God to operate in all of us to produce His purpose is strictly according to “my gospel.” So we need to ask, what was Paul’s gospel? The answer to this question is found in the next phrase: “[that is,] the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery.” First, Paul says, “my gospel.” Then in apposition to that he says, “that is, the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery.” In Greek grammar this construction is called *epexegetical* (a returning for the purpose of explaining more fully). In other words, “the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery” is simply another way of saying “my gospel.”

The revelation of the mystery refers to the unveiling of “the mystery of Christ,” which is His one Body, spoken of in Ephesians 3:4. When Paul talked about the Gentile saints perceiving his understanding in the mystery of Christ, he was referring to their being joint-heirs, a joint-Body, and joint-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus (Eph. 3:1-6). So Paul is referring to the one Body when he talks about the mystery of Christ. This one Body is composed of both Jew and Gentile together in a mutual enjoyment of Christ in the same church life.

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The mystery of Christ is what was produced on the cross, where we were taken out of the old creation and created in Christ together. Thus, we were organically joined to Christ as the Head, and automatically joined to one another as members of His Body. How were we created together with Him? We were crucified together with Him. We were raised together with Him. We were seated together with Him. Now, as our Head He is transmitting all that He is into us to make us an expression of Himself, even His fullness — the fullness of the One who continuously fills all in all (Eph. 1:22-23). This fullness is practically expressed in churches, with the saints meeting together according to cities. This is the content of the revelation of the mystery.

For the saints to express oneness, there must be revelation. To Jew or Gentile, to those practicing one way or another, there must be the revelation of the mystery. When faith comes, in response to revelation, all arguments stop, all debates stop. There is only one choice left — God's choice. All is of God. Our response to the revelation of the mystery is called “[the] obedience [of] faith” (Rom. 16:26). We do nothing but look at what God has accomplished. And this revelation issues in a response of faith which carries with it obedience. This obedience of faith is a living in which our relationships in

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a practical church life are characterized by all the major factors of our oneness set forth in Paul's gospel.

Revelation and faith

To understand the relationship between revelation and faith, it is helpful to consider the example of the gospel. The gospel comes by revelation. We do not pick a Savior of our choice. The gospel reveals to us one Savior (Acts 4:12). There are no multiple choices. There is only an unveiling of who Christ Jesus is and what He has accomplished. We simply come under "the hearing of faith" (Gal. 3:2). This means we sit passively and hear the gospel. While we hear, faith is generated in our hearts toward the revelation given in the gospel, and we believe. When we believe, we are saved. Even our believing does not originate with us; it is "the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8).

Faith is served, so to speak, on the platter of revelation. The message about the cross, the revelation of the redemption of Christ — the very message itself — *is* the platter upon which the gift of faith is served right into us. This causes us to want to hear more about Jesus. Let's talk about Jesus! Tell me about the cross. Tell me about the blood. Speak about the absolutes of Christ's finished work. Let me hear it. As the old hymn says, "Sing them

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over again to me, wonderful words of life!” Let me just hear these kinds of words, and let them permeate my insides. Hallelujah! This is how the gift of faith is delivered right into us. It is not by our trying to work up faith, but it is by our seeing Jesus. It is by having Him portrayed crucified before our very eyes (Gal. 3:1-2). This is how faith comes to us. And this is how the Spirit comes. The principle of receiving the Spirit is the hearing of faith (Gal. 3:2, 5).

When revelation comes, it stops us in our tracks because faith begins to rise up within us. Consider what happens at a gospel crusade. Some attend out of curiosity. Others, invited by friends, may not really be looking for God. But once they come under the hearing of the Word of God, all of a sudden something mysterious happens within them. People who were not even interested in the Lord immediately feel something rising up within them. Faith is coming at that moment. As the congregation is singing “Just as I am, without one plea,” something tugs at the hearts of the hearers, and deep within them there is a desire to go forward to receive Christ. All this happens because faith comes when the Word is heard (Rom. 10:17). Thus, the Word and revelation are virtually synonymous. Both generate faith within the heart. The faith generated is the very faith of Christ that He imparts

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into us through the revelation of Himself (Gal. 2:16). This faith results in salvation.

