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Living together as Believers

The apostle John was given several visions of the events that were to happen before the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth, to set up God's kingdom. They are described in "The Revelation of Jesus Christ", the last book of the New Testament. In one of them he saw a huge crowd of people who were following Christ in the coming age. When he enquired who they were, he was told:

"These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:14-17).

They were the redeemed of God, the very people that we should want to be part of – if we want to share in the joys of the coming age. They were a huge multitude and, the record says, they had come:

"From every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (7:9,10).

❖ Jew and Gentile

There was once a time when God showed Himself to be especially close to the Jewish nation. He dwelt in the very middle of their encampment and later His presence made

their capital city a very special place. That arrangement was intended to bring other nations also into a relationship with God and now the gospel has been made freely available to all nations so that, Jew and non-Jew alike, we can share in God's gracious plan of salvation.

It does not matter now, so far as our salvation is concerned, where we originate¹ although, as we have seen,² the nation of Israel will still have a special role to fulfil when the Kingdom of God is established on earth. But all those who are to be saved out of that nation will have to accept Jesus just like anyone else – by belief and baptism into his saving name. It was like that in Jerusalem in the first century and it will be like that again when Jesus returns. There is no other way of obtaining eternal life.

Paul brings his Letter to the Romans to a close with many personal greetings to people he already knew or knew about.³ But first he refers again to his special role as the apostle to the Gentiles and shows how the original scope of God's purpose has now been enlarged:

*“For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the **circumcised** to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the **Gentiles** might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, ‘Therefore I will praise you among the **Gentiles**, and sing to your name.’ And again it is said, ‘Rejoice, O **Gentiles**, with his people.’ And again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you **Gentiles**, and let all the peoples extol him.’ And again Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the **Gentiles**; in him will the **Gentiles** hope” (Romans 15:8-12).*

It is an interesting exercise to track down the Scriptures⁴ the apostle cites and to note that God's inten-

¹ “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

² Chapter 21

³ Those greetings take up the sixteenth chapter of Romans which we will not examine in this study of Romans.

⁴ You can do this by using the cross-references in your Bible, if you have any. They should lead you to 2 Samuel 22:50; Psalm 18:49; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 117:1; Isaiah 11:10 and 42:3. Just glancing at that spread of references gives an idea of how widely the truth was announced in advance that God would save both Jew and Gentile from sin and death.

tion of redeeming a multitude “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” is a long-standing promise. It had been announced from the time of Moses, some 1400 years before the birth of Jesus, and it was the birth and work of Jesus that made it possible. The saddest thing was that many Jews resented the inclusion of Gentiles into a relationship that they had come to think of as theirs alone – a special status and position in the purpose of God. They wanted to keep their God to themselves!

❖ Living Together

Paul was writing to a mixed congregation of believers who worshipped in Rome, both Jews and Gentiles. He has been careful in the letter to address both and to be sensitive about their particular concerns. Early on,⁵ he defined a Jew as someone who was inwardly circumcised – who had resolved to cut off “the flesh” from their lives, not just a small part of the flesh from their bodies. Thus he encourages all his readers to think of themselves as Jews, and to share the “hope of Israel” as their own hope.

In his final words of encouragement in this letter, Paul writes about the importance of living together in harmony and at peace, so that we can help and encourage one another. He reminds his readers that nobody should exist by himself or live for himself. We should all see ourselves as part of the community or family of God.

It is worth noting how the apostle approaches this subject, for it will help us when we have specific problems to think through. First, he outlines the key principle that should govern all our behaviour – love for one another (Romans 13:8-10). Then he reminds us that everything we do now will be subject to scrutiny at the coming of Christ, so that we should be careful how we apply the principle of loving one another in practice in our lives:

“The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light” (13:12).

And now he returns to that idea when he says:

“For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God;

⁵ See Romans 2:28,29 and Acts 28:20, where he declared “the hope of Israel” to be his hope, even though he was an apostle to the Gentiles.

for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' So then each of us will give an account of himself to God" 14:10-12).

It is not that we should live in fear of the judgement seat of Christ; but the apostle does not want us to forget that there is a day of reckoning coming when all wrongs will be put right – a day of final accounting for the way we have lived our lives. In between those two references to the coming of the Lord Jesus, the apostle does two things.

- 1 He uses some specific examples to explain how we should live in a way that is right with God: we will look at those shortly.
- 2 He reminds us about the way that Jesus lived and the example he has set for all of us. His point is that if we want to live like him in the age to come we have to live like the Lord Jesus now.

