

## **Romans 15:7-13 One in Christ Jesus**

### **Introduction**

My first experience of the breadth of nationalities in our Baptist world family came when I moved up to Glasgow in June 1988. I had heard on the Christian grapevine of a Baptist Youth Conference being held in the SECC just a few miles from where I lived. It was near the end of the week when I first visited unaware just how many thousand Christian young people were there. It was an astonishing sight to see such a vibrant gathering from across the globe. Later in 2005 I had the privilege of attending the five yearly Baptist World Alliance Congress held in the UK for the first time since 1950, in Birmingham. Here an even wider range of nationalities were present. Standing singing God's praises in a vast arena surrounded by people of at least 130 nationalities made me wonder just what heaven will be like! No faith has reached so many people-groups across the globe as the one begun when the Holy Spirit descended upon a small group of people in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. People who in many other respects are so different to one another in the languages they speak and the cultural contexts in which they live, yet they acknowledge the same Lord and Saviour and have a shared vision of God's plans for the present and of His revelation of the future. I praise God for the increasing number of nationalities in our own church, not least because it enables us all to glimpse something of the worldwide family of Christians to which we belong.

The Church at Rome is now a largely Gentile body because the Emperor Claudius had expelled the people of Jewish ethnic heritage from the city in the year prior to this letter being written (See Acts 18:1-3). Prior to that date it was very likely that the majority of leaders of that congregation had a Jewish background because they were the ones with the best biblical knowledge and experience of leading worship services. Now the church had leaders possibly younger in age but certainly younger in the faith and who had come from pagan Gentile homes. It is a time of transition for this congregation, but not only this one in Rome, because as the message spread across the Roman world the proportion of Gentile converts increased year on year. It was, therefore, essential that the groundwork was done to ensure that in future generations the Christian Church was a welcoming place for people of different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. In particular, that the link between Jews and Gentiles who believed in Jesus remained strong. Paul has addressed this issue in great detail in Romans 9-11, but in his closing remarks returns in passing to refer to a topic that was so important to him. Christian Churches today need to recognise that it is all too easy to become mono-cultural ghettos in the midst of an ethnically diverse wider community. But what message does that send out to people outside the churches if we are no different to them in dividing ourselves up on ethnic, social class or some other grounds, rather than showing our unity in Christ through the gospel of God? What Paul has to say here is extremely relevant to Churches in the United Kingdom as the ethnic diversity within its ranks has grown enormously in the last fifty years, a change that will only continue for the foreseeable future. How welcoming are we to people from other backgrounds? I would like to think that we are doing reasonably well but there is never room for complacency. The standard to which we are held is that proclaimed here by Paul- one in Christ Jesus.

### **1. A principle and purpose for life** (Romans 15:7)

(a)**The necessity of our unity** (Romans 15:7a) *Accept one another, then...* The early Christian Church was a remarkable success in integrating people of different backgrounds into its ranks. Although the Roman Empire in the First century AD experienced a remarkable

amount of peace within its territories this did not mean that all was well. Greeks and Romans had tensions in their relationship. The Greeks viewed their language and culture eminently superior to anything the more vulgar and common Romans experienced. They found it difficult to accept that in military terms there would be no return to the glory days of Alexander the Great and his empire! As a result of the slave trade large numbers of people from across the known world had come to live in big cities like Rome or Ephesus or Antioch in Syria. To walk around the open air markets and other public places in those cities would be to experience on a small scale something of the ethnic mix of the then known world. No division, however, was deeper than that between Jews and people of other backgrounds. There was a strict policy of not mixing which suited both parties very well. Each community looked down on the other so when the good news of the Christian gospel reached city after city in the empire it must have been very awkward to build ties of friendship and fellowship between the new converts from the two communities. Yet it was something they had to do if the Gospel was to be visible and credible. *Accept one another, then...* (Romans 15:7a) was Paul's unconditional message for them all. Did this happen in the Early Church? Yes it had begun on the Day of Pentecost. Luke lists the ethnic backgrounds of some of the people present in the meetings on those first extraordinary days. Acts 2:9-11 states: *Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,<sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome<sup>11</sup> (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!* The first church that had an effective evangelism strategy for reaching Gentiles was at Antioch in Syria. The range of nationalities in this Syrian congregation is recorded by Luke in Acts 13, at a time when they were preparing to commission their first overseas missionaries Barnabas and Saul. *Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.<sup>2</sup> While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'*<sup>3</sup> *So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off* (Acts 13:1-3). The five key leaders of the church were first of all Barnabas from Cyprus. His parents gave him the name Joseph. He was from a devout Jewish background and was a Levite. This very experienced lay-leader would most probably have been the most influential figure on the leadership team. Simeon who was known as 'Niger' was an African of especially dark complexion; Lucius, most probably a Roman citizen, came from Cyrene in Libya; Manaen, an aristocrat who had been brought up in the same social circles as Herod Antipas, was of a Jewish background like Barnabas and Saul and probably had his family origins in the West Bank or Jordan; last of all Saul was a Turk from Tarsus. There were no native-born Syrians on the leadership team. What a diverse group they were, but what united them was Jesus. They not only tolerated one another, they warmly embraced one another as brothers in Christ and as a church modelled ethnic inclusivity so that people of a wide range of backgrounds were drawn to follow Jesus because of what they saw in the members of that congregation. What is particularly powerful is an aside of Luke in Acts 11:26b when he noted that: *The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.* What a testimony to their unity in the gospel. Wouldn't it be wonderful if similar things could be said of each and every congregation of God's people around the world today! As I wrote these words it made me ask the question –could we do better as a congregation in making people of other ethnic and cultural backgrounds welcome in our midst? I don't have anything in mind I simply raise it so that we remain sensitive to heed Paul's words in our local setting. The apostle then moves on to explain the basis for our unity.