In the same way, when Paul preaches Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery, faith is generated in us concerning the one Body of Christ. Paul is speaking about the church in the realm of revelation, not in the realm of man's view or opinion. According to Romans 16:25, the establishing of the saints as the church is related to faith coming to them about the oneness of the Body as they hear about "the revelation of the mystery." God Himself is able to establish the saints in order for them to properly receive one another. This receiving is according to the details unfolded from chapters 1—16. These details comprise the revelation of the mystery in the book of Romans.

In Romans 16:25 Paul says, "the mystery which was kept secret since the world began." At this juncture, you have to pause in order to fully hear and feel these words. The mystery of the Body of Christ has been kept secret since the world began. This was something profound that was in God. Ephesians 3:9 says that the mystery was "hidden in God." He had this mystery inside of Him, but He kept it in silence. The appointed time had not come. God did not have the right environment to unveil it and talk about it until "the fullness of the time" (Gal. 4:4-5; Eph. 1:9-10).

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When the fullness of the time came, the Lord was incarnated. He accomplished redemption. The Spirit was poured out. The church was raised up in Jerusalem. When we come to chapter 10 of the book of Acts, we see that the Lord was on the verge of disclosing His most cherished secret. What was kept in silence and hidden in God, that is, the Body of Christ, composed of Jew and Gentile, was about to happen on the earth. At that time, Peter heard the Spirit speak to him to go to the house of Cornelius and stand before the Gentiles and say, “I perceive that God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34, KJV). At that moment in history, what had been silent in God broke forth. The Gentiles received Christ, and the Spirit fell upon them in the same way He did on the Jews (Acts 11:15). Thus, the revelation of the mystery began to emerge on the earth.

However, it was not until Paul was raised up by the Lord that the full understanding of the mystery of Christ was made known (Eph. 3:1-6). This zealous persecutor of the church was defeated by the Lord Jesus on the Damascus road (Acts 9). Immediately, Paul came under the heavenly vision of the Body, and from that point he began to unlock what had been silent and hidden in God from all the ages past. According to the stewardship of the grace of God, Paul received revelation concerning

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God's heart's desire. He released the truth of the one Body of Christ made up of all kinds of peoples with different backgrounds. He spoke forth the revelation that in the one Body, Christ Himself is "all and in all" (Col. 3:10-11). Christ is the factor that holds all the members together. Christ is the factor between us in our relationships with one another.

In Romans 16:26 Paul continues to explain more concerning this mystery: "But now has been made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures has been made known to all nations, according to the [command] of the [eternal] God, for [the] obedience [of] faith." Here we see that the means God uses to make known this mystery are the Scriptures. Thus, the Scriptures have come alive with fresh meaning and understanding. The "Scriptures" in this verse no doubt refer to the Old Testament, but they also refer to those New Testament Scriptures that had been written by that time and were circulating among the saints. So the truth has been released and God's secret is *now* fully disclosed. It has been manifested and is being made known according to the command of the eternal God. This is something great and weighty.

That which God kept in silence is now being made known to all the nations for "the obedience of faith." This means that to respond by faith and believe is constituted

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as obedience. This obedience of faith is the issue of the revelation of the mystery. Paul knows that God is able to establish the saints according to this revelation and that the establishing should result in the obedience of faith — a practical church life. So he sets out in the book of Romans to show the factors of the mystery that reveal the organic oneness between the saints in order that the practical church life could come forth.

