

Essential Relationships 1: Relationships in the Church (Romans 12:1-16)

KEY QUESTIONS:

- What is the nature of Christian worship?
- What is our relationship to one another in the local church?
- How can we recognise and demonstrate true Christian love?

A BRIEF SURVEY OF CHAPTERS 9-11

In Romans 9-11 Paul discusses God's plans for Israel. He emphasises the **Sovereignty of God**. The true Israel consists of those who have faith in God, not all those born as Jews (9:6). Since God is Lord over all men, both Jews and Gentiles (10:12), it is His right to accept all those who call on His name. He chooses to include among His people all those who respond in faith to His call (he grafts the Gentile believers into the same olive tree as the faithful Israelites). However, God still has plans for Israel in a future time, when the remaining Old Testament prophecies will be fulfilled (11:25-32). This section is not, as some commentators have suggested, a parenthesis in which Paul deviates from his main theme of the gospel – in fact, when we understand the context of the church in Rome with its Jewish and Gentile members, these chapters take on a new light as the centrepiece of Paul's argument for the inclusion of both Gentiles and Jews in the church. Nevertheless, we will not be looking at these chapters in detail since our focus in this third series of three messages from Romans will be focused on Paul's essential teaching about relationships in chapters 12-15.

OUR REASONABLE ACT OF WORSHIP (11:33-12:2)

The Greatness of God (11:33-36)

After his lengthy discussion of the places of the Jews and Gentiles in God's purpose, Paul bursts into an amazing "doxology" (literally a "word of glory") – a declaration of God's greatness. He emphasises two great qualities of God:

1. His wisdom and knowledge (vv33&34)

God has all knowledge (He knows all things) AND all wisdom (He understands all things and knows how best to act based on His knowledge). Because of this, **God's judgements are unsearchable** and His paths cannot be fully understood by human beings, with our limited knowledge and wisdom. No one could ever counsel God, and no one can fully understand God's mind (v34). To use the theological term, God is omniscient (all-knowing).

2. His self-sufficiency (vv35&36)

No one can give anything to God – **everything comes from God and returns to Him** (v36). He is completely self-sufficient, and does not depend on anything that His creatures can give Him. We need Him, but He does not need us. Everything we have is a gift from Him

We could summarise Paul's point in one sentence: **"God is God, and we are only human!"** Our proper response when we realise the absolute power and sovereignty of God is to bow our knee and give Him all honour and praise. There appears to have been a general loss of reverence for God not only in society as a whole, but even amongst Christians in recent decades. We are very good at rejoicing in the intimacy of our relationship with Him as Father (8:15), but not so good at humbling ourselves under His mighty hand. In our praise, prayer and behaviour we should always be mindful of the power, majesty and holiness of God in equal measure with His mercy, grace and love.

Our "Reasonable" Response (12:1)

Paul's response to his doxology about God is clear (12:1) – in view of the power and wisdom of God, the fact that He chooses to include us in His eternal purposes is pure mercy. When we consider this mercy towards us, there is only one reasonable response we can make – **to offer our bodies (meaning everything we are and have) to Him as a living sacrifice**. Everything we have came from Him and is His by right, so we ought to return it to Him in sacrifice. A sacrifice has no rights, it does not debate or seek its own pleasure – it simply brings honour to God! The sacrifice of our lives as we set them apart (holy) to Him is pleasing in God's sight. Paul's use of the word body is not an accident – it represents a rebuke to the Platonic Greek notion that the body is evil, a prison we long to be released from, as Paul sees it as an acceptable offering to

God, and it reinforces the Biblical truth that true worship is not simply an attitude of heart, but an active physical thing. Worship must be expressed in service, and service is impossible without the body. It is not enough to feel worshipful or to sing songs that express ideas of worship, true worship is physical! This is in direct contrast to Paul's description of sinful acts in 3:13-18 in physical terms, and continues his challenge in 6:19 to offer the parts of our bodies in slavery to righteousness rather than impurity. So, then, the challenge for us is whether we are daily offering ourselves to God. This may seem basic, but I wonder if we really do it in practice? Do we begin every day in prayer, offering ourselves to God? Do we continue through the day in communion with Him – offering to Him the highs and lows, the joys and pains, the stresses and frustrations? When we truly know God and realise what He has done for us, we will bow in humility and acknowledge Him as the sovereign Lord over all our being.

Transformed, not conformed (12:2a)

Paul explains in v2 more about what it means to be a living sacrifice – **to be transformed, not conformed**. Rather than fitting into this world's pattern of behaviour and thinking we ought to allow God to transform our minds by the Holy Spirit. The two verbs here ("conform" and "transform") are present passive imperatives, meaning that they are things that happen to us and continually happen to us rather than being single decisive past events. Every day the pattern of this world tries to impress itself on our minds – it isn't difficult to see how in our modern world with so many forms of media clamouring for our attention this could be so. We need to wake up to this reality, and realise that the songs we listen to, the movies and TV programmes we watch, the websites we visit, the newspapers, books and magazines we listen to, the art we look at, and the schools, universities and workplaces where we spend so much of our time, are not value-free. The world has an agenda, and it wants to make you conform to it. That agenda is materialistic, hedonistic (pleasure-seeking), relativistic (placing equal value on all opinions) and frankly hostile to God. We must constantly be on guard against the flow of worldly thinking into our minds. This does not mean we will cut off all interaction with these media, but that we will approach them with a questioning mind, and an awareness of the messages they are pumping out, and that we will practice self-censorship, choosing to switch off when the things we watch or listen to are dishonouring to God and unhelpful to us in our pursuit of holiness. What we watch we must watch with a godly mind, discerning what is good and what is potentially harmful, but where something is patently sinful (e.g. pornography, gratuitous violence, blasphemous material) we should flee its very appearance. A major reason for our ineffectiveness as a witness to God's power is that we have sold out to the pattern of this world and have become barely distinguishable from it. So much of our thinking, especially about money, possessions, power, relationships and sex, is shaped primarily by the world around us rather than the word and Spirit of God. For us the bottom line must be not what benefits us most, nor what can bring us the greatest success in the eyes of this world, but what is good, perfect and pleasing to God!

