

### 3 ► **Linked Together in Oneness**

*Understanding the mixed background  
of the book of Romans*

**T**o have a proper understanding of the book of Romans, it is necessary to know the background and situation Paul was addressing. According to Romans 16, there were several groups that were meeting in Rome. Also, the apostle Paul eventually had his own rented house in Rome and received all who came to him (Acts 28:30-31). Paul identifies two households in Romans 16 — those of Aristobulus and Narcissus (vv. 10-11). In addition, he mentions the church that met in the house of Aquila and Priscilla. He also names others as part of a group, together with various saints “who are with them” (vv.14-15). Thus, there was in Rome a mixed atmosphere, with saints gathered in diverse ways. Some had Jewish backgrounds; others had Gentile backgrounds. In Romans 14 and 15 Paul talks to the saints about receiving one another despite the differences in their practices. From this it is apparent that there was a potential problem of division among them because of their backgrounds and the lack of a full revelation of the mystery of Christ, His one Body.

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With this background, it is clear why Paul speaks the way he does in Romans 1:11: “For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established.” His burden to visit the saints and to see them established is directly related to their mixed situation. As we mentioned previously, Paul does not say “to the church in Rome” in the way he addressed the saints in other localities. Rather he says, “to all who are in Rome.” By this he is seeking to include and reach out to all the saints in that city, irrespective of whom they met with. It is an all-inclusive word, embracing all the saints living in that locality.

The burden behind Paul’s words in the book of Romans is to see all the saints established according to “the revelation of the mystery.” This becomes clear by putting Romans 1:11 together with 16:25-26. The establishing of the saints would include their genuine greeting of one another. This means that the saints in the household of Aristobulus would greet the saints in the household of Narcissus, and there would be a genuine blending of all these members in one Body. Because chapter 16 of Romans is filled with exhortations to greet one another, it is apparently dealing with mere outward matters. But Paul knew that these greetings would be the result of the saints’ experiences of the Lord in the preceding chapters.

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At the end of Romans, Paul desires to see the practical working out of all that he ministered in his letter. There must be a practical connection between all the brothers and sisters. It is by this connection that the mystery of Christ, the Body, becomes a reality.

When Paul makes his closing remarks in Romans 16, he repeats the word “establish,” which he used in Romans 1:11 at the beginning of his letter: “Now to Him who is able to *establish* you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret since the world began” (16:25). The ability of God to establish the saints is according to Paul’s gospel, which is unfolded in the entire book of Romans. And this gospel is “the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery.” This is a preaching of Christ that is inseparable from His Body, the church. Thus, Paul’s gospel reveals a Body that expresses Christ. It is a Body that is without division — without racial or cultural distinctions. It is a Body that is being built up organically in the Holy Spirit.

“The revelation of the mystery” is the revelation of Christ in the corporate expression of His Body. This is the same understanding and revelation that Paul defines in Ephesians 3:3-4: <sup>3</sup> “How that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I wrote before in a few

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words, <sup>4</sup> by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ).” Paul gives further definition to the mystery in verse 6: “that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same Body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel.” Thus, the content of the mystery is Jew and Gentile together in one Body, partaking of Christ and enjoying the promises of God. This means they are together in an organic way, connected to one another by the same indwelling life.

Paul begins and ends his letter with the burden to see the saints established in the reality of one Body in Rome. He first addresses *all* those who are in Rome, because he is speaking to a mixed situation in which there is no indication that the saints were meeting together in one central meeting place. Then he infuses them with 16 chapters of revelation concerning Christ and the church. And finally, he commends them to the establishing God, who is able to bring them together practically in one accord and with one mouth glorifying God.

#### *The factor of being in “one accord”*

In Romans 15:6-7 Paul says, <sup>6</sup> “That you may with one [accord] and one mouth glorify the God and Father of

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our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.” These two verses show the intimate connection between being in “one accord” and receiving one another “just as Christ also received us.” Being in one accord in verse 6 is dependent on the receiving in verse 7. The simplicity of receiving one another the way Christ received us is the solid basis for believers to be in one accord with each other. Such receiving brings us all back to the atmosphere of our gospel beginnings — “Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me, and that Thou bid’st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come! I come!”