Our mutual faith

There were genuine, born-again believers in Rome. Paul mentions their “faith” in Romans 1:8. Faith was dwelling within them. This faith became the factor of spiritual connection that Paul identified with when relating to the Roman saints. Faith is the common bond that immediately connects us with every believer on this earth. It is as if Paul were saying, “You have the same indwelling faith in you that I have in me.” What is this faith? This faith is our common response to Jesus. You love Jesus and I love Jesus. My faith is in Him, and your faith is in Him. This living, subjective factor is inside each of us. Every one of us as believers has this faith in common with every other believer, irrespective of our practices, background, history, concepts, doctrines, and

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even our prejudices. Regardless of all this, we have one thing that we cannot deny — the same response to the same Person.

Paul begins most of his letters by relating immediately to the faith in the saints. To the Ephesians he says, “after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus” (Eph. 1:15). To the Colossians he says, “since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus” (Col. 1:4). Peter also relates immediately to the saints’ faith. In 2 Peter 1:1 he says, “To those who have obtained like precious faith with us [in] the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.” These verses reveal the common, mutual bond between all the saints everywhere. Faith is the linking factor existing between the saints.

When Paul writes to an unestablished group of saints, it is instructive to see how he does *not* begin, that is, what he does *not* say. First, he does not seek to outwardly organize the saints in Rome. He does not even address them as “the church in Rome.” He does not assume that they have an understanding of the New Testament pattern of one church in one city (cf. Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Rev. 1:11).

There were at least six or seven known groups in Rome. There were Jewish saints in one house. There were exclusively Gentile saints in another house. There

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was yet another house with Jews and Gentiles mingled together. How does this all correspond with the teaching of how the church should meet? By considering the practical expression of the churches in the New Testament, it is evident that there was only one church in each city. Even with the city of Jerusalem, where thousands of saints were meeting in various homes, there is still mention only of “the church” (singular) which was at Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). Nevertheless, Paul does not start out by seeking to have the saints in Rome all meet together as the church in a mere outward way. He does not attempt to organize them. Although Paul’s goal with the saints in Rome was that they would be established according to “the revelation of the mystery,” he does not adjust the gatherings of the various house groups to conform to a certain outward expression.

What does Paul do? How does he handle such a diverse situation? He begins by touching the major factors that relate believers together in an organic way. He first links the saints together in the realm of faith. In Romans 1:11b-12 he says, ^{11b} “that you may be established — ¹² that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.” These verses reveal that Paul is not trying to establish them organizationally to meet in a scriptural way. Rather, he is touching

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a factor of organic oneness — faith. His starting point is not to address them as “the church in Rome,” as if to assume they were gathering as the one church in that city. But he begins by linking their spirits together by their mutual faith.

By beginning with faith, the inner content of the reality of oneness, Paul touches the intrinsic nature of the saints’ mutual participation in one Body. What makes the one Body a living reality is the mutual faith of the saints. We know that Paul was preserving this mutual faith even at the end of Romans. He speaks of those who were “causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the teaching” which the saints had learned (Rom. 16:17, ASV). What they had learned is found in Romans 14, where Paul instructs them not to stumble each other by their practices, but to protect the faith in all the saints (vv. 13, 22-23). In other words, in their relationships in Rome, they needed to care for one another’s responses to Christ. Faith was in those responses. Thus, the genuine linking and preserving factor between us is our mutual faith. It is by nurturing this realm of faith that we can be established and built up together.

Among us there are thousands of differences in our backgrounds, not only in our history and our doctrinal understanding of the Bible, but also in our human con-

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cepts, views, and opinions. There are so many differences. What do we do in the face of these differences? We must learn to bypass all the differences and touch that living faith within us. Look at what happens when we sing together, pray together, and open our hearts to one another in fellowship around Christ. When there are no opinions in the atmosphere — when there is a simplicity and a purity of just Jesus — God descends and flows among us. God loves to live there. He desires to occupy this kind of atmosphere. This is the realm of simple faith.