(b) **The basis for our unity** (Romans 15:7b) *just as Christ accepted you...* On what basis did Jesus accept you and me? By His grace we were accepted by God as we are on the understanding that we will be changed to become one day perfect like Jesus! Paul's familiar words in II Corinthians 5:21 are worth repeating here. *God made Him who had no sin to be*

*sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (II Corinthians 5:21).* Paul has already outlined the basic gospel message in the earlier chapters of Romans, but wants to keep reminding his first readers as well as future generations of Christians that none of us were good enough to earn the right to be accepted by Jesus. Romans 5:6-11 spells out some of what Paul is highlighting here: *You see, at just the right time, when we were still **powerless**, Christ died for the **ungodly**.* <sup>7</sup> *Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.* <sup>8</sup> *But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were still **sinners**, Christ died for us.* <sup>9</sup> *Since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through Him!* <sup>10</sup> *For if, while we were God's **enemies**, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life!* <sup>11</sup> *Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.* This is hardly ego-boosting stuff! *Powerless, ungodly, sinners, enemies* – Jesus accepted you and me when we had no merits to commend us to Him. This truth ought to give us space to reflect on how we view other Christians. How quickly do we get irritated by the weaknesses of another brother or sister? How patient are we when another believer takes longer to do something you could have done very quickly and maybe more competently? God sees our flaws but seeks to view us as we shall be one day – just like His Son. Relating to fellow believers as Jesus values each member of His church is an incredibly high standard that we will undoubtedly fail to meet at times – but how hard are we trying sometimes? Is there a relationship challenge or situation God would like you to reflect on as to how you may be more Christ-like in attitude or conduct? May God help us to keep desiring further progress in Christ-likeness in our relationships with one another. But for what reason?

(c) **The purpose of our unity** (Romans 15:7c) *in order to bring praise to God.* throughout His earthly life Jesus was incredibly conscious of seeking to honour God the Father in heaven through the choices He made. You and I are called to the same God-centred focus as followers of Jesus. The message of a number of the Psalms echoes this emphasis. Psalm 67, for example, declares: *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face shine on us –* <sup>2</sup> *so that Your ways may be known on earth, Your salvation among all nations.* <sup>3</sup> ***May the peoples praise You, God; may all the peoples praise You.*** <sup>4</sup> *May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for You rule the peoples with equity and guide the nations of the earth.* <sup>5</sup> ***May the peoples praise You, God; may all the peoples praise You.*** <sup>6</sup> *The land yields its harvest; God, our God, blesses us.* <sup>7</sup> *May God bless us still, so that all the ends of the earth will fear Him* (Psalm 67:1-6). Do you need to pray that God will give you a greater desire to praise Him, not just through the songs in church but equally in the way we conduct ourselves each day of our lives, in whatever setting whether work or social, that we may delight in honouring Him in each area of our lives. Eric Liddell had a sense of giving pleasure and glory to God when He ran well. In what activity in your life might you have a similar sense of blessing God?