The Greek word for “receive” does not refer to a casual kind of receiving. Neither does it imply a standoffish kind of receiving, that is, a receiving with reservations. Rather, this Greek word (προσλαμβάνω) means to intimately embrace, to receive with one’s whole being. This is to receive one another in the same fashion as Christ received us. It is the highest level of receiving possible to man. It is not an impersonal handshake, but a warm, personal taking of another to yourself. It is a “taking into,” an “embracing,” a “receiving to oneself” — *as* Christ received you! It is this kind of receiving that is the inner factor of being in one accord and having one mouth to glorify God.

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In Romans 14 and 15 Paul does not try to settle the differing issues that were present among the saints. Some had a conscience sensitive in one way, and some had a conscience sensitive in another way. Nevertheless, each was doing things *to* the Lord. As an example, I once said to a brother, “Brother, I know that when problems arose in the church, you did what you felt was right before the Lord. You sought to do things *to the Lord*. You took certain actions.” Then I said, “But do you realize that when those same problems arose, I also did what I felt was right before the Lord? What I did was also *to the Lord*.”

Of course, to our natural mind this kind of mutual acknowledgment and acceptance does not seem right. This is because we are living according to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil — right and wrong. Someone has to be right, and someone has to be wrong. According to this thought, there is a category of right and a category of wrong. It is either black or white. But this is not Paul’s thought. In Romans 14 there were saints who had two outwardly different practices, and yet Paul considered each saint to be right. This is because even though what they did was different, they each did it *to* the Lord. For example, *to the Lord* some did not eat meat, and *to the Lord* some did eat meat. Each was right because each was doing it *to the Lord*. Paul does not place the emphasis on

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the outward action, but on the inner attitude of the saints.

The main point that Paul reveals in Romans 14 and 15 is to care for that sensitive relationship with the Lord that is resident in the conscience of all the saints. Even though the saints are at different levels with different understandings, there is still a common denominator between them — that is, each person’s relationship “to the Lord” in regard to what he does or does not do (Rom. 14:22-23). Thus, rather than focusing on the differences related to the various issues, we need to focus on the oneness related to our relationship with the Lord. Emphasizing the issues divides, but caring for each other’s relationship with the Lord unites and builds up.

Whenever saints who may have differences are meeting together and are not under an expectation to be uniform in their practice, but are maintaining an atmosphere of receiving one another as Christ received them — this kind of church life is the kingdom of God and is what crushes Satan under our feet. Such a receiving is actually the reality of the Lord Himself between us. Our relationships do not drop to the level of mere agreement on issues. Rather, the major factor between us is what Christ did for both of us. We are both men for whom Christ died! This is the way Paul expresses it in Romans 14:15: “Your brother” is not only a brother, but he is “the

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one for whom Christ died"! This kind of expression elevates every saint to the realm of how God feels about him. This is how to be related to the saints in an organic way to preserve the reality of the kingdom of God.

### *The practical handle of oneness*

After Paul gives the saints insight into the secret of being in one accord through receiving one another *as* Christ received them, he then provides a practical handle to implement their having one mouth together to glorify God. First, in Romans 15:8 he says, "Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers." This verse testifies to *how* God appealed to the Jews — it was by keeping all the promises He made to the patriarchs. Christ became a servant to the circumcision, that is, He was born as a Jew under the law to redeem those who were under law (Gal. 4:4-5). Thus, in His move through history we see that God's truth and God's promises are related to the Jewish people.

Following Paul's appeal to the Jews in Romans 15:8, he turns to the Gentiles in verse 9: "And that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy." To the Jew, God appeals through the promises; but to the Gentile, He

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appeals through mercy. Here the relationship between Jew and Gentile is stressed by Paul, as it is throughout the book of Romans. The reason for this is that Paul is dealing with saints who need to see that “the middle wall of partition” has been torn down (Eph. 2:14, ASV). They need to see that Jew and Gentile are now one Body in Christ (vv. 14-16), and that this oneness needs to be practically expressed in Rome. This is why Paul continually refers to Jew and Gentile together.

Concerning the gospel, Paul says, “For the Jew first and also for the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). Concerning a common sinnerhood, he says, “For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin” (3:9). Concerning a common salvation on the basis of faith, he says, “Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith” (3:29-30). Concerning calling upon the name of the Lord, 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” (10:12). These kinds of verses occur throughout the book of Romans. There is an underlying current of thought in Paul’s writing. He wants to see the saints who are meeting in different places in Rome (due to

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differences mainly between Jew and Gentile) meet together in one accord with one mouth glorifying God.