❖ Specific Examples

This will be the last opportunity, as we work through Romans, for you to try out your skills as a Bible student. But by now you will have learned to understand the Bible for yourself, so this should be easy. Read through Romans chapters 14 and 15 again, this time looking for the particular illustrations Paul uses to explain what living-by-love means in practice. Then ask yourself these questions:

- Why does Paul refer to things eaten, or not eaten, and to the observance of certain special days?
- What is his advice about how the believer should respond to such concerns which are genuinely held by other believers?
- What reasons does he give for the advice he offers?
- What does this course of conduct mean for the way we should behave towards other people?

The clue to answering these questions is to remember that Jews and Gentiles were living together side-by-side in Rome. All Jews had been brought up to observe strict dietary laws, sometimes to fast, and occasionally to keep special feast days, like the Feast of Passover or Tabernacles. In time, believing Jews came to realise that

this observance was now unnecessary. But it took a while for the change of practice to work through, and God allowed for that. So it was that Paul went to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost (see Acts 20:16) and made offerings in the temple, just before he was arrested by the Roman authorities (Acts 21:17-26).

Paul's advice to the Gentile believers in Rome was that they should be tolerant and sympathetic towards their Jewish brethren, and vice versa. He stressed that what really mattered was that they should live together in peace. They should not pass judgement on one another, nor despise one another – because of what they ate or did not eat; and they should not do anything that would be a hindrance or an obstacle to their fellow believers. There were things the Gentiles might eat – including meat that had been routinely offered to idols – which could cause the Jews deep offence. Paul said that both Jew and Gentile believers should be sensitive to the needs of others and should do nothing that might damage the faith of their brothers and sisters in Christ.⁶

❖ “For whom Christ Died”

The reasons given by Paul for this Christian tolerance are at the heart of what it means to be in fellowship with others who share the same faith and have also been baptized into Christ. They give us a glimpse into the way of thinking about those with whom he was in fellowship. Here are some extracts:

*“For **none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.** If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, **we are the Lord's**” (Romans 14:7,8);*

*“If your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, **do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.** So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil” (14:15,16);*

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

⁶ It seems to have been New Testament practice to call fellow-believers “brother” and “sister” and that is the practice of Christadelphians to this day (see Matthew 12:50; 1 Corinthians 7:15 and James 2:15).

each of us please his neighbour for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me" (15:1-3);

"Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (15:7).

Paul here reminds his brothers and sisters what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for them and what that should mean to them. It should stimulate all believers to try to follow his wonderful example and to live selflessly and sacrificially. We must try to care as much about others as we do about ourselves: to put them and their needs first. Notice that all believers should try to be like this – whether they are Jew or Gentile, bond or free, male or female. All believers have a duty of care and love towards their fellow believers. It would not be right for one believer, or a small group, to insist on their own way when, in fact, they held a minority point of view.

This is where careful Bible reading helps, for the language used by the apostle is very telling. He says that believers should be most tolerant towards those who could lose their faith if something is done that deeply offends them. For example, if Jews who believed they must still keep the feasts were despised by their Gentile brethren for so doing, that could force them back to Judaism, and they would lose their new-found faith. Paul does not say that the moment anybody says they are unhappy about a course of action the brother or sister involved should stop. As ever, with so much that happens in life, it all depends. These are the critical words Paul uses:

*"As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions ... It is before his own master that he **stands or falls** ... Therefore let us not pass judgement on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a **stumbling block or hindrance** in the way of a brother ... For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, **do not destroy** the one for whom Christ died ... So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, **destroy** the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another **stumble** by what he eats. It is*

*good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to **stumble**"* (14:1,4,15,19-20).

❖ Christian Fellowship

We should behave towards others as we would want them to behave towards us. Being in fellowship with other believers means that we would want to do nothing that could cause them such offence that they would stumble, fall and lose their faith. Paul was quite clear that there were no real reasons why people should not eat certain foods; but for the sake of nurturing and developing the faith of others he was willing to abstain. It is that spirit of mutual tolerance and sympathetic understanding towards each other that should typify the fellowship that exists between brothers and sisters in Christ. This was how Paul summed up his desire for all believers, of whatever race or background:

*"May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to **live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**"* (15:5,6).

This is a prayer for the unity and harmony of all *true* believers. Paul is not praying that *all* people everywhere who claim to be Christians should live together in harmony or that they should be in fellowship with one another. This would be quite contradictory to what we have already discovered – that saving faith is the vital and only way into God's favour.