On the other hand, God wants to transform our minds, and He will do this by His Spirit if we offer ourselves to Him and commit our minds to His power. The word translated "transform" is *metamorphoo*, and is only used in two other places in the New Testament – in relation to the Transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:2 & Mark 9:2) and in II Corinthians 3:18 where Paul describes the transformation into greater Christ-likeness that the Holy Spirit carries on in the life of the believer. So, then, this transformation is a progressive changing away from the pattern of this world into the likeness of Christ. As our minds are transformed we will begin to think in accordance with His mind and we will be able to have the wisdom to test and approve what God's will is. And His will is good, pleasing and perfect! Guidance depends on our willingness to be surrendered to the will of God. Too often we let our minds be conformed to this world – we think we know best and that we have a right to be who we want to be and use what we have for ourselves. In our prayers we often present God with our agenda based on our own wisdom rather than honestly surrendering all to Christ and asking for His will to be done. Paul shows us that when we think this we are deceiving ourselves – we are nothing and we have nothing except what God has given us and made us, and we can only really accomplish anything when we give in to His will and surrender ourselves to Him. Do we lack the faith in His wisdom and knowledge (11:33), in His power and sovereignty (11:36), or in His goodness (12:2)?

The aim, then, in our relationship with God is to be transformed into greater Christ-likeness. This standard is even higher than the well known WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) approach to holiness. That approach depends on asking ourselves in every situation what we should do, which is in itself an excellent question to ask. What Paul envisages here, however, is a step beyond that – to reach a point where our minds are so like the mind of Christ that we automatically think as He thinks, speak as He would speak and act as He would act. Holiness is a change from the inside out as the Spirit works in us to apply the truth of God's word to our minds, not simply an external change resulting from our own efforts.

Knowing God's will (12:2b)

People often struggle with knowing the will of God. Guidance is a major topic on which much has been written, and it is indeed vital for Christians to know how they can determine God's will for their lives. There are vital tests that can be applied to our desires – testing against God's word (if the Bible says it's wrong, it can't be God's will), seeking affirmation in prayer, taking wise advice from mature believers, assessing our God-given gifts to see if they match with our desire – to test if they are likely to be from God. However, at the core of the issue is wisdom and discernment. The Scriptures, both Old (e.g. Proverbs 3:5&6) and New (e.g. here) Testaments are clear that knowing the will of God is only possible if we are genuinely seeking to be subject to it. In other words, the starting point for knowing how to serve God is to be committed to wanting to serve Him – offering our lives to Him as a sacrifice. When this happens, God can work in us by His Spirit to renew our minds, so that our desires will be in line with His. The process of discerning God's will for the believer has much more to do with "testing and approving" than with supernatural revelation. We must be careful not to look always for a vision or prophetic word to guide us, but we must develop the godly mind that will enable us to consider the options before us and by wise thought, prayer, Bible-study and counsel decide which is God's will. This is not to say that God will never speak in supernatural ways to us – He may – but that these things are likely to be the exception, and are not to be emphasised at the expense of Paul's emphasis here. There is no short-cut to godliness or wisdom – it develops in us as God transforms us by His Spirit.

A definition of Christian worship

Paul's definition of worship should lead us to reconsider how we commonly use the word in church. It has become the norm to use the word "worship" to mean singing of songs in church and the term "worship leader" to describe the person who leads the congregation in the singing of these songs. An examination of the use of the word worship in the Bible is revealing. Of its 112 uses in the Old Testament, only one is in connection with singing and music, but in that case it is not the singers or musicians who are described as worshipping but the people who bowed in silence (II Chronicles 29:28). Worship in the Old Testament is normally not connected with any action or noise, but where it is, it is normally associated with the offering of sacrifices (e.g. I Chronicles 16:29; II Chronicles 32:12) and a posture of bowing or kneeling (e.g. II Chronicles 29:28; Psalm 95:6). In the New Testament the word appears 47 times, never in connection with singing or music. The focus is always on the attitude of heart – true worship must be in spirit and in truth (John 4:22&23) ["in truth" emphasises that true worship is always in response to truth about God], led by the Spirit of God (Philippians 3:3), in reverence and awe (Hebrews 12:28) as we offer the living sacrifice of our being to God (Romans 12:1&2). However, as Paul reminds us here we must ensure that our thinking is not influenced more by Platonic notions than Biblical truth, and must recognise that if our worship is true it will express itself in acts of service. God has never been impressed with ritual sacrifices that are not matched by obedience (see I Samuel 15:22). Our actions must match our words if they are to be true, and the best test of a person's love for God will be the degree to which they serve Him and others in sacrificial love.

Christian worship, then, could be defined as **"a response to truth about God that leads to reverence and awe in the spirit and sacrificial service of Him with the body"**. It can be silent or spoken, and cannot necessarily be measured by outward appearances during a time of singing. In the Old Testament pattern the worship of God was displayed through the sacrificial system, and the priests could be described as "worship leaders" since they led the people to sacrifice to God. In the New Testament the sacrifice that God desires is a life of service and obedience to Him. Every believer is now a priest (Revelation 1:6), and we do not need a special class of people to lead us in our worship of God. When we describe people as "worship leaders" we are ascribing to them the quality of priests, and this belittles the role of the other believers in the congregation. We must aim for a Biblical use of language instead of using terms in ways that may be misleading or even cause some believers to stumble.

I want to make this absolutely clear. I am not suggesting that we cannot worship God during times of singing. This is entirely possible, and in fact should be our aim. Our singing should always be in reverence and awe, in spirit and truth and led by the Holy Spirit. However, we cannot judge whether people are worshipping by how loudly or how exuberantly they are singing, since worship is an attitude of heart, and we must not think that the time of singing is our "worship time". Our worship of God involves our whole lives, and our corporate worship of God in church should include every part of our service – prayer, singing, teaching, sharing. Our aim as believers should be that our whole lives become an act of continual worship to God – honouring His name. It would be wrong if we placed undue emphasis on times of singing as the central aspect of our worship of God, as this would distract us from the key act of worship, which is our daily service for Him.

How, then, should we describe our times of singing in church? I would suggest that a far more Biblical term for this would be “praise”. This word is used 261 times in the Old Testament, almost always in the context of verbal expressions about God’s greatness and goodness, and on at least 42 of these occasions it specifically refers to singing or music (e.g. II Chronicles 5:13; Ezra 3:11; Nehemiah 12:46; Psalm 7:17, 33:2, 66:2-4, 149:31; Isaiah 42:10). In the New Testament the word occurs 41 times, and on two of these singing in praise is specifically mentioned (James 5:13; Revelation 5:13). Praise is to ascribe to God the glory and honour that is due to His name, and as such is almost certainly spoken, sung, played on instruments, shouted, or danced. Whereas someone could be worshipping God in absolute silence, it is hard to speak of someone praising God without some audible expression of it. Praise, almost by definition, includes telling others how great God is. Therefore, I would suggest that it is entirely Biblical to describe our times of singing in church as times of “praise”, “sung praise” or “praising God in song”, and to describe the team of musicians and gifted singers who coordinate the singing as the “praise team” or simply the “music team”. However, I would still urge caution about speaking of “praise leaders” as this again has connotation of the function of the Old Testament priest, and we should recognise that leading praise is not spoken of in the New Testament as a spiritual gift. To be effective in leading praise it may be helpful to be gifted in music or singing and it will be important to be comfortable speaking in front of a group of people, and these are natural gifts given by God, but it does not require a particular spiritual gift that is limited to only some believers. It must also be clear that those people who cannot sing well or are not musically talented should not despair. Out-of-tune singing could be just as full of praise as pure notes and harmonies, and spoken words, and even shouts, can convey praise just as clearly as singing.