Paul exhorts the saints with a practical handle for bringing in the one accord among them. The handle he gives them is found in Romans 15:9-11: <sup>9</sup> “And that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written: For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, and sing [praise] to Your name. <sup>10</sup> And again he says: Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people! <sup>11</sup> And again: Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!” In other words, Paul exhorts the saints to come together and touch the Lord together in spirit by singing, calling, and praising the Lord. His words in the above verses are a handle for the oneness to be made practical.

There were many potentially divisive problems in Rome. Doctrinal tensions, conflicting views and concepts, and middle walls between brothers and sisters, due to differences in background, all existed there. Paul, what are you going to do? How are you going to handle this mixed situation? His answer is for all the saints to confess and sing praise to the name of the Lord (15:9). His answer is for the Gentiles to rejoice with His people (15:10). His answer is for the Jew and Gentile to praise the Lord together (15:11). The answer for bringing divided peoples

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into one accord is to sing, praise, and confess the name of the Lord together.

Paul cites several verses to indicate that the desire for oneness between the Jew and the Gentile was already in God's heart in Old Testament times (2 Sam. 22:50; Psa. 18:49; Deut. 32:43; Psa. 117:1). God foresaw the Body with all the saints praising Him together. All of Paul's exhortations in Romans 15:10-11 are in the imperative mood, implying that the saints were not at that time coming together for common worship. His very admonitions show that they were not together that much. This discloses something of the real situation in Rome. Nevertheless, we see Paul as a wise masterbuilder handling a very delicate situation and seeking to minister the truth to the saints in order to bring them all together on a common ground.

### *The ground of the church*

Perhaps the phrase "the ground of the church" is unfamiliar to some. Therefore, it is necessary to give a brief explanation of its significance as it is revealed in the Bible. In the New Testament we observe a consistent pattern concerning how the church met, that is, concern-

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ing how the saints were characteristically identified as they gathered together. Basically, what we observe is that there was one church in each city. Thus, when “the church” is used in the singular, it includes all the saints in a city. For example, we read, “the church [in] Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1) and “the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Cor. 1:2). Never do we read of “the churches of Jerusalem” or “the churches of Corinth.” When the plural, “the churches,” is used, it always refers to a region, either local or universal. For example, you read of “the churches of Macedonia” (2 Cor. 8:1) or “the churches of Christ” (Rom. 16:16).

The fact that this geographical practice is recorded within the pages of the New Testament has been observed by many Bible teachers and scholars through the centuries. Even many of the writings of the apostolic and early church fathers attest to the practice of one city, one church. Indeed, the growth of the system of ecclesiastical organization in the Roman Catholic Church was based upon the geographical practice of one city, one church. However, this practice was merged with a hierarchical system of bishops and elders that departed from the simplicity of the New Testament.

Eventually, the Plymouth Brethren under the leadership of J. N. Darby sought to practice the church life as

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one city, one church, with one Lord's table. In more recent years, Watchman Nee taught and practiced the principle of the ground of the church. He used the term "a locality," which in biblical terms means "a city." Thus, this practice is identified as one city, one church. To practice the ground of the church is to seek to recover the simplicity of geography as a factor to group believers together. The objective evidence of the New Testament indicates that one city, one church was the original expression of the local churches (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Rev. 1:11).

#### *How Paul links different groups in one city*

Based upon this understanding of the ground of the church, let us consider how the saints were grouping together in different houses in Rome with a tendency toward having separate "churches" within the city. Truly, this posed a new challenge to the apostle Paul. The situation in Rome was not defined clearly enough that you could recognize one city, one church. As we have observed, Paul does not even address the saints there as the church in Rome. Although he does mention the church being in the house of Priscilla and Aquila (16:3, 5), he does not say it in a way of implying that their house

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was the *only* meeting place of the church in Rome. He acknowledges a number of other saints meeting in other homes.

If we were Paul, how would we approach this situation in Rome? How would we start out? How would we relate to all the various groups? These are the kinds of questions that must be asked as we seek to understand the burden behind the entire book of Romans. It is with this unique situation in mind — groups of saints needing to be established according to the revelation of the mystery, with a genuine receiving of one another — that we must read the book of Romans. Eventually, if all the saints that Paul addressed in Rome would respond with “the obedience of faith” to the revelation contained in Romans, they would be like-minded according to Christ Jesus, in one accord with one mouth glorifying God (Rom. 15:5-7). Ultimately, the church life in Rome would be on the proper ground for the full expression of the one Body of Christ.

