

Study 17: Romans Chapter 15

Introduction

After a short continuation of the discussion from the last chapter, Paul now wraps up the things he has been saying with final exhortations and travel plans before moving on to final greetings of the brethren.

Body of the Study

How should “the strong” react with “the weak”?

What is the purpose of the Old Covenant writings?

What should our response be to these things?

What’s this about the Gentiles?

Concluding remarks and travel plans

How did Paul characterise his ministry?

Travel Plans

Final exhortations

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *Paul was a “pioneer missionary”. Should everyone follow his example?*
- *We are called to be “likeminded towards each other”. What does this mean, and how far should we go in “likeminded fellowship”?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 16 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 17: Chapter 15

Introduction

Paul has now made most of the teaching and arguments that he wants to make. (Remember that Paul didn't put the chapter breaks in the letter, they were put there much later). After a short continuation of the subject of the last chapter, he now wraps up the things he has been saying with final exhortations and travel plans before moving on to final greetings of the brethren.

Body of the Study

How should “the strong” react with “the weak”?

The strong need to bear with those who are weak (remembering that it is the Gentiles who are “the strong” and the Jews who are “the weak” in this case. However the same relationship should exist between “weak” and “strong” on every issue). We need to recognise where our brethren are at in their walk with God. Importantly, we need to consider the possibility that perhaps the position that we are taking on a particular issue might not be the “strong” position, but rather the “weak” one?

What is important, is that we consider others in the things that we do, and don't just please ourselves. We need to recognise our responsibility to help our brethren (our “neighbour” reminds us of the story of the good Samaritan). We need to build up our fellow brethren (as opposed to crushing them by insisting that they conform to our requirements). Consideration of others is one of the prime concerns that we ought to have – *and to practice* – as Christians.

As further emphasis of the point, Paul points out that “...*even Christ did not please Himself...*” (15:3). How much more of an example can we have than this!!! Here is the only righteous man that ever lived – the strongest of the strong – one to whom we would necessarily think that everyone would grant whatever he desired – the King of Kings – and yet he conformed Himself to those who are weak. He gave His life that He might redeem the weak – and that is every one of us – because of the reproaches (the sins) that we have committed. The reproach that we justly deserved from God, He took on our behalf. This was not because He wanted to do this. On the contrary, in the garden He said “...*If it be possible let this cup pass from me, but nevertheless not my will but your will be done...*” But He gave up His own will that He might submit Himself to the Father (1 Pet 2:23).

What is the purpose of the Old Covenant writings?

Paul has just cited Psalm 69:9 “...*The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on me...*” This Psalm is quoted also in John 2:17 and in that place applied to Christ. Next, Paul reminds them that the Old Testament writings had a purpose – it was not just for the Jews to whom they were initially written, but they were also *written for our learning*, so that we might have knowledge and conviction about Jesus as the Messiah. Paul describes this as “...*we through the patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope...*” (15:4 NKJV). It is through the knowledge that we have – by seeing these things that were written hundreds (and in some cases thousands) of years before hand being fulfilled in Jesus – that we can be assured of our hope in Him as the Son of God. If *the things written before* are true, then Jesus is who he says he is. If not, then He is an imposter, and we have no hope.

What should our response be to these things?

Therefore *be like minded towards one another* – the weak and the strong should have the same care for one another and be working towards the care and concern for each other's welfare. This

is exactly in accordance with Jesus' example – as Paul has just quoted, that He died for us, not because He wanted to please Himself, but because of His concern and love for us (Jn 3:16).

The outcome is that with one mind and one mouth we would glorify almighty God – the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Notice that God wants unity from us – one mind and one mouth – and that unity can only come from the things that Paul has instructed us to put into place. It can only come from the *servicing* relationship that we need to have with each other.

Paul outlines this a little further – *receive one another* – not only should we serve others, but we also need to learn to receive the service that they offer. Think about this. If everyone in the congregation wanted to serve everyone else, but no-one allowed anyone to serve them, then how would it work? No-one would be able to fulfil their ministry of service! When we allow others to serve us, then we are allowing them to fulfill their work of service. That does not mean that we should sit back and *expect* others to serve us. But we should receive others *just as Christ received us*. He went and took us back when we were still sinners and aliens to Him. After we had betrayed Him and sinned against Him, yet He took us back – *He received us*.

What's this about the Gentiles?

The entire Roman letter has said a lot about the Jew – Gentile relationship. Paul is now starting to round things off. Building on what his instruction about *servicing*, he says that Christ came and was a servant to the Jews (15:8). He confirmed to them the *promises that God had made to the fathers*. The promise of the coming Messiah had long been made, and is repeated time and again through the Old Testament prophets. These promises were fulfilled in *Christ* “...*I have not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it...*” (Mt 5:17). Jesus' earthly ministry was (almost) entirely to the Jews (Mt 15:24). Paul shows that God had always intended the Gentiles to have a place in His kingdom.