ONE BODY, MANY MEMBERS (12:3-8)

In this section Paul is concerned with how believers relate to one another in the church, and particularly how we serve. As ever, these verses should not be divorced from the context of the preceding verses. In vv1&2 Paul has given us the most fundamental principle underlying service in the church – that it flows from our sacrificial service for God and our surrender to His will. The greatness and goodness of God are the background for Paul’s call to humility in v3. In view of His greatness we have a scale by which to measure our own importance. Because He is the source of everything we have and are, we have no room left for boasting. Paul’s call in v3 is to have a right perspective on who we are. Most of us struggle much of the time with knowing who we really are, and it is only when we can fix our position against the immovable landmarks of God’s power and goodness that we can get an accurate perspective. When we compare ourselves with others we will invariably either think that we are greater or less than we really are. We end up with thoughts of pride or inadequacy – boasting or self-deprecation. It is only in knowing God and surrendering ourselves to Him that we can come to know ourselves and our place in His plan. The true measure by which we should judge ourselves is the faith that God has given us. Faith is the starting point in living for God, and our aim should be to do everything in dependence upon Him.

True humility is to know who you are – your weaknesses **and** strengths; gifts **and** limitations. The twin enemies of humility are pride (thinking too much of ourselves) and false humility (thinking too little of ourselves). We must have “sober judgement” to be able to see clearly who we are and what we can and cannot do, and this is only possible when we have the renewed mind Paul has spoken about in v2. This is vital as we come to consider Paul’s teaching about gifts and service in this section. In our churches we should aim to have every member serving with the gifts her or she has been given by God, and no one serving in ways for which they are not gifted. If we are to achieve this, our members must have sober judgement and a good idea of who they are and their part in God’s plan. The leadership in the church should be helping them to do this too. The clarity of our judgement will depend on the “measure of faith God has given” us. When we have a wrong idea of who we are the issue often boils down to a lack of faith in God. We should ask Him to increase our measure of faith!

Paul develops his teaching here about gifts and service in the church through the picture of a body with many parts. There are two principles at play here:

A] Every part belongs to the body (vv4&5)

We belong to one another as members of the local church. None of us can claim to be self-sufficient any more than one of our body’s organs can live on its own. Paul’s language is very strong here – it is nonsense when Christians suggest that they can grow and live perfectly well without being committed to a local church. Our highly individualistic society may give credence to this idea, but the Scriptures present our faith as a thoroughly community-based life. This inter-relationship means that my behaviour has an impact on the whole body, in the same way that if one organ in my body malfunctions the whole

body will become ill. We must be very aware of the impact of our attitudes and actions on the local church we are part of. If I am critical and negative, it will affect the body. If I am cold and unloving, it will affect the body. If I am apathetic and uncommitted, it will affect the body. Of course, there is a positive side to this inter-relatedness too. If I stumble, others will hold me up. If I hurt, others will bear my pain with me. If I struggle, others will support me. This truth of the one body would have profound implications for the church in Rome, with its differing Gentile and Jewish groups, and has particular relevance for churches today that contain a varied ethnic, cultural or linguistic mix. If we can only identify with or feel comfortable with people who have the same background, culture, race or language as us how can we claim to have experienced or expressed the transforming love of God? People in a chess club are committed to each other because they have a common love of chess – that does not mean that they have wonderful fellowship in God! As believers we can look beyond differences to see the common bond we have in Christ, and we can rejoice in the unity that this brings.

B] Every part has its own role to play (vv6-8)

Although we are all equally important as members of the body, we do not all have the same function. Contrary to the prevailing attitude in modern Western society, it **is** possible for people to be equal in standing but different in function. The reality is that none of us can do everything in the church – God simply hasn't gifted any one person in that way. In our system of church government and approach to service we must reflect this truth. God gifts people in accordance with the grace that He gives – spiritual gifts are “grace gifts” (Greek *charismata* in I Corinthians 12-14), given by God as He determines. In our service we must remember that any gift we may have is simply a gift from God – that we are stewards of it. There is no room for boasting in our giftedness or jealousy at the giftedness of others. We must use our gifts to serve others and build up the church, and rejoice with others when they use their gifts. We must avoid the pitfall of comparison and remain committed to being good stewards of whatever God has entrusted to us.

What, then, of the seven gifts listed by Paul in vv6-8? This is by no means an exhaustive list, and to have a more full impression of the range of gifts God has give to the church we should also consider the other lists in I Corinthians 12:4-11 and Ephesians 4:8-13. Each of these three lists is incomplete, and has a different emphasis (on service in Romans, preparation for service in Ephesians, and misuse of “supernatural” gifts in I Corinthians), but all three emphasise God as the source of the gifts (the Father in Romans, the Son in Ephesians, and the Spirit in I Corinthians) and their purpose, which is to build up the body of Christ. Every Christian has one or more gifts, but no one Christian has every gift. Some gifts are more public than others, but all are necessary. The gifts Paul mentions here are:

- **Prophecy** (v6) – to speak God's word specifically directed to His people
- **Serving** (v7) – to recognise the needs of others and act practically to meet them. The word is *diakonia*, which is “a generic word for a wide variety of ministries” (John Stott).
- **Teaching** (v7) – to explain Biblical truth, helping people to see and apply its relevance to their lives
- **Encouraging** (v8) – to draw alongside others helping to strengthen or restore their faith
- **Giving** (v8) – to contribute from our own possessions to meet the material needs of others
- **Leadership** (v8) – to bring inspiration and direction to God's people in line with His will
- **Showing mercy** (v8) – to reach people in need (physical, material, emotional or spiritual), helping to forgive them and restore them through actions or words.