### *Linked together in the realm of faith*

It is impressive to observe Paul as he cares for the situation in Rome with all of its potential problems. He starts out by mentioning the saints’ faith. He does this in most of his letters. In Romans 1:8 he says to the saints,

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“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.” Then after he mentions his burden to “establish” them in verse 11, he says in verse 12, “that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.” Thus, Paul is immediately establishing a common factor between all the saints and himself — mutual faith. To start with faith is to start with what every believer has in common with every other believer on the earth. Faith is our response to the same Person, Jesus Christ. In other words, we all have within us this same living response of faith to the same Person.

Recently I was together with a number of believers that I had never met before. There were two pastors, an assistant pastor, and several other brothers and sisters who were from various groups in the same area. We came together to share what the Lord was doing among us. Our opening fellowship was so precious. We enjoyed looking at the way Paul related the believers in Rome to one another when they had not previously known each other. He mentioned their mutual faith. What is common between us all is that we have the same kind of response to the same Person. We all have faith in Christ. Our indwelling faith instantly binds us together.

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This faith is able to dissolve all the feelings that come with having differences as believers. For example, when we gather we might feel threatened or intimidated due to our differences. Peter is aware of such a problem when he says in 2 Peter 1:1, “To those who have obtained like precious faith with us [in] the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.” He begins his fellowship with the saints by establishing a common point of reference — like precious faith. This indicates that even the apostle Peter, whose stature might be intimidating to us, puts us on the same level with himself by saying that we have like precious faith with him and the other apostles. Thus, Peter equates the saints’ faith with his. This way of speaking tears down the barriers between believers.

In the same way, Paul links the saints together by their mutual faith. He does not start out by attempting to organize them as the one church in the city, in an outward way. He starts out by connecting the saints with one of the major factors common to us all — “the mutual faith both of you and me.” This is like saying to one another, “Let’s talk about Jesus. Let’s talk about the same response we have to the same Person.” By this we can fan the flame of our mutual faith and be linked together in an organic way.

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### *Linked together in the righteousness of God*

There are many verses about righteousness throughout the book of Romans. Paul links the saints by the common factor of their standing together in the righteousness of God. Concerning the gospel itself, he says, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed [out of] faith [into] faith” (Rom. 1:17). The righteousness of God is mentioned in this book in many different aspects. In chapter 3 God’s righteousness is demonstrated on the cross, where all of us as sinful people are forgiven, washed, and justified. God’s righteousness on Calvary reveals how God took our sin and placed it on Christ. Such a transaction links us together in oneness because it results in our common standing together in God’s righteousness.

We all have been “justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24). This justification is based upon the solid foundation of God’s righteousness demonstrated at the cross (v. 25). Such a foundation is not only a common factor between us, but it is also a major factor between us — we stand together before God because of the same righteousness that justified us both. This is a great matter.

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We are common in receiving the benefits of the transactions on the cross. On the cross there was a double transfer — Christ became sin, “that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). Sin was transferred to Christ, and righteousness was transferred to us. On the cross this glorious double transfer took place. Now we can shout, “He has the sin, and I have the righteousness!” When sin shows up in our flesh in the form of negative reactions, and the devil comes to accuse us, we can say, “Sorry, Satan. My Christ has the sin, and I have the righteousness. You are talking to the wrong person.” This double transfer accomplished on the cross is now made real to us in our union with Christ in our spirit. We are all common in our enjoyment of this double transfer. No wonder Paul says in Ephesians 2:13, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ.” Brothers and sisters, we are one in the wounds of Jesus! We are near to God, and we are near to one another. This is all because of the righteousness of God, which is a major factor between us. We are linked together in God’s righteousness.

Not only in Romans but also in 1 Corinthians, Paul brings in righteousness as the factor for the saints to be linked together in a common way. In 1 Corinthians 1:29-31 he says,<sup>29</sup> “That no flesh should glory in His presence.

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<sup>30</sup> But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God — [that is,] righteousness and sanctification and redemption — <sup>31</sup> that, as it is written, He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.” In these verses, the common factor between us is Christ as our righteousness. This is the factor of our boasting and glorying. It is boasting in the Lord. This kind of boasting links us together in a common way.