## 2. **The transforming power of the gospel** (Romans 15:8-12)

(a) **The gospel brings hope to the Gentiles** (Romans 15:8-9a) *For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed<sup>9</sup> and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy.* So then what did Jesus accomplish in His work on earth? Romans 15:8-9a gives a succinct summary. Jesus was born a Jew and as He told the Samaritan woman at Sychar *salvation is from the Jews* (John 4:22b). The Old Testament Scriptures many centuries earlier had promised a coming Messiah and as Jesus told some sceptical Jews at the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem that *the Scriptures cannot be broken* (John 10:35b), that is they must deliver what has been promised. What had been prophesied concerning the future must come to pass. Right from the beginning of the history of the nation of Israel God made plain a greater and more

comprehensive plan of salvation for the nations. In Genesis 12:1-3 there is a reference to Abraham *The Lord had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. <sup>2</sup> I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'* Israel had a commission to take the gospel to the nations, but she failed to carry out this calling so God raised up the Church comprising both Gentiles as well as Jews who would honour this calling. The prophets repeated the commission to the nations and proclaimed that a fruitful response will be seen in due course. Isaiah uttered these words from God in Isaiah 60:1-3: *'Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. <sup>2</sup> See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and His glory appears over you.<sup>3</sup> Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.* Nations have come to acknowledge Jesus as Lord around the globe. The kingdom of Armenia acknowledged King Jesus just a few hundred years after Pentecost. In the twenty-first century one of the world's two most populous countries, China, may have now witnessed over one hundred million of its citizens profess faith in Jesus Christ. Missionaries from Brazil in South America and South Korea in Asia, Ghana and Nigeria in West Africa in increasing numbers take the Gospel message across the globe. Why? Romans 15:9a has the answer *that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy.* Praise God that we are living through the fulfilment of aspects of this glorious commission in this generation. For Paul to whom all this was very much a future blessing he chooses to quote from four passages in the Old Testament to back up the truth of what he has just been speaking. For him there was no doubt that it was the prophetic confirmation of God's plans for the nations.

(b) **The prophetic confirmation of God's plans for the nations** (Romans 15:9b-12)

*As it is written:*

(i) **A Jew praising God among the Gentiles** (Psalm 18:49) *'Therefore I will praise You among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of Your name.'* Psalm eighteen is a Psalm of David that has a focus on thanksgiving and praise to God for His blessings. David is looking back over his lifetime rejoicing in the faithfulness of God. It was written, more specifically, to praise God for answering his prayers with respect to his deliverance from the many attempts by Saul to capture and kill him; after his deliverance in battles against the nations surrounding Israel; after his deliverance from the revolt led by his own son Absalom. The Psalm begins in an expected fashion: *I love you, Lord, my strength. <sup>2</sup> The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. <sup>3</sup> I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies* (Psalm 18:1-3). These are expected words acknowledging deliverance, but the ending has an unexpected emphasis: *The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be God my Saviour!... Therefore I will praise You, Lord, among the nations; I will sing the praises of Your name. <sup>50</sup> He gives His king great victories; He shows unfailing love to His anointed, to David and to his descendants for ever.* The gospel is good news and must be proclaimed *among the nations*. The calling is not just for long-term career missionaries overseas but for all of us as God's people wherever we are. What is David saying here? God I have been so blessed that I want to pass the blessing on to the Gentile nations around us. Witnessing can happen in many different ways but do you pray with expectancy for opportunities to share the good news? David was praying for opportunities to bless God by praising His name in contexts where many of those present were yet to come to faith in Jesus? Are you praying for opportunities to witness outside the Christian community concerning your faith? Do you have a sense of expectancy that He will answer your prayers even if it is in ways least expected?

(ii) **Gentiles praising God with the Jews** (Deuteronomy 32:43) <sup>10</sup> *Again, it says, 'Rejoice, you Gentiles, with His people.'* Deuteronomy 32 is a record of the song of Moses produced towards the end of His life when he rehearsed the call to the nation of Israel to live up to their calling

as they enter the Promised Land. It naturally highlights the blessings of living in obedience to God and the opposite for a life lived in unfaithfulness against God. Surely the message here was just for the Jews? After all they are about to become a nation in their own right and eventually they will be settled in the Promised Land. How is this song relevant to Gentile nations? Look carefully at this passage and the links emerge. In Deuteronomy 32:8-9 it reads: *When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He divided all mankind, He set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel. <sup>9</sup>For the Lord's portion is His people, Jacob His allotted inheritance.* The second passage here which Paul has already quoted in Romans 10:19 is Deuteronomy 32: 21b: *I will make them envious by those who are not a people; I will make them angry by a nation that has no understanding.* The third and most significant passage is Deuteronomy 32:43: ***Rejoice, you nations, with His people, for He will avenge the blood of His servants; He will take vengeance on His enemies and make atonement for His land and people.*** Here Gentiles are invited to join the Jews in praising God for His mighty acts, in particular His provision of a sufficient atonement to cover all their sins, past present and future. Paul would have seen a prophetic link to the death of Jesus here and although in Romans 15:10 he only cites the first part of the verse it is most probable that he was drawing the attention of his hearers to note the significance of the whole verse- Deuteronomy 32:43. This atonement was not just for Jews. God's plan was to include Gentiles as well as Jews. Therefore, it was right and proper that both Jews and Gentiles would together be praising God for all that He has done!