We must also notice that for four of these gifts Paul adds a qualifying comment about how it should be exercised. Prophecy must be used in proportion to the faith of the prophet (although the phrase could be, as in the NIV footnote, “in agreement with the faith”, emphasising the same truth stated by Paul in I Corinthians 14:29 that the words of prophets must be weighed and tested for their truth and application, and are not infallible). Giving should be done generously. Leaders must govern with diligence. Mercy must be exercised cheerfully. These comments are important in understanding how gifts function in church. Merely because a person has and uses a gift does not mean that they are honouring God or building up the body. Each gift must be used by the person exercising it in an appropriate attitude. It is possible to misuse gifts, and each of us should ask how we can use our gifts in ways that bring glory to God and benefit the body as a whole.

LOVE IN THE FAMILY (12:9-16)

It is no coincidence that each of Paul's three lists of spiritual gifts is followed by comments about love (see Ephesians 4:15 and I Corinthians 13). The new commandment of Christ was that His followers should love one another as He loved them (see John 13:34), and in Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22,

love comes first. It is the supreme proof of Christian character; the purest mark of Christ-likeness. It is the most vital quality in the use of any spiritual gift. If a gift is used in a way that does not display love for the other members of the body, it is useless and pointless. In these verses (as in I Corinthians 13) Paul describes the kind of love we should have for one another in the church, listing twelve core qualities:

- **Sincerity – “Love must be sincere” (v9a)**

Love must be sincere – in other words what you see is what you get (the Greek word *anypokritos* means literally “without hypocrisy” – the hypocrite in Greek was an actor). This theme runs through the remaining verses of chapter 12. Christian love (*agape*) is not simply a feeling, it is an act of the will – it is not simply emotion, but powerful, deliberate, purposeful action. If love is to be sincere it must display itself in the way we behave towards others. This kind of love is at the centre of a radical revolution in the heart of the believer that leads to a new kind of community.

- **Discernment – “Hate what is evil; cling to what is good” (v9b)**

Love, far from being “blind”, is discerning, and has a selective memory. It does not keep a record of wrongs, but rejoices in the truth (I Corinthians 13:5&6). It does not bear grudges against others for their wrongs, and it hates whatever in our own intentions may be evil. It does not participate in gossip, and places no weight on malicious rumours about others. Furthermore, love seeks always what is best for the loved one, so much so that it can actually “hate” what is evil – those things that are harmful to its object – and will cling strongly to what is good. If only we could learn to be so devoted to good and so repulsed by evil, how much better we would be at building others.

- **Family affection – “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love” (v10a)**

The words Paul uses here speak of relationships in the family – to quote John Stott, “‘Be devoted’ translates the adjective *philostorgos*, which describes our natural affection for relatives... The other word is *philadelphia*, ‘brotherly love’, which denotes the love of brothers and sisters for each other”. Within the body of Christ we are brothers and sisters. It is vital that we grasp this truth, as the church should function much more like a family than an organisation. We are held together by love – devoted to one another as brothers and sisters. It is important to examine our hearts as we hear Paul’s words to ask, am I devoted to the other Christians in my church fellowship in this way? Do I view them as dear to me, people who I will stick with through thick and thin? We must grasp this fact, that even if we leave the membership of a local church, we do not cease to be in relationship with its members – they are our brothers and sisters still. Therefore, we should have a high view of the church and be reluctant to move between churches without strong reasons. However, we should also be eager to find opportunities for cooperation with other evangelical churches in our locality, as we will recognise our brothers and sisters irrespective of other names and labels.

- **Honour – “Honour one another above yourselves” (v10b)**

True love always seeks a way to give respect to the loved one, and to make other people think more highly of the object. It does not undermine others or detract from their reputation. We must consciously make every effort to give more honour to others than we seek for ourselves. We must let go of the hunger for approval, admiration and applause that so often motivates our hearts. Only by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit can we learn to see ourselves with sober judgement (v3) and to see others as worthy of honour (v10).

- **Zeal for God – “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour” (v11)**

Although Christian love is devoted to other Christians, it starts with a passionate devotion to God. The love we display to one another flows from our love for God and the love He has poured into our hearts (see 5:5). We have a responsibility to keep our “spiritual fervour” (v11), and the best way to do this is to keep serving God. Too often we blame other people when we don’t feel spiritual passion or when we feel that we aren’t growing. It is true that others can be stumbling blocks to us, but no one can make us fall. Satan himself does not have the power to get between us and God. The only person who can prevent you from growing spiritually is yourself. Paul does not tell us to maintain each others’ zeal, but our own. In a similar vein, Paul challenged Timothy to “fan into flame” the gift he had received (II Timothy 1:6). Who is primarily responsible for maintaining your spiritual fire? Your pastor? Your cell group leader or members? Your husband or wife? Your Christian friends? None of the above. The fact is that **you** have that responsibility. That is not to say that those other people have no responsibility to you – we all have a responsibility to care for others and do everything we can to encourage or “spur one another on” (Hebrews 10:24). However, I maintain that the central issue in spiritual growth is whether you are continuing to walk daily with the Lord, trusting in Him, filled by the Spirit, seeking Him. How do you maintain the spiritual passion? By serving God! This is the essence of worship as Paul has defined it in

v1. Whenever Christians stop serving God and others, they soon become inward looking, more concerned about what they are getting out of church than what they can give, and lose sight of the goal of our faith, which is Christ. What should you do when you feel discouraged, fed up, mistreated abused by those you serve? Offer yourself again to God as a living sacrifice – lay down your rights and feelings and keep serving Him. Let Him deal with the hurt and pain you feel as you keep on obeying Him.

- **Perseverance – “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” (v12)**

Love perseveres even in the face of affliction. It does not give up when things are tough or it becomes costly to keep on loving. It is joyful in the hope of the return of Christ (5:2, 8:24), and patient. When it meets an obstacle it turns to God in prayer. How can we sustain our love for others? Only by drawing daily on God’s love in faithful prayer. Christian love flows from faith and rejoices in hope!

- **Generosity – “Share with God’s people who are in need” (v13a)**

When we realise that we belong to one another (v5) and that we are brothers and sisters in Christ (v10), it becomes natural to freely share everything we possess with other Christians who are in need. This is reminiscent of the church in Acts 2:44-46. Do we practise this in the 21st Century? Do we share freely and generously within our church fellowship? What about God’s people overseas who are in desperate need? We must seek God’s guidance in how we use our possessions.

- **Hospitality – “Practise hospitality” (v13b)**

Devotion to one another will also display itself in hospitality. The word translated “practise” means literally “pursue” – the imperative is to seek every opportunity to open our homes to others. John Stott quotes Origen, who wrote: “We are not just to receive the stranger, when he comes to us, but actually to enquire after, and look carefully for, strangers, to pursue them and search them out everywhere”.