It is of God that we are all in Christ Jesus. God’s wisdom was to put us all in Christ. Now, Christ is our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Every Christian has this boast. Our boast is nothing but Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 6:14). When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he was dealing with a church problem of division. But, the way he handled this problem was not by dealing with the issue of the church. He did not discuss how to organize the church, how to set up the church in an outward way, or even how to properly stand on the ground of the church. Paul did not touch those kinds of matters. Rather, he turned the saints to Christ: “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized [into] the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:13). It is “Christ the power of God” and Christ “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). It is as if Paul were shouting, “Saints, come back to Christ!” His burden was

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to reconnect the divided saints by a major factor in God's New Testament economy — Christ our righteousness.

#### *Dealing with the problem of pride*

The Jewish people were intended by God to be a vehicle to bless the earth. Abraham was appointed to be “a father of many nations” (Rom. 4:17). But the Jews became a narrow, self-assured group of people who boastingly said that they had the law, they were the guides to the blind, and they knew the will of God (Rom. 2:17-20). Paul was dealing with these high thoughts and proud attitudes held by some of the Jewish saints in Rome. Then in Romans 12:3 Paul cautions all the saints against the tendency to think highly of themselves: “For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think.”

In these kinds of verses, Paul is dismantling the pride behind all the prejudices, concepts, and views that existed particularly with some of the Jewish saints. Yet he also deals with the Gentiles' temptation to be proud. In Romans 11:19 he anticipates their reasonings, and in verse 20 he admonishes them: <sup>19</sup> “You will say then, Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in. <sup>20</sup>

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Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be [high-minded], but fear.” Then Paul shows how both the Jew and the Gentile can be cut out of the olive tree, but grafted in again (Rom. 11:22-24). He seems to level everyone’s pride. This leveling of pride is for the purpose of bringing all the saints to a common feeling of sinnerhood in order to enjoy a common redemption in the blood of Christ.

Paul exposes the wickedness of the Gentiles in Romans chapter 1. Then he turns to the Jews in chapters 2 and 3 to expose their pride and hypocrisy. He says, “You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you, as it is written” (2:23-24). To the Jews he also says, “For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision” (v. 25). Paul’s words reveal that the Jews were making claims about themselves.

Saints, we should always guard our hearts so that we would not be deceived and make proud claims about ourselves. We can say, “Thank You, Lord, for the church! This is the church!” But we must be careful. Do not think, “*We are* the church!” If this is in our heart, we must take heed lest we fall. No one is exempt from

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dealing with pride. The real problem is the flesh and the hidden self-life in so many subtle forms. May God purify our source.

What Paul does in Romans is bring everyone to a common feeling — we have all come short (Rom. 3:23). The whole world is guilty before God (Rom. 3:19). In these matters there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. Paul is tearing down all the inward barriers — the high thoughts, the Jewish culture, the nations' despising. He is tearing everything down and connecting the saints inwardly with common faith, a common feeling about their sinnerhood, and then the common righteousness of God demonstrated at the cross.

### *Linked together by our common redemption*

Not only do we have a common righteousness at the root of our relationships with one another, but we also have a common redemption. The original meaning of the Greek word for redemption (ἀπολύτρωσις) was to “buy back a slave by means of a ransom.” Paul uses this word in Romans 3:24: “Being justified freely by His grace through the *redemption* that is in Christ Jesus.” The redemption spoken of here is in the sphere of Christ Jesus. Ephesians 1:7 reveals the same sphere: “In [whom] we

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have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.” Thus, in the sphere of the Beloved (Eph. 1:6) and in the sphere of being a chosen one in Him before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), we have redemption. This redemption is God’s wonderful “buy back” of those who were chosen, predestinated, and graced in the Beloved. The deepest meaning of redemption is that we were originally God’s property, but because of the fall of man we needed to be bought back. It was through the redemption of Christ that God bought us back for Himself (Rev. 5:9). The price of this “buy back” was the blood of Christ. Now by His blood we have been brought back to God’s original purpose over us, which is to conform us to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:28b-29).