Dismantling pride and superior feelings

After presenting faith as a major factor of the saints' oneness, Paul continues in Romans 1:16-17 with the revelation of God's righteousness in the gospel. He says, ¹⁶ "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, The just shall live by faith." The righteousness of God unveiled in the gospel is another factor Paul presents to establish the Jew and Gentile in an organic way. When the righteousness of God demonstrated at the cross shines over Jew and Gentile, they are linked to-

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gether by these major factors — their common sinnerhood and common justification. The Gentiles are sinful before God, and the Jews are also sinful before God.

By showing a common sinnerhood, Paul is dismantling the pride, the views, the ideas, and the opinions of some Jewish believers who felt they were superior because of their heritage. They had been given the law, they knew the will of God, and they were the custodians of God's truth. But Paul removes all these supports, all that they trusted in, and brings them to the level of hypocrites who blaspheme the name of God because of their disobedience. He says in effect, "Your circumcision, which you pride yourselves in, has become uncircumcision. You claim to be so much, when before God it is a serious thing to claim to be anything." Paul deals in this way with pride and superiority not only in the Jews but also in the Gentiles (Rom. 11:18-21).

The same problem has continued through church history. Some groups have claimed to be "the church" while at the same time excluding other genuine believers. If we make claims about ourselves, while at the same time making the factor between saints something other than Christ Himself, we nullify our claim of being the church in a genuine way. In God's thought, there is only one definition of the church, and that is the one that includes

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all whom God has received (Rom. 14:3). His definition of the church is all-inclusive. It includes all the redeemed, regenerated children of God, even with their existing differences. This is the Body of Christ. This is the church. Thus, any kind of practical standing of the church must have this all-inclusive testimony.

Paul speaks of Jew and Gentile throughout the book of Romans. This permeates everything. He deals with one, and then he deals with the other. Even when he talks about faith, he does it in a way to expose Jewish pride and superiority. For example, the Jews prided themselves in being descendants of Abraham — “We have Abraham as our father” (Matt. 3:9). The Lord Jesus also had to deal with the Jews’ problem of pride. He countered their pride by saying, “Before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:58). So the Jews were always referring back to Abraham in a boastful way. In dealing with this problem, Paul appeals directly to the Scriptures. He asks the Jews when it was that Abraham had righteousness imputed to him. That is, according to the Scriptures, when was Abraham counted righteous? Then Paul answers that it was when he was uncircumcised. Abraham did not receive righteousness because of his circumcision. Rather, circumcision was a seal, or a sign, of the righteousness of the faith which he already had (Rom. 4:1-12).

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No distinctions

Paul is seeking to show throughout the book of Romans that in one area after another, there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. Why does he do this? Because there were still too many distinctions between the saints in Rome. These distinctions would frustrate the church life from being the mystery of Christ, the one Body. When we read Romans 9—11, we see God’s sovereign ways with both the Jews and the Gentiles. He had a purpose over both peoples in order to accomplish His goal in the universe. Thus, these are crucial chapters concerning God’s dealings with His people.

In Romans 10:12 Paul says, “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him.” Again Paul declares, “no distinction.” Why does Paul talk this way? His aim is to cause the saints in the different groups who were having superior feelings to come out of their high thinking of themselves into the reality of their inner oneness. He shows them their common faith. Then he shows them their common sinnerhood. Then he shows them their common redemption that is now freely given to all who will believe. He shows them their common justification — that is, that they are not saved by works, but by faith.

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Then he shows them how they are commonly identified with Christ in baptism because they have died with Him and have been raised with Him. Both Jew and Gentile have died to the law, and now together they are organically joined to the same Head, serving in newness of spirit (Rom. 7:6). All through the book of Romans, Paul is showing the common factors between all believers in their relationships with one another.

Consider the faith existing between us as believers. This faith is the mutual gift of God. Then consider that we are all sinners before God. Not only so, but we are washed in the same blood. We have the same redemption. Consider these major factors that link us together inwardly and organically. This was Paul's thought in Romans.

