

Romans 15:1-13

Righteousness in Conduct, Focused on Unity

A. Notes to the Text

Verse 1

For the context, see Main Thoughts, 1, below. Paul resolutely positions himself on the side of the strong, (see previous outline about "strong" and "weak"; for his standpoint cf. Romans 14:14; Mark 7:18,19; Acts 10:15 and 1 Timothy 4:4,5). But the strong ought to bear with the weak; they may not please themselves or think and do as they will. The apostle literally speaks of the "strong" and those "without strength."

Verse 2

This verse does not mean that we should let the weak have their way in all things. It must be for good, that is, to the upbuilding of the congregation in the faith.

Verse 3

The reason for the attitude of vv. 1 and 2 is Christ's example. And then follows a quote from Psalm 69 (v. 9). This psalm was also the rule for Christ's life. Christ had to bear more humiliation and show more self-denial than the strong in Rome's congregation for the weak. The New Testament church saw the suffering and death of Christ as a fulfilment not only of Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 and 118, but also of Psalm 69 (see John 2:17; 15:25; 19:28,29; also, for the downfall of Judas, see Acts 1:20; cf. Romans 11:9).

Verse 4

The quotation in v. 3 gives Paul grounds for a general statement about the importance of Scripture for all the generations of the church.

"Teach": direction for doctrine and life, actions and conduct.

"Endurance" or "steadfastness"[RSV]: viz. in the faith of the Scriptures.

"Encouragement": with the promises of Scripture; to hold on to the hope of Christ's future.

Verses 5, 6

Scripture does not automatically reach this goal in its hearers and readers, but only by way of faith and prayer. That is why Paul prays for them. The meaning is: praising God in the meetings of the congregation, with one mind and one voice.

Verse 7

In order to glorify God in unity, the members are to accept one another (the strong the weak, and the weak the strong), as full members of the body of Christ, the church (cf. 14:1). The reason: Christ adopted them all to be his (cf. 14:15; and Hebrews 2:16). Paul can say this because the differences are not doctrinal, not fundamental.

Verses 8, 9

Paul explains: Christ became "a servant of the Jews" (circumcised), that is, he placed himself under the law (Galatians 4:4) and hence was himself also baptised (Luke 2:21). Thus he fulfilled his work of salvation in order that God's truthfulness (faithfulness to his promises) would be shown in the fulfillment of the promises. And (v. 9) this work of Christ bore fruit also for the Gentiles; they too are involved in Christ's work and brought to faith, to glorify God together with the Jewish Christians.

Verses 9-12

Paul now quotes the Old Testament Scriptures, to show what was already foretold in the Old Testament, that both Jews and Gentiles would glorify God.

He quotes from the three parts into which the Jews divide the Old Testament: the Law (Deuteronomy 32:43), the Prophets (Isaiah 11:10) and the Scriptures (Psalm 117:1).

Verse 13

Paul's prayer is based on God's promises; that is why God is the God of hope.

"Peace": harmony, good relationships, without inner conflicts, well-being and joy. (See Glossary #24.)

B. Main Thoughts

1. In chapter 15:1-13 the apostle continues with the subject matter of the previous chapter, the relationship between the strong and the weak in the congregation. Here he considers this relationship from the point of view of the unity of the congregation. The differences in eating and drinking may not harm or break the unity of the church. Paul can say and stress this because the differences are not doctrinal, so that there is no conflict between true and false doctrine. It must be clear from the attitudes towards each other that the strong as well as the weak are "righteous", that is, justified, set free from the sin of discord and schism in the church. The new righteousness must be shown in that they seek the unity of the congregation together.
2. This also gives us a standard for all ages in the church. It is necessary always to make clear judgments, so that on the one hand we do not exaggerate differences of opinion into doctrinal differences and polarise relationships (pit

them over against each other so they come to a head), and on the other hand we do not disregard or ignore what really is false doctrine. In other letters (such as Galatians and 1 Corinthians) we see that Paul is not at all lenient and indulgent about false doctrine. It is remarkable that members in the church who see the bond of communion with their brothers broken because of mere trifles, often do not trouble themselves about false doctrine!

3. Paul exhorts the strong especially to take care not to despise the weak. That is why he shows them the example of Christ. Christ had to show more self-denial to haters and enemies than the strong in the congregation of Rome to their own weak brothers and sisters. But Christ did not seek himself or please himself (cf. Philippians 2:1-11). The strong in Rome's church must follow Christ's example in this respect.
4. When comparing the Old Testament quotations in 15:9-12 with the actual passages in Deuteronomy, Isaiah and Psalms, we see that there are differences.

We can generally divide the quotations Paul uses here and in other letters into three groups: (a) quotations which are literally the same as the text in the Old Testament; (b) quotations which differ from the Hebrew Old Testament but agree with the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint); and (c) quotations which agree neither with the Hebrew Old Testament nor with the Greek. Much has been written about this. It is too difficult a matter to discuss here. I have mentioned it because these differences will be noticed when comparing the quotations with the Old Testament. Two things must be kept in mind: (1) The Holy Spirit, who is the Author of the Scriptures, is free to give his own Old Testament words a different form in the New Testament, and even to change their meaning; and (2) usually the meaning of the quoted words has not been changed, even though they have a different form in the New Testament.

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