The fact is that we were all originally God’s property. Then we were lost and sold under sin (Rom. 7:14). But God provided the grace of redemption in His Beloved so that we would be bought back and reconciled to Himself. When we see at what great cost God bought us all back, our hearts are blended together in our common redemption. Brothers and sisters, our redemption is God’s “buy back.” We are purchased possessions. We were fallen, and as sinners we came “short of the glory of God,” that is, short of God’s original purpose for us (Rom. 3:23).

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But Christ paid the price with His blood to buy us back and restore us to God's original purpose (v. 24).

Redemption is a major factor to link us as believers to one another. Ultimately, in Romans 16 Paul exhorts all the redeemed sinners in Rome to greet one another with a holy kiss. For a Jewish saint and a Gentile saint to greet one another with a holy kiss means that pride, concepts, judging, and despising are dealt with. Everything is common among us—common faith, common sinnerhood, common redemption, common identification with Christ. Even our struggles are common (Rom. 7). Thus, we all need the common “law of the Spirit of life” to be set free (Rom. 8). Whether Jew or Gentile, we are all the same.

By the time we reach the end of Romans, we are clear that the church is not a matter of trying to organize the saints in a certain way. The church is a matter of saints coming into contact with one another under the revelation of the mystery of the one Body. Under this revelation, God's power, His ability, operates to establish the saints (Rom. 16:25-26). The revelation of all the common factors becomes the inner bond that connects believers together in reality. Therefore, when we come together, we are rejoicing in the cross, the blood, and our redemption in Christ. It is in these things that we find the joy and peace in the church life (Rom. 14:17; 15:13).

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### *Linked together by our common justification*

One of the major ways Paul links the saints together is by their common justification. There is an intrinsic relationship between justification and the oneness of the church. Apparently they are two separate matters, but actually they are organically one. You cannot separate justification from the oneness of the church. Paul's ultimate goal for the saints in Rome is that they would be established in the oneness of the Body. The way he reaches this goal is by building a solid foundation of justification.

Paul uses Abraham's justification before God in Romans 4 as a unifying factor between the Jew and the Gentile. He shows how Abraham is the common father of many nations (Rom. 4:16-17). He also shows that faith was the principle in Abraham's justification, just as it is in ours (Rom. 4:22-25). Eventually, in Romans 5:1 Paul concludes, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The "peace with God" based on justification is another way of saying "peace with one another." Peace with God is not one thing, and peace with each other another thing. No. There is only one peace that was made at the cross (Eph. 2:14-16). That one peace works in two directions —

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toward God and toward one another. The peace in justification *is* the peace that now exists in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). Peace is the sphere in which the oneness of the Spirit in the Body is kept (Eph. 4:3-4). The relationship between justification and the oneness of the church is seen in the way Paul dealt with Peter's behavior in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-21). Apparently this incident was related only to justification, but actually it also involved the practical oneness of the church.

Peter, Barnabas, and a number of other Jewish believers had been in Antioch for a period of time, eating continually with the Gentile saints at the same table (Gal. 2:12). It is important to observe that there are three verbs in verse 12 in the Greek imperfect tense: "eating," "withdrawing," and "separating." This means that the actions described in this verse were continually occurring and not merely related to one incident. All the saints had been enjoying fellowship with one another in the oneness of the Body of Christ. This was something precious and pleasant in Antioch—having Peter himself there with the Gentiles in a common way. In Acts 10 the Lord had given Peter a direct revelation about receiving the Gentiles into the fellowship of the church. Yet, there in Antioch he did not walk in that revelation.

The following is the account of Peter's hypocrisy and

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divisiveness in Galatians 2:11-14: <sup>11</sup>“But when Peter had come to Antioch, I [Paul] withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; <sup>12</sup> for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. <sup>13</sup> And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. <sup>14</sup> But when I saw that they were not straightforward [according to] the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?”

The above account reveals the divisive action on Peter’s part toward the Gentile saints in Antioch. Although he did not teach anything wrong, his actions were wrong. His actions of withdrawing and separating from the Gentile saints sent the wrong signal to the brothers and sisters in Antioch. What he did compelled the Gentile saints to live like Jews. Again, his actions involved two matters — the oneness of the church and justification by faith.

Paul withstood Peter to the face. The Greek tenses in Galatians 2:11 indicate that Peter was self-condemned over his actions. Paul only spoke according to what Peter already knew within him. Immediately, Paul interpreted

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this divisive situation, including the hypocritical actions of all involved, as not being “straightforward [according to] the truth of the gospel.” In other words, this church problem was actually a gospel problem. Paul saw the real implication of Peter’s actions. To withdraw and separate from the saints was putting a question mark on the genuineness of their justification. Paul does not handle this as a problem of division; he handles it as a problem that touches justification.