- **Forgiveness – “Bless those who persecute you” (v14)**

Forgiveness is a central Christian truth. We are forgiven by God out of the depths of His grace, not because we deserved to be forgiven, but because of His great mercy. We too must forgive others just as He has forgiven us. In fact, as the prayer the Lord taught His disciples tells us (see Matthew 6:12), we cannot expect to experience God’s forgiveness if we are not prepared to forgive those who sin against us. This is the centre-piece of the Christian ethic, and echoes directly the teaching of Christ (see Matthew 5:38-48) – that we must love not only those who are similar to us, but those who are different and even those who are our enemies. It is because we have been released from slavery to sin and the cycle of revenge by the power of God that we can then pass on this forgiveness to those who we meet. Until we are prepared to forgive and let go of our bitterness and resentment we cannot experience the fullness of God’s grace and freedom. Paul will expand on the theme of our response to our enemies in vv19-21, but his inclusion of this comment in this section about relationships between believers perhaps emphasises that our church communities have a part to play in forgiving our enemies. Local churches must seek ways to show this principle of blessing those who persecute in their locality.

- **Compassion – “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (v15)**

True Christian love is all-weather love. It sticks with people when things are good or bad. At its core is compassion – feeling along with the person in their joys and trials. Its response to a person’s emotion is always appropriate to where they are at that point in their life’s experience. It takes great sensitivity and wisdom to be able to practice this kind of empathy. We need to learn to recognise how others are feeling through their words and unspoken communication. True love is other-centred. Christian compassion is more than mere pity. Pity says “Poor you, that’s awful”. Compassion comes alongside the person and feels with them. Only by God’s grace can we love in this way.

- **Harmony – “Live in harmony with one another” (v16a)**

The Greek of this sentence emphasises that we should think in the same way about one another. Undoubtedly, Paul has in mind his teaching about a renewed mind (v2), and his conclusion is that if all our minds are renewed we should have one mind, one purpose. Our Christian harmony does not come from ignoring differences but identifying the shared core of our faith, which is the gospel of Christ. When we realise what we share together with our fellow Christians, we discover that it is so much greater than the differences between us. Divisions in churches almost always have at their root some wrong desire or pride, or a desire for something that is not prepared to wait for God’s timing or to consider the effect on other believers in the body (see James 4:1-3). We must learn to focus more on our service of others in love than our differences from them.

- **Humility – “Do not be proud ... Do not be conceited” (v16b)**

Humility is central to Christian love. Paul has already defined it effectively in v3 by telling us that we should not think more highly of ourselves than we ought, and now in v10 he gives us the positive counterpart, telling us to honour others above ourselves. Furthermore, we are not to be proud and resist doing menial tasks or associating with other Christians simply because they are lower than us in social, economic or educational status. Unfortunately, too often in Christian circles churches or leadership teams in churches have been defined on grounds of the wealthiest, most educated or most socially respected people. The sad result has been that, in Western countries at least, churches are more often middle class than working class. Of course, this is not due to an intentional exclusion of people from certain backgrounds, but may reflect a confusion of education with spirituality (whoever knows the most must be most spiritual) or money with blessing. We must work through this issue in our own attitudes and ask if there might be some pride in us, some sense of superiority, some tendency to look down on others. Only the Spirit of God can point to our pride and conceit and show us the “most excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31). In this way we can live out the reality of belonging to one another (v5) as we relate to one another in harmony, irrespective of our background (v16).

SUMMARY

This chapter gives the blueprint for good relationships in the church, starting with our relationship to God, then our relationship to the whole body and finally our relationship to one another:

- 1. Correct relationship to God – true worship (vv1&2)**
 - True worship – laying down our lives in sacrifice (v1)
 - Transformation – the renewing of our minds (v2a)
 - Living by His will – testing and approving it (v2b)
- 2. Correct relationship to the body – true service (vv3-8)**
 - Humility – sober judgement (v3)
 - Inter-dependence – we belong to one another (vv4&5)
 - Use of gifts – with faith, diligence and a joyful heart (vv6-8)
- 3. Correct relationship to one another – true love (vv9-21)**
 - Sincere love for God and for one another in His family (vv9-16)

Essential Relationships 2: Relationships with the world (Romans 12:17-13:14)

KEY QUESTIONS:

- How should we treat our enemies?
- How should Christians view the government?
- How should we treat our neighbours?

LOVE FOR OUR ENEMIES (12:17-21)

In 12:9-16 Paul described the kind of love that should characterise our relationships with one another in the church. What, then, of our relationships with non-Christians? Amazingly, Paul reveals in these verses that the same love we have for other Christians should dominate our relationships with non-believers. There are three powerful principles in these verses that enable Christians to turn our society upside down. The person whose life is dominated by sincere, empathic, humble love (love that is zealot for God above all – v11) will live in this way towards his enemies. The three principles are each introduced with a “do not”, but (as always), he also gives positive instruction to do what is right. This teaching follows beautifully from the teaching of Christ (see Matthew 5:38-48).

DO NOT	DO	IMPLICATION
Repay evil for evil (v17)	Be careful to do what is right in view of everyone (v17)	We should do everything we can to live at peace with others (v18)
Take revenge (v19)	Leave room for God's vengeance (v19)	When we are wronged, we must leave this with Him and trust Him to do right, not take revenge ourselves (v19)
Be overcome by evil (v21a)	Overcome evil with good (v21b)	Everything we do should have good motives – to see good overcoming evil by bringing people to repentance(v20)

1. Do everything to live at peace – “Do not repay anyone evil for evil” (vv17&18)

The Christian cannot control how other people will behave or how they will react to the message of the gospel, but for our part we must do everything we can to live peacefully with others. We must ensure that we act in a proper way, even if others do not. When they do evil to us we must not repay it with evil, but we must be careful to do what is right. When Paul says “in the eyes of everyone” (v17) he does not mean that we should always aim to please everybody – we should do what is right as defined by God's word and the teaching of Christ, and this should be done for everyone to see. Unfortunately in a world of sin others may not always appreciate or approve of our standards, but we must make sure that the fault is with them and not with us. We are answerable to God. How are you doing in this respect? What about your church fellowship? Could we be described as blameless when compared with the standard of Christ's calling upon us? We must constantly examine ourselves.