To show the place of the Gentiles, he quotes from several Old Testament scriptures – the things written before – which although (as he has previously said were) written for the Jews – also now show the Gentiles the fact that the promises were made with them in mind:

- ...*I will confess to You among the Gentiles...* (Ps 18:49)
- ...*Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people...* (Deut 32:43)
- ...*Praise the LORD, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!...* (Ps 117:11)
- ...*(Jesus) shall rise to reign over the Gentiles, In Him the Gentiles shall have hope...* (Is 11:10)

Paul gives multiple examples to prove his point about the place of the Gentiles. Rather than discord between the brethren (the Jews and the Gentiles = the weak and the strong), there should be harmony and joy and peace and abounding hope!

Concluding remarks and travel plans

Now Paul commences to wrap up the letter. The “doctrine” (teaching) is essentially finished, and he now expresses his confidence that the Romans will put into practice the things that he has been discussing: “...*I am confident in you brethren, that you are full of goodness and knowledge, and are able to instruct one another...*” (15:14).

He says that he has been *bold* on some of the things that he has written (15:15). He is careful to explain that some people might have taken some offence at the things that he has written. But it was necessary for him to have made a direct approach to these things. The Jew – Gentile relationship was one of the key issues in the church in Rome. The Jews were jealous of the Gentiles for having been “allowed in” to God's community, and could not accept some of their practices (“bacon & eggs for breakfast and ham sandwiches for lunch”). At the same time, the Gentiles would not accept the things that the Jews were attempting to bind on them (especially after the letter that had come from the Apostles in Jerusalem – Acts 15:23-29; 16:4).

There was none better equipped to resolve these issues than Paul. He was after all, *the apostle to the Gentiles* (15:16), was a *Hebrew of the Hebrews* (Php 3:5), he was well known, and had a good reputation amongst the brethren at Rome (although he was still yet to visit there).

How did Paul characterise his ministry?

Paul had gone the full extent that he was able to do that he might convert the Gentiles *and make them obedient*.

“...in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God...” (15:19) he used the miraculous powers that he had (through the baptismal measure of the Holy Spirit) not only to work miracles, but also to pass on the ability to work them to others. There are numerous examples in the book of Acts, of the people seeing miracles, and then listening to the things that were said (for example, Acts 8:6; 13:12). This shows the work of the Holy Spirit in confirming the word (Mk 16:20), and Paul describes how he had used them in his work of ministry.

Paul had travelled from *Jerusalem to Illyricum*. Illyricum was a region north of Macedonia – so Paul had essentially travelled over the full extent of the Roman Empire. He had yet to go to Rome, and was later reported to travel to Spain. He had gone everywhere that he could – and *he had fully preached the gospel of Christ*. He was not preaching only *half the gospel*. He had wasted no effort and done all in his power to convert the Gentiles – but he had also always tried to convert the Jews first.

Beyond that, the places that Paul went were new fields “...not where Christ was named...” He did this lest anyone could say that it really wasn’t Paul who did it (but “Peter” did it, or someone else), lest he “...should build on another man’s foundation...” (15:20).

Travel Plans

Paul has explained the reasons for his delay in coming to Rome (his work of ministry in other places got in the way). He had had a desire to come to Rome for many years (15:23).

His plan was to go to Jerusalem with the great contribution that had been made from the churches of Achaia and Macedonia. His travel was imminent, and he was most likely at Cenchrea and ready to depart when he wrote the Roman letter (we discussed this in the first study). This journey is described in Acts 20:3-21:19. His intention was after visiting Jerusalem to then go to Rome and on to Spain (15:24).

Unfortunately (?) Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, and then spent 2 years in prison in Caesarea before he was able to make the journey to Rome, and a journey that took around 6 months to make. I say “unfortunately” with a “?” because Paul’s imprisonment and subsequent appeal to Caesar gave him opportunity to speak to Kings – and most likely to Caesar himself. Such opportunities most likely would not have eventuated if Paul’s desire had taken place and he had come to Rome as a free man directly after a short visit to Jerusalem. After his imprisonment in Rome for another 2 years, it is believed that Paul was released and then did make his journey to Spain. For a fuller discussion on this, refer to my series “Studies in the Life of Paul”, the final study “The Latter Years”.

Final exhortations

Paul *begs* the brethren to “...strive together...” it goes to the heart of the things that he has been saying about unity and sharing. He asks them to strive together with him “...in your prayers to God for me...” (15:30). He was aware of the dangers that lay ahead of him in Jerusalem. The Jews had been out to get him at every opportunity, but he was prepared and willing to face the danger for the sake of the brethren there who needed the relief (Acts 20:22-24; 21:11-13).

His final desire was that he would be able to come to Rome and to visit the brethren there. Paul pronounces the first of three blessings upon the brethren in the closing section.