

Christian Unity: An Invitation to Encourage One Another **(Romans 15:1-13)**

Christians must get along with one another both because it's the right thing to do and because unity speaks volumes to the world. However, the church of Jesus Christ hasn't been known for unity. Local congregations splinter and whole denominations stand apart from others of like faith for often insignificant reasons. While it's fine to hold doctrinal and practical distinctions, we have so much in common in our shared faith in Jesus Christ that unity rather than disunity should be the obvious characteristic of God's people. Christian unity rests on a foundation of putting others first. When Christians put others first—seeking to build up and encourage others—we reflect the character of Christ. In his extended exhortation for unity in the church at Rome, Paul describes our Christian liberty (Romans 14:1-12), Christian harmony (Romans 14:13-23), and finally Christian unity (Romans 15:1-13)—interwoven themes that remind us to accept and encourage one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Like Jesus Christ, we must willingly surrender our rights and put others first.

We build each other up in unity by developing an attitude of self-denial (15:1-4).

Encouraging and edifying one another is at the heart of Christian unity. These practices begin with an attitude of self-denial.

The strong should support the weak, disregarding their own rights and privileges (15:1).

The “strong,” those who are strong in their faith regarding debatable practices are now mentioned specifically for the first time even though Paul has been addressing them in this broader section (compare Romans 14:1). Paul identifies himself among the strong, using the first person “we.” The strong are to bear, or carry, the weaknesses of those who are not strong. This admonition goes beyond a mere suggestion—it's an expectation. It also goes beyond the idea of merely tolerating the weak—it means to carry the weaknesses of those who are weak. Here Paul refers to the weak in a more positive sense, calling them those who are “not strong.” These individuals have not yet become strong enough in their faith to accept the freedoms that we have in Christ Jesus. The strong support the weak by refusing to please themselves, that is, by setting aside their own rights and privileges in order to meet the needs of those who are weak.

The strong should edify the weak, following the example of Jesus Christ (15:2-3).

This admonition to support the weak really applies to all believers, weak or strong. Paul says that “each one of us” should make it our aim to please our neighbor. “Neighbor” here may

refer to the weak believers, but this term often stretches beyond the Christian community to the unsaved around us. Every Christian should seek to please his or her neighbor for “the good,” anticipating good blessings that we can bestow on others. Our goal should be edification, the building up of one another and even the building toward faith in the hearts of an unsaved neighbor. The strong should edify the weak so that the weak will become strong. Together, we must build up one another for the good work of God in this world. Jesus Christ becomes our example for this edifying work. When He came into this world He did so without seeking to please Himself. Instead, Jesus always did that which pleased His Father in heaven (John 8:29). Citing Psalm 69:9, Paul points out that Jesus bore the insults that were targeted toward the Father. These insults, these ignominies fell on Jesus Christ. He bore our sins, the sins that offended the Father. Since Jesus came into this world without regard for His divine rights and privileges, dying for our sins, we as His followers should eagerly carry the weaknesses of our weaker brothers and sisters.

The source of our endurance, encouragement, and hope is the written Word of God (15:4).

Having once again cited the Old Testament to support his thoughts, Paul here interjects a statement about the value of Scripture in the life of the Christian. Those things that were written before—the truths of the Old Testament—were written for our instruction. They teach us how to live and think. They give us confident hope in God and His plan for our lives. Consequently, we build endurance and receive comfort through these revealed and inspired writings. It’s hard to imagine where we’d be without the Word of God to guide, nurture, and encourage our faith. The Scriptures build us up in our faith, helping the weak to become strong and challenging the strong to set aside their rights in order to bless the weak.

**We build each other up in unity by
following the example of Jesus Christ (15:5-6).**

Jesus is our prime example of living a servant lifestyle, a lifestyle that encourages and edifies others.

Unity among Christians reflects the character of Christ (15:5).

Scripture builds within us endurance and comfort (verse 4). Now Paul identifies endurance and comfort as having their source in God Himself. God is a God of endurance and comfort, a God who strengthens and encourages His people. It was Paul’s desire that the Christians in Rome receive from this God a deep sense of unity—“to think the same thing” among themselves. Such an attitude would best reflect the purposes of Jesus Christ. Paul didn’t expect every Christian to come to an identical conclusion on every point of doctrine or practice.