(iii) **Gentiles praising God on their own** (Psalm 117:1) *And again, 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol Him.'* This incredibly short Psalm has a worldwide focus calling upon all the nations to give God the glory due to His holy name on their own as well! It was expressed in general terms recognising God's amazing love and faithfulness to us but it is an ongoing love and faithfulness that will be sufficient for all our needs. There are times when we run out of resources and out of time for things. God will never stop loving His people whether of Jewish or Gentile backgrounds. His faithfulness endures for ever! Jeremiah had a revelation of that truth in the midst of the ruins of devastated Jerusalem after the Babylonian conquest. *Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail.<sup>23</sup> They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup>I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for Him.'* (Lamentations 3:22-24) If Jeremiah could find grounds for praise and adoration in such an unpromising setting then so can we in our lives today? Do you make a point of thanking God when He grants blessings to you? May we either continue to be or commence being a person with a thankful spirit.

(iv) **All possible because of the One who is king over Jews and Gentiles** (Isaiah 11:10)

<sup>12</sup>*And again, Isaiah says, 'The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in Him the Gentiles will hope.'* [once again Paul quotes the Septuagint Bible version, the Greek language translation of the Old Testament to which some of his readers might have had access] This section of Isaiah is assumed to be Messianic pointing forward to the descendant of David who will accomplish extraordinary things as the coming king in the future. 'Jesus will reign where're the sun doth its successive journeys run' (C.M.P.389). Isaac Watt's hymn captures beautifully the message of this Old Testament prophetic passage. Isaiah 11 continues with even more amazing truths. *The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. <sup>7</sup>The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup>The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. <sup>9</sup>They will neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea* (Isaiah 11:6-9). No wonder wise Gentiles put their trust in Him. Have you done so yet? How this passage is interpreted of course depends on your understanding of the chronology of the end times prior to Jesus' return. What must be emphasized here is that Gentiles are identified with the Jews in having a

right to and a place where they can praise and glorify our amazing God. No wonder Paul gets excited at what God has done in the past and what He will do in the future both in us and for us. Does it thrill your heart as it should? No wonder Paul concludes this section with a doxology of praise.

### 3. **The sign of a Christ transformed life** (Romans 15:13)

(a) **The source of our life** (Romans 15:13a) ...*the God of hope*... We are not called to ‘grin and bear it’ with stoic fortitude. Instead through all the ups and downs of life to have a complete confidence in *the God of hope*, that is the God whose good plans for our future will come to pass. With such a conviction Paul was able to stand for God in the toughest of circumstances. In II Corinthians 6:10 he wrote about being: *sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything*. Do you and I share His confidence in the source of our lives?

(b) **The fruit of our life** (Romans 15:13b) ...*all joy and peace* ... In John 15:11 Jesus desired this blessing for His followers: *I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete*. And in John 17:13 prayed these words for us: *I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of My joy within them*. Both these blessings are recorded by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23 –the flavours of the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of Christian believers. Too many Christians go around looking as if the cares of the whole world were on their shoulders instead of rejoicing that they are handed over to Him. Peter in I Peter 5:7 exhorts us: *Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you*.

(c) **The condition for this life** (Romans 15:13c) ... *as you trust in Him*... There is a clear condition to receiving these blessings. Have you put your faith and trust in Jesus for the first time? If not I urge you to do it today! As a Christian are you truly trusting our faithful God as we should? The honest answer so often is sometimes ‘yes’ and sometimes ‘no’. Don’t miss out on what He has for you through doubting the goodness of God toward you.

(d) **The purpose for this life** (Romans 15:13d) *so that you may overflow with hope*... We place our trust in the God of hope in order that we may reflect more and more the confidence in God the Father that Jesus displayed in His life on earth. It is a matter of trusting and obeying Him to receive the blessings He has stored up for us in coming days.

(e) **The power that makes possible this life** (Romans 15:13e) ...*by the power of the Holy Spirit*. I cannot... but He can! As the familiar words of Zechariah 4:6 remind us: *Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,*” says the Lord Almighty. If you need more of it –then pray for it! God is at work in the midst of His people, enabling us to be one in Christ Jesus, reflecting more of His God-likeness of character in our relationships with one another, through the blessed Holy Spirit. No wonder Paul could be so thrilled with what God has in store for us in the future as he prayed for these Christians in Rome and for us as well in these words: <sup>13</sup> *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit*. Amen