There have been attempts made to bring churches together on the basis that doctrinal differences are unimportant and that what matters is that everyone is worshipping the same God and Lord Jesus Christ. But, as we have seen, that is not the case. It really *does* matter what you believe and the differences are very substantial. Some people understand that God is a trinity and not a unity, and many other beliefs that people hold are man-made and are not in harmony with what God has revealed in His Word.

Notice that Paul's prayer is that all believers should live "*in accord with Christ Jesus*", which means believing what he believed and obeying his commandments, not the commandments and teachings of men. It follows from this that Christadelphians take no part in inter-church discussions,

believing instead that what you believe and how you then act are vitally important if we are to be found acceptable to God at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Believers should be courteous and considerate towards members of other churches and faiths, but they should take every opportunity to explain to them what constitutes saving faith. There is a responsibility on all who follow Jesus to try to assist others who have not yet come to understand the gospel of salvation, so that at the coming of Jesus there will be many others who join with them in welcoming him. This is the only proper way of enlarging the fellowship of true believers. But until that proves possible, a new believer could be the only person in a locality who holds the faith and will have to keep the faith alone. But he or she will soon become aware of the fellowship of many other believers elsewhere in the world.

❖ **Single or Married?**

It makes a difference, of course, whether a new believer is single or married when he or she learns to understand the Bible and decides to act on what is true. If married, there will be an immediate challenge to live in such a way that the other partner recognises the difference and is encouraged to learn more himself or herself. The apostle Peter was thinking about a believing wife married to an unbelieving husband when he gave advice in 1 Peter 3:1-7, but it is equally important advice for a believing husband. In some societies not all members of the family may be able to read and there is then a real opportunity, and responsibility, to teach other family members by reading the Bible together and talking about it. And if there are children, there is nothing better to share with your children than the knowledge of saving truth that leads to eternal life.

The Bible has clear teaching about the state of marriage, which is a God-given arrangement, as is clear from the early chapters of Genesis when, in Eden, God said:

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24).

This is a New Testament truth as well, for the verse is cited in the gospels, where it is endorsed by the Lord himself, and in the letters of the apostle.⁷ Marriage is an arrangement recognised both by God and by human soci-

ety. Nowadays society has become very tolerant about less formal arrangements, by recognising "common-law marriage";⁸ partnerships; same-sex relationships and even certain civil ceremonies to "marry" homosexuals and lesbians.⁹

This is another of those cases where human law is out of line with that which is acceptable to God. Marriage between one man and one woman is the only acceptable arrangement, so far as God is concerned. Ideally marriage should be between believers and it should be for life. Jesus explained that divorce was an arrangement that was introduced because some couples could not live according to the ideal but marriage should be for life, except in very exceptional circumstances.

"Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery. The disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.' But he said to them, 'Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given'" (Matthew 19:8-11).

Jesus was saying that not everyone needs to marry, but some people do need to. He was also recognising that not everyone who marries will be able to stay married: some will need to separate. But the Lord also commanded that once a married relationship has ended the separated couple should stay single.

❖ **Coping with Difficulties**

The Bible sets a high standard of behaviour and encourages us to aim high. But it also recognises that even the best people sometimes fail and need help to recover. If we

⁷ See Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7; 1 Corinthians 6:16 and Ephesians 5:31.

⁸ "Common-law" marriage is a term that describes the arrangement where two people just live together and have never been married; the state however can recognise their relationship and give some protection to it in common law, even though there is no marriage contract as such.

⁹ God declared from early times that sex between members of the same sex, whether man or woman, was an abomination in His sight and His standards never change. See Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26,27; 1 Corinthians 6:9,10; 1 Timothy 1:9,10.

take marriage as an example, the ideal which was stated right at the outset was one man for one woman. But people like Abraham and King David had several wives – and all the problems that went along with that situation. In those cases, and many others, God worked through the situation with the people concerned. Even when David lusted after another married woman and conspired to have her husband killed so that he could take her, when he was completely repentant, God forgave him and restored them both to favour.

We may have similar difficulties to cope with, either in our own relationships, with things that have happened in the past, or with other people that we know, including with fellow believers. In the next chapter we will look at how to cope with some of those problems if something has to be done about them before baptism. But Paul, in Romans, as in many of his letters, has been encouraging believers to be tolerant, understanding, sympathetic and loving in the way they deal with such difficulties between themselves. We are all in need of God’s forgiveness and His mercy, for none of us can live a good enough life to deserve eternal life; it is God’s gift to us.