2. Do nothing to take revenge – “Do not take revenge” (vv19&20a)

The teaching of Christ in this matter is absolutely clear – as Christians we must surrender the desire to personally exact revenge on others who do us wrong. This is not to say that we should ignore wrongdoing, or that we should condone it or pretend it is not a problem. In fact, Paul says, we should “leave room for God's wrath” (although the Greek does not include the word “God”, simply reading “leave room for wrath”, the quotation from Deuteronomy about God's judgement makes it clear that God's wrath is in mind). We can let go of our desire for personal revenge because we know that one day God will judge all men, and that His judgment will be perfect and just. Paul is not saying that it is wrong for sin to be judged, but that God is in a much better position to judge than we are, and so we must trust Him to judge, not take this upon ourselves. Judgement for sin is God's prerogative, not ours. This is not to say that crime should be left unpunished by the state (a theme that Paul will discuss in chapter 13) – they have been given God's authority to judge wrongdoers and reward those who do right – but that individuals should not exact revenge. This is wise indeed when we remember Paul's words in 11:33-36 about God's knowledge and wisdom. We in our limited understanding are so prone to making unwise judgments, misinterpreting a person's motives or missing the whole picture. We are so liable to personalise issues and take personal offence that puts us in danger of sinning in our anger. It is right that we are angry with sin, but we must turn to God in this anger and leave it to Him to judge. Our prayer for those who wrong us should be that they would come to repentance and know God's forgiveness before the day of His wrath.

3. Do everything from good motives – “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (vv20&21)

This principle that Paul introduces in vv20&21 with a quotation from Proverbs 25 and his own summary statement in v21 is powerful indeed. By repaying evil with good we can actually overcome evil – we neutralise its effect. Revenge only leads to tit-for-tat actions. When a person steps in and forgives, things really change. We heap “burning coals” on the heads of our opponent – hoping that his conscience will be sparked and he may seek repentance. We must ensure that our own motives remain pure in everything we do – that our intention is to bring good results and never because we ourselves have surrendered to evil. We would do well to consider our motivation in how we act and react to those we meet day by day, and especially in the area of forgiveness and revenge we need God’s grace to act in a Christ-like way.

SUBMIT TO THE GOVERNMENT (13:1-7)

It is important to understand what Paul is saying here if we are to know how we should relate to the state. This teaching from Paul again follows seamlessly from the teaching of Christ (see Mark 12:17), and the theme of being good citizens is a consistent theme throughout the New Testament.

1) The Authority of the Government (vv 1&2)

Paul says that all authority is established by God. He does not necessarily mean that every person who has authority is directly placed in that position by God, but that they can only hold authority because God allows it, and that all authority originates from Him. He is the sovereign king over all creation, and all authority belongs to Him. Therefore, we must submit to the authorities and not rebel against them. This rule even applies to governments that are ungodly – the Roman Empire in Paul’s day could hardly have been described as a faithful executor of God’s will or justice. Christians should never be subversive or anarchists. If they feel strongly that the government of their land is corrupt, is harming the people or hostile to God, they may protest, but this must be done peacefully, within the limit of the law of the land as far as possible, and within the limit of the Law of God always.

2) The Role of the Government (vv3&4)

Paul does not mean that we must blindly submit even when the state is evil or makes wrong Laws (the Bible contains many examples of godly people who did not and could not obey the state). This is clear from v3, where Paul shows that we must do what is right first. Rulers have a responsibility before God for how they use the authority He allows them to hold, but if the rulers do what is wrong, we must still do what is right. We must submit to them and obey as long as they do what is right before God, and after that point we may have to disobey. Those in authority in society would do well to understand this truth before God – that they are accountable to Him and will answer for how they have exercised the authority He has entrusted to them. For our part, we should seek always to be good citizens, respecting those who rule over us and obeying as far as we can without sinning. Paul holds up 2 key roles that the government should fulfil. It is worth noticing that Paul describes the government in both of these cases as “God’s servant”. We should not read this as meaning that God uses these people as He sees fit against their own volition. Although God may be able to do this, we cannot claim that God is responsible for the terrible decisions some rulers have made throughout human history (e.g. Hitler and the Holocaust). Paul describes the ruler as God’s servant, not as His puppet – a servant does not always obey his master, but will be answerable to him one day for how he has managed those things the master entrusts to him. Those in power have a responsibility before God not to misuse their authority – they are His servants whether they acknowledge it or not, and will answer to Him. They have a positive and a negative role to play:

(i) **POSITIVE: To do good to their subjects**

Rulers should promote good and reward those who do good. They have a responsibility to order society in a way that improves the lives of the people. In particular, they have a responsibility to order this world in a way that is more in keeping with God’s kingdom. Perhaps modern governments would do well to put greater effort into recognising the contribution of those who do good and rewarding those who contribute positively to society.

(ii) **NEGATIVE: To punish those who do wrong**

Rulers must uphold the Law and punish those who break it with a sentence or punishment that fits the crime. Paul even seems to allow for capital punishment here, since the word “sword” was commonly used of execution, which would be in keeping with Old Testament legal principles

(although there may be other reasons for being reluctant to have capital punishment in a legal system where miscarriages of justice are common). Notice that Paul describes the ruler as “an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” – in other words, the state is the one who brings God’s vengeance as mentioned in 12:19. Paul does not just see the return of Christ and God’s final judgement as the time of God’s judgement on wrong-doers, but he envisages the state being fair, honest and just in exercising judgement according to God’s truth. It is important to emphasise also that Paul is absolutely in favour of punishment for crimes. We ought to be concerned about certain trends within the criminal justice system to lessen the harshness of punishments for crime and see the criminal more as a victim himself rather than a wrongdoer.

Of course, if the state reverses its responsibility by rewarding those who do wrong and punishing those who do right, it will answer to God for this, and Christians may feel compelled to resist the state’s authority in grace, peace and truth. This should never involve violence, but may include illegal gatherings or parades if the state has given them no other option. As Peter said to the human authority of the Jewish Sanhedrin, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). When the government sets itself against God Christians must protest, as the Hebrew midwives in Egypt (Exodus 1:17), Daniel and his friends in Babylon (Daniel 3 &6) and the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 4:18-20) did in Biblical times and Christians have done in recent decades.

3) Our response in citizenship (vv5-7)

In v5 Paul gives us two reasons why we should submit to the authorities. The rather crude motivation of impending judgement, and the higher principle of conscience. For example, as a Christian I should accept that it is a sin for me to break the speed limit, since this has been set in law by the authorities, which are appointed by God. Now, I may obey the speed limit because I am afraid that if I am caught I will be fined or get penalty points on my license, but wouldn’t it be better if I obey the limit because I realise my responsibility before God to submit to the authorities and habitually keep the Law as a result? I am afraid that even Christians can be very quick to criticise laws made by the government, often without fully understanding the reasons behind them, and to behave as if they can opt out of them simply because they are unpopular (30 miles-an-hour speed limits are a good example). This is contrary to Paul’s teaching here.