After relating the details of the incident in Antioch, Paul then answers the situation by speaking the truth concerning justification by faith: “Knowing that a man is not justified [out of] the works of the law but [through] faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed [into] Christ Jesus, that we might be justified [out of] faith in Christ and not [out of] the works of the law; for [out of] the works of the law no flesh shall be justified” (Gal. 2:16). Why does Paul introduce justification at this point when he had just described a problem of division among the saints in Antioch? It is because a person’s standing with God (justification) has everything to do with a person’s standing with the church. In effect, what Paul is saying to Peter is, “Are the Gentiles justified by faith? If so, then we must receive them in fellowship, for God has received them” (Rom. 14:3). Conversely, if the Gentiles are justified by

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works of law, then Peter's action of separating from the saints was right.

The real issue in Galatians 2 is that our being part of the church as the one Body of Christ, including Jew and Gentile, has to do with whether or not we are justified by faith. Thus, justification is a major factor between us as believers. We dare not meddle with what God has done to justify us at the cross. We dare not touch justification by faith. Justification is a major factor that joins us together as one Body. We have all been justified in the same blood, and we are all in God together. The simplicity of our being right with God is a major factor between us as Christians. There should be nothing between us but Christ and our common justification. We all need to bow and say, "Thank You, God, for justifying us!"

It is not a small thing for us to be made the righteousness of God in Christ. In our union with Christ we are a testimony of God's righteousness. God's justification at the cross is a grand display to the universe of the righteousness of God in Christ. Marvelous! We are now standing clothed judicially with Christ as our righteousness. Not only so, but we are also in the process of participating in that righteousness day by day. Hallelujah! Justification is the common standing of every believer, linking us together in a deep way as members of one Body.

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### *Generality and being organic*

In reading the book of Romans, it is important to keep before us that Paul was addressing a potentially divisive situation. He was ministering to saints who were not together that much due to their differences in practice. These were saints who tended to group only with those of like practice. There were the meat-eating saints (the “strong”) and the non-meat-eating saints (the “weak”). Because of the tension this produced, Paul speaks of the need to be general with one another over these issues and practices. He says in Romans 14:5b, “Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.” This kind of generality includes not imposing our practices on others, nor opposing others’ practices.

We may have appreciated this truth of generality through the years, but we must also realize that if it is not held in the Holy Spirit, it can be just a good teaching on how to practice the church. It can even be merely a philosophy — that is, it is good to be a broad-minded Christian, able to tolerate others. Eventually what we hold as the generality of the church will be tested again and again. If it is only a philosophy or a mere teaching to us, it will not stand the test.

The true generality of the church is what Paul speaks

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of in Romans 14:17: “For the kingdom of God is not [eating] and [drinking], but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Actually, generality is only a term that explains the organic reality existing between us in the Holy Spirit. We are all participating in the same life together in an organic way. We are learning to preserve God between us in our relationships. It is not just a matter of trying to remember not to impose upon others nor to oppose others. It is a matter of knowing the Spirit between us. It is a matter of recognizing righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit in our relationships when various issues arise between us. We are not just keeping a philosophy of generality. We are keeping God! Amen! Brothers and sisters, we are keeping God with one another.

For us to be in the reality of preserving God between us, we all need to have someone in our life with whom we interact. It may even be someone whom we differ with or someone who might annoy us. In our relationship with this person, we learn how to apply the cross to our inner being. We learn how to detect when the Spirit is grieved due to our murmurings and reasonings. This is what it means to experience the Spirit and to know God between us. We are able to sense when a wall comes up to divide us, which happens especially when we differ over some-

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thing, yet each think we are right. In these situations, we learn the difference between soul and spirit. We learn to interact with the Spirit and keep the oneness of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This is the genuine generality of the church. This is what it means to be organic — it is learning how to move with God *together*.