The way we respond to the problems of others is an indication of our appreciation of what God and Jesus have done for us. We must try to live together as members of God’s family in a way which encourages and upbuilds one another but, at the same time, we all need to uphold the standards of behaviour and conduct that befit those who are baptized believers and members of the family of God.

This is not always an easy balance to strike, as Paul indicates in these last chapters of Romans. On the one hand he urges the followers of Christ to be sympathetic, loving and caring. On the other hand they are to be discriminating and careful to uphold the standards of behaviour and belief which are right in the sight of God. We can see that process of trying to balance things up if we gather some verses together from the last four chapters:

Show Love to all	Uphold Proper Standards
	"Be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (12:2)
"Let love be genuine ..." (12:9)	"... Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good" (12:9)
"Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour" (12:10)	
"Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited" (12:16)	
	"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (12:18)
	"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (12:21)
"You shall love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (13:9,10)	
	"Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy" (13:13)
"As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions" (14:1)	
"Why do you pass judgement on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God" (14:10)	
"So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (14:19)	

Show Love to all	Uphold Proper Standards
	<p>“The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves” (14:22)</p>
<p>“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, to build him up” (15:1,2)</p>	
<p>“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:5,6)</p>	
	<p>“I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder” (15:14,15)</p>
	<p>“I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil” (16:17-19)</p>

❖ **Finding the Balance**

Sometimes in these matters it seems difficult to keep the right balance. We know that we must love each other and forgive each other, as God has forgiven us. Yet we may see things in the lives of other Christians that we know are wrong. What should we do? As ever, it is to the example of the Lord Jesus Christ that we should turn. He was “full of

grace and truth”. He didn’t sometimes show grace¹⁰ and at other times practise truth: he demonstrated both all the time. What the Lord wanted for everyone was that they would be in the Kingdom of God – but he knew this could only happen by acceptance of the true gospel and a new life of discipleship. So it should be in our lives. It may be that we decide that we cannot meet with other Christians because they do not believe the true gospel or they practise things which are wrong in God’s sight. But this does not mean that we do not love them or do not want them to be in God’s kingdom and all our words and actions should show both ‘grace and truth’ towards them.

Paul acknowledges that it is not always easy to balance the two sides of the issue in this way. Notice that in the closing words of this letter (16:17-19) he is still adamant that “the doctrine that you have been taught” is absolutely vital to salvation and must be carefully protected and preserved. This is why he has written the letter – to set out his understanding of what constitutes saving faith. Now he says that efforts will be made by others to change those teachings and to substitute human thinking; such a process is inevitable, but it will be “evil” and not good.

Centuries on from the time when the apostle Paul wrote those words we are in a position to see just what has happened to the doctrine that he taught. It has been changed in very many important respects. Things have been added to it which are man-made ideas and many important things have been taken away. People who now call themselves “Christian” often believe things that would not be recognised as Christian teaching by the apostles. And people who still believe what is taught in the Bible and nothing else are often treated as though they were not followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. That’s how the apostle was treated by many of his contemporaries, including his fellow countrymen, many of whom regarded him as a traitor and a blasphemer. But he preached God’s true gospel of salvation, and has passed that saving truth on to us through this letter.

We are now faced with the challenge that confronted the first readers of the letter. Do Paul’s views match those we once had, or now have? Would we be happy to meet him and to discuss our beliefs with this great man of God, con-

¹⁰ “Grace” means undeserved favour from God.

fidet that we believe the same things that he believed, share the same hope, and serve the same Lord? Make no mistake about it, the gospel that Paul preached is the one true gospel – there is no other. This is how he concludes the letter we have been using as the basis of our own exploration:

*“Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, **according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith** – to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen” (16:25-27).*

Things to Read



Now that our study of Romans is finished take the opportunity to read the whole letter again. If you haven't read it through at one sitting before, you will now have the opportunity to follow the apostle's argument as he develops it. Now we have looked at it in some detail you should have a very good understanding of what the gospel really is.

Questions to Think About

- 27.1 Paul was on his way to Jerusalem when he met with the elders of the Ephesian ecclesia at a place called Miletus. What were the important things that he told them (in Acts 20:17-35) at what he thought would be his last meeting with them, and what do we learn about our own situation in the 21st century?
- 27.2 Now that we have finished working through Romans, what do we need to do to continue our understanding of the will of God? (Colossians 3:16; 1 Peter 2:2; 1 Timothy 4:15; Romans 12:1-2)