It is also worth mentioning that a proper application of this passage in a democratic country must include a thoughtful approach to voting (although Paul does not refer to this for obvious reasons). If we believe that positions of authority are appointed by God and we are allowed a part to play in deciding who is appointed to them, we should think and pray carefully about who we elect. I believe that we should vote unless we really believe that there is no candidate who we can vote for with a clear conscience. We should not squander the opportunity to influence the make up of the government, but should seek to appoint those people who are godly or whose policies are closest to the truth of God’s word (for example on moral issues such as marriage, homosexuality, abortion or social issues, such as eradication of poverty, provision for families and care for the elderly). In vv6&7, Paul develops this idea to tell us in black and white terms what it means to submit to the authorities. We should pay our taxes, pay revenue and fulfil any other requirement of the law. It is a sin for Christians to evade tax or to fail to pay their TV license. This is particularly pertinent for self-employed people who are responsible for their own tax returns. We must be completely honest and take positive action to ensure that we are giving everyone what we owe them. We must not think of the government in impersonal terms – “I wouldn’t steal from a person, but not paying tax isn’t stealing, it’s a victim-less crime” – we must realise that the government is God’s servant. Would you steal from God’s servant? We must also have an attitude of respect and honour towards those in positions of authority, not just if they deserve it but also because of the position itself.

These truths also have implications for how we view our daily working life. If we are serving the state (or society) then we are equally God’s servants as those who serve full time in the church are. We are all “Full Time Christian Workers”! God cares equally about our “secular” work and our “spiritual” service, and we must be accountable to Him in our attitude to our work. We must not cheat in the work-place, taking office supplies when no-one is looking, using the photocopier for personal (or even church) use, leaving early when the boss isn’t around etc. We must have a high standard, working for our boss as if we were working for Christ.

CHURCH AND STATE

The issue of how the church should relate to the state has been a major question for Christians throughout church history. John Stott summarises the various approaches that have been taken in four words:

1. **Erastianism** – “the state controls the church”
2. **Theocracy** – “the church controls the state”
3. **Constantinianism** – “the compromise in which the state favours the church and the church accommodates to the state in order to keep its favour”
4. **Partnership** – “church and state recognise and encourage each other’s distinct God-given responsibilities in a spirit of collective collaboration”

I believe that a survey of church history will reveal the problems that have arisen when any of the first three options have been adopted. The confusion of spiritual authority with material power tends always to lead to a compromise of Biblical truth or an abuse of power. Paul’s teaching here would appear to favour the approach of partnership. As Christians we should be committed to both church and state, respecting both church leaders and secular leaders, being good church members but also good citizens. The state should not fear a church that is not state-controlled, and the church should not seek to take on itself secular power. As Christ said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mark 12:17).

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR (13:8-14)

In these verses Paul returns to the over-arching theme of love that flows through all of our relationships. He challenges us to love for three great reasons:

a) Because we have a debt to love others (v8a)

We are to leave no debt outstanding except the debt to love one another. We must pay our debts to individuals and to the government (taxes etc.), but the one debt we can never fully pay off is love. How can this be described as a debt? Surely we have no debt to love people who have not loved us? In fact, we do. There are two ways to get into debt. The first is if someone gives something to you, and you owe them it – you must repay them. This is often the basis of human relationships, and is most clearly represented in the Chinese concept of *guanxi* – the principle of reciprocation that is at the root of Chinese business etiquette. The second way to be in debt, however, is if someone gives you something to pass on to another person. You are in debt not because you must repay someone but because you must pass it on. This is the kind of debt Paul speaks about here. God has shown us His love by sending Christ to die for us (5:8), and He has poured His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (5:5). He now commands us to pass His love on to others, including our enemies (12:9-21). We are indebted to others because God didn’t give us His love just so that we can revel in it and enjoy it for ourselves, but so that we can pass it on. Christian relationships are based on the flow of love from God to us and through us to others, rather than a *guanxi* type system of reciprocation. Because of God’s love for us, we are able to love those who do not and may never love us. This selfless love is the foundation stone of Christian ethics.

b) Because Love fulfils the Law (vv 8b-10)

Again Paul harks back to Christ’s teaching as he reminds us that the command to love our neighbour sums up the Law (see Matthew 23:37-40). As we have seen previously, Paul is not antinomian (opposed to the Law). In fact, his desire is that people would fulfil the Law, but he recognises that this is only possible by the new way of the Spirit (8:3), which is the way of Christ-like love. The commandments quoted by Paul are three of the six commandments relating to our behaviour to other people in the famous list of ten (see Exodus 20). He does not make reference to the first four, which speak of our relationship with God. Christ said that the greatest commandment is to love God with all we are and have and the second is to love our neighbour as ourselves. It is only when we love God and know His love that we can love others. There is no higher principle than Christian love – if we genuinely love others we will do no harm. In medical ethics the principle of *primum non nocere* – “first, do no wrong” – is foundational. How can we avoid doing wrong? By loving others genuinely with the love God has given us! Even in our workplace, and even (if you are a tired, stressed out, fed up junior hospital doctor) when relatives, patients, senior doctors, radiologists, nurses or pharmacists seem to be abusive, remember your debt to love them! It is important to emphasise that Paul is not saying that love alone can guide us into correct action without any moral standard – he says that love fulfils the Law, not that it replaces or removes it (see Matthew 5:17-19). The new commandment of love summarises the other commandments, and it is true that if we obey the ten commandments we can say we have loved our neighbour, but we also need the standard of God’s Law to be able to discern right from wrong.

c) Because Christ is coming soon (vv 11-14)

The third reason to live a lifestyle of love depends on a consideration of the “present time”. When we look at society, we should realise that the world is in darkness, but that the dawn is almost here. The day of

Christ's return is going to break soon (sooner than when we first believed – v11), so we should shake ourselves, stop sleeping, and live in a way that represents Christ. We must put on the "armour of light", reminding us that we are at war with the world we live in, and clothe ourselves with Christ. The sad truth is that too often we slumber and think about how to fulfil our sinful desires (v14). We need to learn to see the times we live in for what they are and live appropriately. There is no room for compromise in the Christian life, and God is calling us to stand out and be different – shining with the light of Christ in a world of darkness.

CHALLENGE:

- Are you loving your enemies – overcoming evil with good?
- Are you submissive to the government – leaving no debt outstanding?
- Are you loving your neighbour, shining in this dark world?