In Romans 14 Paul describes this delicate matter of our relationships in the Holy Spirit as “the kingdom of God” (v. 17), the “building” of God (v. 19, NASV), and “the work of God” (v. 20). It is for preserving our relationships that he says, “Do not destroy *the work of God* for the sake of food.” It is for preserving our relationships that he says in verse 15b, “Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.” Our relationships in the church are a gift given to us. They are the gift of the Father and the Son’s relationship with Each Other that we participate in (John 17:21-23). This oneness of the Triune God between us is to be preserved in the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:3). Our relationships are constituted with the peace that Christ made on the cross and the oneness of the Spirit, which embodies the entire process of Jesus Christ from His incarnation to His ascension (Eph. 2:14-18).

When righteousness and peace in the Spirit prevail among us as believers, then the spontaneous issue in the

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church life is joy in the Holy Spirit. Joy is a genuine evidence of the reality among us, not necessarily what we may claim or say about ourselves. To determine whether this joy is among us, we can ask ourselves, are we genuinely happy? Is there the joy of the Spirit? When we sing, do we touch God? Are we drinking the Spirit? Is there an organic church life among us? When unbelievers and visitors come in, do they fall down on their face and “report that God is truly among you”? (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

### *The common areas of dealing in all believers' lives*

In Romans chapter 13 Paul touches other areas common to all believers. For years I wondered why chapter 13 was placed where it was in the book of Romans. Romans 12 reveals the one Body, and chapter 14 speaks of the practical church life as the kingdom of God. These are great matters. Chapter 13 does not seem to fit in this context because it deals with apparently ordinary matters, such as keeping a proper attitude toward the government, caring for our conscience, paying taxes, learning to give respect to those to whom respect is due, owing no one anything, loving one another, and casting off the works of darkness. The question is, why did the Holy Spirit place chapter 13 between the chapters on the Body of Christ and

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the practical church life? The answer is obvious when we realize that the Body is a matter of the experience of life.

To be a member who is enjoying the Body in common with all the other members is dependent on our daily life of following the Lord. If we tell lies, cheat on our taxes, and are disrespectful and unruly toward authority, we could never know the church life in an organic way. To live in a fleshly way in any area of our life will cause us to be an insubordinate person without any regard for spiritual authority and relationships in the Body. The lesson in Romans 13 is that our daily life is for the church life.

We are not living one way at work and another way in the meetings of the church. No. When we throw off the works of darkness and put on the Lord Jesus Christ, making no provision for the flesh, that in itself ushers us into an unfeigned church life that is full of Christ. Our daily living of Christ is a common factor between us all that prepares us for the building up in the church. Then, when we come to the practical church life in Romans 14, our capacity to receive the saints and keep the organic reality of the kingdom in our relationships is directly related to how much we have experienced Christ in our attitude toward people at work, in paying our taxes, and in dealing with fleshly habits. How we have interacted

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with Christ in our daily life determines how we will interact with Him in the Body life. Our experiences of Christ in daily life are carried directly over into our thoughts, views, and concepts in the church life. This is the significance of Romans 13 — we are common in experiencing Christ in all the areas of our life day by day.

*Organically related in a practical way*

The book of Romans ends with the mention of a number of households and saints who were living in Rome. The way Paul mentions them is fitting to the entire book of Romans. When he names the saints, it is with a deep sense of the revelation of the mystery of Christ. There is a dignity. There is a soberness. There is great respect. Paul mentions all the saints in light of their loving relationship to the Lord, their position in the Lord, and their service in His work. This is like being in a graduation ceremony, with the president of the university reading the graduates' names with great dignity as they receive their degrees. In the same dignified way Paul says, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord" (16:13). "Greet Amplias, my beloved in the Lord" (v. 8). "Greet Apelles, approved in Christ" (v. 10). Then in verse 16 Paul says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." And finally, he

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mentions all the churches of Christ: “The churches of [this corporate] Christ greet you” (v. 16). This is the way Paul relates all the members of the Body together. Then he says, “Now to Him” — I am looking to Him — “who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of [this] mystery” (v. 25).

Here is a revelation of the book of Romans, with an unestablished situation that was broken and scattered. But Paul connects the saints *inwardly* by all the common factors between them. Then he appeals to them to connect themselves *outwardly* through greeting one another. Now, the establishing of the saints would be expressed by the household of Narcissus beginning to have fellowship in the Spirit with the household of Aristobulus — both receiving one another to the extent of being in one accord with one mouth glorifying God together in Rome. Oh, may the Lord do this more and more among us today, that we could be linked together by all the major factors of our oneness, and be filled with all joy and peace in believing (Rom. 15:13).