He did, however, expect the Christians in Rome to commit themselves to unity even with their different perspectives and practices. Unity in the church doesn't demand uniformity, simply oneness of purpose and faith. Jesus Christ has brought us into fellowship with God, a fellowship that we share with one another. Unity within the body of Christ reflects His character and work.

Unity among Christians brings glory to God (15:6).

To have the same mind as other believers, to be unified in faith and practice, brings glory to God. Paul emphasizes the importance of maintaining unity by referring to God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This God deserves from His people a unified attitude (literally “single passion”) and a unified voice (literally “one mouth”)—praise that comes from the oneness we experience in Jesus Christ. We encourage and edify one another by maintaining unity of heart and voice, following the example of Jesus Christ in His relationship with the Father.

**We build each other up in unity by
accepting one another unconditionally (15:7-13).**

Because Jesus Christ received us just as we are, with all our sins and flaws, we too must receive one another. We encourage and edify one another by accepting one another unconditionally.

Because Christ has accepted us, we must accept one another (15:7).

Verse 7 repeats precisely the verb Paul used to begin this broader section on unity in Romans 14:1—to “accept” one another. The strong are to accept the weak because God has accepted them (Romans 14:3). All believers are to accept one another because Christ has accepted us (Romans 15:7). To “accept” one another means to welcome one another into a vital relationship based on our common faith. By accepting one another we bring glory to God, who has accepted us.

Because Christ became a servant, God's promises to the Jews have been confirmed (15:8).

Jesus Christ set the example for us when it comes to self-sacrifice and service. Christ became a servant to “the circumcision,” that is, to the Jewish people. He did so for the sake of God's truth, that is, to confirm God's promises to the Jewish patriarchs. God promised to bless all people on earth through Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), and Jesus became the fulfillment of that promise.

Because Christ became a servant, Gentiles can glorify God for His mercy (15:9-12).

Christ's example of sacrificial service touched not only the Jews but Gentiles as well. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, Gentiles can enter into the family of faith and thereby glorify God for the sake of His mercy. We have become recipients of God's mercy through Jesus' self-sacrifice and service. Therefore, we can live in unity as Jews and Gentiles, as brothers and sisters, as members together in the body of Christ through faith in His sacrificial death.

Paul finalizes his admonition on unity by citing four Old Testament references that show the inclusion of Gentiles in the grand scheme of God's redemptive plan. In Psalm 18:49 David declared that he would praise (literally "confess") God among the nations and sing praises to His name. In the song of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 32:43 we read that the Gentile nations should rejoice together with God's chosen people, the Jews. From the shortest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 117:1 invites all the nations to praise the Lord and all the people groups of the earth to super-praise (an emphatic form of the verb for praise) Him. Finally, Isaiah 11:10 states that the "Root of Jesse," a name for the Messiah based on His descent from David's father Jesse, would rise up (possibly a reference to Jesus' resurrection) and rule the Gentile nations. These same Gentile nations would put their hope in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Jews and Gentiles together share in the blessings of the self-sacrificing Savior and Messiah, Jesus Christ. Therefore, everyone who believes in Jesus can and must accept one another in loving fellowship and unity. We must accept one another unconditionally. Like Jesus Christ, we must willingly surrender our rights and put others first.

The God of hope fills those who believe with joy, peace, and overflowing hope (15:13).

As a capstone to his section on Christian unity (Romans 14:1—15:12), and possibly to the entire section on life transformation in Christ (Romans 12:1—15:12), Paul presents a benediction, a pronouncement of blessing for his readers. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him." God is a God of hope. Our confident expectation of a better future rests in Him. Because of our faith relationship with God we have access to joy and peace, an inner, settled confidence in the midst of life's storms. This relationship with God that offers such hope, joy, and peace should move us to "overflow with hope," not as a sense of confidence based on our own feelings but a sense of confidence that comes from the power of God's Holy Spirit living within us. Our lives are truly different, remarkably and irreversibly different, because of our relationship with Jesus Christ. We have been transformed. We live in joy, peace, and hope. God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—has granted us this boundless blessing by His grace.