Paul was not merely attempting to organize the church in an outward way. That was not his thought in writing to the saints in Rome. If anyone knew the proper practice of the church, it was Paul. But he did not make the outward practice the primary issue. To him what was primary was the inner reality of redemption, justification, identification, a relationship in the Spirit, and being organically joined in one Body — all of which constitute the revelation of the mystery. It is possible to have an organized oneness, and yet be void of the reality of the church. This is seen in the example of the seven churches

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in Asia, spoken of in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. The situation with the church in Ephesus specifically shows that it is possible to have a scriptural ground of meeting, yet lose the reality of the lampstand as a testimony of Jesus (Rev. 2:1-5).

Established together in righteousness

The most overarching factor in the book of Romans that relates us to one another in God is righteousness. Righteousness is the most solid factor between us. This is the foundation upon which Paul builds the major portion of his burden, which is to see the saints established in Rome. In Romans 1:17 concerning the gospel Paul says, “in it the righteousness of God is revealed.” In the gospel there is a manifestation of what is called the righteousness of God. What is the righteousness of God? It is simply God’s method, or God’s way, of dealing with us as sinners to pardon us, justify us, and join us to Himself.

In God’s righteousness, He can impute righteousness to every one of us and make us part of Him. The entire process of God’s dealing with us is His activity of doing something over us in a righteous way. That righteous way is focused in His Son and was supremely manifested at the cross, where He righteously dealt with sin and every

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negative factor. The factor of division among us was terminated at the cross. Jew was terminated. Greek was terminated. The old creation was terminated. Everything that divided us was terminated. God did this terminating work in a righteous way when He put us all in His Son and made both Jew and Gentile one Body through the cross (Eph. 2:16).

Many things happened on the cross. Not only were our sins forgiven, but sin in the flesh was condemned. The old man was crucified. The flesh was crucified. The world was crucified. The devil was stripped off. All that happened on the cross was the activity of the righteousness of God. Righteousness refers to the way God did it. He remained righteous while dealing with sinful man and at the same time justifying all those who believe in Jesus (Rom. 3:26). He not only reconciled us to Himself, but He also reconciled us to one another in one Body through the blood of His cross (Eph. 2:14-16; Col. 1:20).

Righteousness is the major factor between us, rather than a particular doctrine or practice of the church. Please do not misunderstand. There is a battle here. God's enemy would like to cause us as believers to hold the truth concerning the outward expression of the church in an exclusive way. In principle this is the same as what happened in Corinth, where some were using the name of

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Christ in an exclusive way (1 Cor. 1:12). In other words, the name was right, but the source and attitude in holding that name was wrong.

The Jews were also claiming something in an improper way. They were exclusively saying, “We are the Jews. We have the truth. God gave it to us. We know God’s will.” They were saying these things while all the time the pride of their heart had deceived them. God gave the truth to them in order that they would be a vehicle to bless the nations and the earth. That is why He chose the Jews. He chose the Jews to have a testimony of His faithfulness so that He could bring forth Christ (Rom. 9:3-5). Thus, in Romans chapter 4 Paul reminds the Jews not to forget that Abraham was not just their father, but he was also the father of many nations (Rom. 4:16-18). All those who believe are the children of Abraham. Indeed, we who are Christ’s are the seed of Abraham today (Gal. 3:29).

One of the major factors between us is the righteousness of God manifested on the cross in His redemption. We do not dare interrupt that. We do not dare intrude into the major factors between us with a doctrine, a view, or an opinion, after our Christ has reconciled us to one another. Even if you do not like me, we still have the same Lord. He is not just my Lord or your Lord. He is “our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:2). He reconciled us to Himself and to

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one another. Our God did it. That is revelation. And when revelation comes to us, our mouth is shut, and we just greet one another with a holy kiss. Amen! This is what happens when we see that the factor between us is not merely an outward matter. Rather, it is this faith that has been given to us, and it is this righteousness of God — what He has done on the cross — that has been revealed to us in the gospel.

The meaning of receiving one another

Throughout the book of Romans, Paul is seeking to dismantle any improper views that may have been held by the saints. For example, some of the saints in one household may have been considering the saints in another household and judging them because they ate meat. Or another household may have despised one of the other households because the latter did not know the true freedom of the gospel. In the despisers' thinking, they were a little higher than those who were weak in the faith, and so they looked down on them. This judging and despising was going on between the saints. Thus, the organic reality of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit was ruptured.

It is to the saints in this environment in Romans 14—

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15 that Paul gives his admonitions (Rom. 15:14-15), exhorting the saints to receive one another. The Greek word for “receive” in Romans 14:1 and 3 and 15:7 is difficult to translate into one English word. It needs a few synonyms to bring out its full meaning. In most instances in the New Testament, this particular Greek word is used in the context of a warm, intimate receiving. For example, in Acts 28:2 it is used to describe the natives’ welcoming response to Paul on the island of Malta: “And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all *welcome*, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold.” The word for “welcome” in this verse is the same Greek word Paul uses in Romans 14 and 15 to describe the nature of the receiving needed among the saints in Rome.

Let me illustrate what I mean by this intimate receiving. In some homes that we walk into, the atmosphere is cold and uninviting. We do not feel so welcome, so “at home.” There is not the intimate receiving. But we may walk into other homes where the atmosphere is warm and comfortable, and we are wholeheartedly received. The principle is the same in our relationships as believers. We are not merely to recognize one another as “Christians” in a distant, reserved way. No, we are to fully receive one another to ourselves.

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In Romans 15:7 Paul says, “Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.” Christ’s receiving of us is related to God’s righteousness in laying our sins on Christ and imputing righteousness to us. Now we are to receive one another “as,” or “just as,” or “identical to” the way Christ received us, to the glory of God. The Greek word for “just as” is *kathos* - καθώς. What kind of receiving is this? This is a receiving based upon the cross of Christ. That means our debt as sinners has been fully paid. Yet not only is the debt paid, on the negative side; but on the positive side, there is an account that is now full of riches. God’s receiving of us has a negative aspect and a positive aspect. Negatively, He has pardoned us of all our sins; and positively, He has credited Christ as our righteousness to our spiritual account. This is how Christ received us to the glory of God. And this is to be the nature of our receiving of one another.

How do we receive one another? Is it based on all of us believing the same doctrines? Is it based on all of us practicing the same things? No. Receive one another *as* Christ received you. Brothers and sisters, even doctrines may insulate us from the genuine receiving of one another. Our relationships can be regulated by doctrines rather than the major things revealed in Romans — the

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cross, the blood, God's righteousness, justification, reconciliation with God and with one another. These are the major factors between believers today. If our hearts are related in these realms, this will automatically overthrow every high thought, every insulating feeling, and every wall existing between us.

The receiving in Romans 15:7 is without any ulterior thoughts or motives. In Romans 14:1 Paul says, "Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things." The *New American Standard Version* says, "not for the purpose of passing judgment on his [considerations]." This means that my embracing of another brother should be with simplicity and purity. Our receiving of the brothers should be without hidden motives to sway them to our way of thinking, which could cause damage to their conscience.

A brother's opinions, or considerations, in Romans 14:1 refer to certain feelings and convictions he has about eating meat and not eating meat. He has scruples about this matter because he is weak in faith. That is, he is not strengthened in his conscience to know the freedom in the gospel. Nevertheless, he still has a personal relationship with the Lord; and when he does not eat meat, it is "to the Lord" (Rom. 14:6). So instead of despising this brother's weakness in understanding, we must care for how his

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conscience is related to the Lord. We are in the realm of preserving that brother's relationship with the Lord. The genuine receiving takes all these things into consideration.

Paul's thought of being in "one accord"

The receiving of one another is also related to being in one accord. Our natural thought of being in one accord may be to have a uniformity of practice, that is, to have all believers and churches doing the same thing. However, this is not Paul's thought of being in one accord. In Romans 15:5-7 he says, ⁵ "Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, ⁶ that you may with one [accord] and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God."

From these verses we see that being in one accord and having one mouth to glorify God is the result of receiving each other the way Christ has received us. It is not related to uniformity of practice in outward matters. On the contrary, Paul allows the differences to exist in Romans 14 while at the same time he speaks of the saints being in one accord in Romans 15. He does not assume that it is necessary to clear up the differences in practice in order

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to be in one accord. To be in one accord with one mouth glorifying God has to do with the saints' ability to "receive one another, just as Christ also received us."

Paul does not equate being in one accord with uniformity of practice. For example, he does not say that all have to eat meat in order to be in one accord. Neither does he suggest that being in one accord is equal to all the saints agreeing on days of worship. His attitude is open and general: "Let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5b). Then in verses 6-9 he directs everyone to their relationship with the Lord: "he . . . observes [that day] *to* the Lord . . . eats *to* the Lord . . . gives [thanks *to* God] . . . we live *to* the Lord . . . we die *to* the Lord . . . we are the Lord's." In summary, Paul says that everything we do or do not do is "to the Lord." So Paul lets the differences remain and still goes on to say that the saints can be in one accord by being "like-minded toward one another according to Christ Jesus" (Rom. 15:5).

The key word in understanding Paul's thought concerning one accord in Romans 15:6 is the word "therefore" / *διό* in verse 7. "Therefore" is a Greek particle (meaning "a small part"), and is used here as a connecting conjunction. It connects being in "one accord" in verse 6 with "receive one another" in verse 7. It is translated variously in different versions of the Bible as "therefore"

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(NKJV), “wherefore” (ASV), and “then” (NIV). In addition, the Greek grammars include two other possible translations for διό: “on which account” and “and so.” The grammarians refer to this word as “the strongest inferential conjunction.” Thus, the clear inference in these verses is that for one accord to be a reality there must be a receiving of one another just as Christ received us.

For this kind of receiving, we need to come back to the cross and discover anew how Christ received us. Our receiving of one another should be a mirror image of how Christ received us on Calvary. When we touch our spirit and have access together in one Spirit (Eph. 2:18), we touch the great transactions of the cross such as “peace,” “reconciliation,” “one new man,” and “one Body” (Eph. 2:13-16). In this realm there is an all-inclusive receiving, irrespective of any differences in outward practice. In the receiving of one another, one accord is expressed and we have one mouth to glorify God.

Uniformity, oneness, and diversity

The natural thought about oneness is that we need to be uniform and identical in practice. This kind of thought was introduced in Genesis 11 with the building of the

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tower of Babel. But notice the Triune God's response — They came down to confuse that kind of oneness (vv. 6-8). The Triune God did not approve of a oneness that was of the nature of uniformity in outward practice, because it is not a oneness in God Himself. That kind of oneness actually prohibits an atmosphere of receiving. What happens to saints who are oriented to being identical in their practice? They can become inwardly insulated from receiving others as Christ has received them. Instead of receiving, they tend to experience judging and despising, as Paul indicates in Romans 14.

Not only does uniformity of practice prohibit an atmosphere of receiving, but it also denies the very nature of the Body of Christ, which is oneness with diversity. Paul makes it clear in Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:1-30 that oneness and diversity exist together, because the oneness he is speaking of is the oneness of a many-membered Body. It is not the oneness of an organization or a hierarchy. It is oneness that is expressed through the diversity of the members with their various ministries, gifts, and operations. It is oneness that depends upon differing functions for the fullness of the expression of Christ. Indeed, diversity is crucial for the riches of Christ to be expressed.

If we do not have diversity, then we only have one big member — one eye, one hand, one mouth (1 Cor. 12:17,

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19). Everything is identical. Everything is uniform. This does not express fullness. It limits fullness. The highest oneness of believers in the Bible is expressed in the diversity of the Body of Christ. Consider your own body. You are one man, one person, but you have many members. Your oneness is composed of your many parts and members. If you were not many-membered, then you would be something abnormal. There would be no proper expression of the fullness of your person.

For the oneness that is revealed in the Bible to be a reality, we need differing expressions, diversity of gifts, various ways to express all that Christ is. In other words, we need fingers, arms, feet — different kinds of members — because when they are all joined together in the circulation of life in one Body, there are riches and fullness. We need a Matthew, a Mark, a Luke, and a John. Let the story of Christ be told in four different ways. Tell us about Christ in four dimensions and more. Say it through Paul. Say it through Peter. Say it through Jude. Let Christ be expressed in all His fullness through His many members. It is true that Paul is sometimes “hard to understand” (2 Pet. 3:15-16), so I need an Apollos to water what Paul planted (1 Cor. 3:5-7). When I hear Apollos, I understand what Paul was saying. Also, John

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is very deep in his expressions, but when I read the simplicity of Peter, I begin to see what John is talking about. Oh, the richness in the diversity and multiplicity of the Body of Christ!

May we always believe and hold to these biblical principles of oneness, even when they are tested. And may the testing serve to strengthen our convictions concerning oneness in diversity. The principle of oneness in diversity is a clearly revealed truth related to the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:14-20). Oh, brothers and sisters, we are solidly connected in the righteousness of God, so we receive one another the way Christ received us. Paul is not basing our receiving of one another on anything outward. He is talking about the major organic factors that exist between all believers. When he seeks to establish the saints in practical oneness in Rome, he remains on the level of their common faith, sinnerhood, redemption, justification, identification with Christ, and organic relationships in the Holy Spirit. He joins the saints by the cross, the resurrection, and the one Body of Christ. These are the major factors of our oneness as believers. The truth of the ground of one church in one city should be practiced as an expression of these major factors.

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The inner atmosphere of oneness and the outward ground

With all the major factors of our oneness presented throughout the book of Romans, by chapter 16 the “revelation of the mystery” is clearly brought into focus. Now Paul is confident that God Himself is able to establish the saints according to that revelation (vv. 25-26). The truth imparted by Paul, the admonitions given, and the inner atmosphere that resulted among the saints surely created a situation in which they could receive and greet each other as members one of another.

Paul’s exhortations to greet the saints in all the various houses are fitting for the practical working out of the revelation of the mystery. After reading Romans 1—15, the households of Narcissus and Aristobulus, along with all the other saints, were no doubt more prone to greet one another with a holy kiss (Rom. 16:16). Their receiving and greetings were expressions of the one Body in Rome. So you are not left with a rigid atmosphere of practicing the ground of the church in a mere outward way — one city, one church. Neither do I mean to imply that the ground of the church is not an essential truth revealed in the New Testament, but it must be understood and practiced in a proper way.

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Paul does not handle the mixed situation in Rome by first teaching the saints the principle of one city, one church in an organizational way. He does not even address them as “the church in Rome.” Paul does not initially touch the matters related to the outward expression and practice of the church. This would be lacking in depth, in light of “the revelation of the mystery.” Instead, he focuses on the major factors of oneness between all believers. He proceeds with all the things that are common among us as saints — common sinnerhood, faith, righteousness, redemption, justification, identification with Christ. Then he even links us all together through our struggles with the flesh under the law in Romans 7. In other words, we all have the same problems. Next he links us together in the realm of the Spirit in Romans 8. Then he shows us in Romans 9—11 that we are all the people of God.

The unveiling of the major factors of oneness between all believers has the effect of inwardly healing us of division and a sectarian spirit or attitude. By our being healed of everything foreign between us, our relationships with one another become just Christ as “all and in all” (Col. 3:10-11). What is between us is pure Christ, only Christ, without any other motive. We simply receive one another *the way* Christ has received us. Amen.