Essential Relationships 3: Relationships with the weaker brother

(Romans 14:1-15:13)

KEY QUESTIONS:

- How should we treat our enemies?
- How should Christians view the government?
- How should we treat our neighbours?

INTRODUCTION

Up to this point Paul has been laying down the fundamental truths of the Christian faith – things that every true Christian must agree to in their faith and lifestyle. Now he turns to a discussion of how they should approach those things that not all Christians agree on (“disputable matters” – 14:1). Paul does not demand that all Christians MUST agree on every detail of practice or belief. In Rome the particular issues surrounded the relationship between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile believers. Some of the Jewish Christians felt that they could not leave behind some of their Jewish customs, while some of the Gentile Christians saw these things as unnecessary. Who was right, and, more importantly, how could they live together in unity in the church when they had such different ideas about these things? The principles Paul gives in this passage can be applied to many other situations where Christian unity is threatened by differing opinions over non-fundamental issues.

RESPONSIBILITY BEFORE GOD (14:1-12)

Vital Definitions

Paul tells us that we accept, and not judge those whose faith is weak over “disputable matters”. It is important that we should define two key terms here before examining this passage:

- a) **Weak faith** – the man with weak faith is a person who sets extra limits on himself that are not demanded by the gospel. In the Roman setting this particularly applied to Jewish believers who held on to rules about diet (v2 – although the Jews were only required to abstain from non-kosher meat rather than all meat, these people in a Gentile city may well have abstained from all meat because of the difficulties of ensuring meat was kosher) and Sabbath observance (v5). It is important to note that Paul is not saying that both positions on these issues are equally valid – the issue is the strength of ones faith, and weak faith is surely not commendable – but that the brother whose faith is stronger has a responsibility to act appropriately to those whose faith is weaker. In fact, Paul makes his position on these issues quite clear. He identifies himself as being among the strong (15:1), and therefore is clear that the position of the strong in faith is correct and the natural outworking of the gospel. Furthermore, it must be emphasised that the issue for these people is a weakness of faith, not weakness in character. As John Stott says, “if we are trying to picture a weaker brother or sister, we must not envisage a vulnerable Christian easily overcome by temptation, but a sensitive Christian full of indecision and scruples. What the weak lack is not strength of self-control but liberty of conscience”.
- b) **Disputable matters** – the two examples given by Paul here are of particular relevance to Jewish believers, since their Jewish culture and faith had prohibited the eating of many “unclean” foods, and had required them to observe the Sabbath and certain other feast days, whereas the gospel is silent about these issues. Paul is not advocating relativism – that there are several equally valid positions – as we have already said, but he is distinguishing between those core issues of the gospel that are not to be disputed (which he has presented up to now) and secondary issues over which godly believers have differing opinions. It is also important to note that the issue in Rome is not one of legalism (of people suggesting that salvation was dependent on keeping aspects of the Jewish ceremonial Law), since in Galatians 1:8 Paul is scathing about those who try to distort the gospel in this way, whereas here he is gentle with the weaker brother. This is not a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel, but an unhealthy emphasis on issues of secondary importance.

Why we should not judge

Why, then, should we avoid passing judgement on people who have a different position on such matters? The reasons Paul gives are to do with our responsibility before God:

1) We must NOT reject people He has accepted (v3)

This is an important principle in our acceptance of other Christians. Even those who differ from us on many non-essential issues, and attend churches which differ greatly from ours in their practice must be accepted as our brothers and sisters. This is not to ignore the differences or to pretend that all positions are equally acceptable or correct – Paul makes it clear that these people are weak in faith (not something to be commended) – but to recognise that there are some issues (fundamental truths of the gospel and sinful lifestyles) which must divide us from people and others (non-essentials) that should not. We must accept those who differ over non-essentials warmly and sincerely, not in a judgemental or grudging way.

2) We belong to the Lord, and must do everything thoughtfully for Him (vv 5-8)

Paul presents us with the over-ruling principle by which we should decide our position on these non-essential issues – by thinking them through prayerfully so that we are “fully convinced” in our own minds (v5). It is not an acceptable excuse to have no position on matters, or to claim that “godly Christians have different views so it must not be important” – we must think through the implications of the gospel in all areas of our lives. We are responsible before God for our own behaviour and actions, not those of our brothers and sisters, and, whatever we do, we should do it prayerfully and thankfully, remembering that we belong to the Lord. The core problem that Paul is tackling here is selfishness or pride. In v7 he reminds us that we don’t live for ourselves alone – we belong to Christ!

3) It is not our place to judge God’s servant – we will all stand before Him (v4, vv 9-12)

It is God who will judge what is right or wrong in our behaviour on the day when we stand before His judgement seat. We are His servants, and we answer to Him. He will judge our actions and will reward us for what is good and burn up what is bad (see also I Corinthians 3:10-15). No one will fall at this judgement because of his stance about disputable matters – the Lord will make him stand (v4). In our attitude to our own practice we should be careful to examine ourselves, but in our attitude to those who differ on non-essentials, we should be content to leave it for God to judge them rather than taking that upon ourselves. It was for this very reason that Christ died and rose again – to be the Lord who judges (v9) – when we take this responsibility on ourselves we are acting against the very core of the gospel!

RESPONSIBILITY TO YOUR BROTHER (14:13-23)

Paul now raises the standard further. He has told us that the key principle in deciding our behaviour is our responsibility before God, but now he reveals the second test: What effect does my behaviour have on the weaker brother himself? Instead of spending so much energy on examining and judging other Christians, we would do better to apply ourselves to examining our own actions to see if we might be guilty of putting a stumbling block in the way of others. How much easier relationships within the church would be if we held to this principle! This is something we should take very seriously as these are our brothers and precious to Christ, who died for them! If we are to recognise these stumbling blocks we must. Paul challenges us to see a distinction between our private conviction, which we should keep between ourselves and God without forcing it on others (v22), and our public action, which should be governed by three principles:

a) The Spiritual reality is more important than outward non-essentials

Paul shows that compared to God’s Kingdom, non-essential matters (such as regulations about food) are trivial! It doesn’t mean that they are unimportant or that it is wrong to have your conviction about it, but it does mean that we can learn to hold back and restrain ourselves for the greater good. The things that really matter in God’s Kingdom are righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (v17) – the work of God is more important than food (v20)!

b) We must always think of the effect on other brothers and sisters

Even if our conscience allows us to do something, it is wrong for us to do it if it causes unnecessary offence to another brother (v15), or if it will cause him to stumble or fall (vv20&21). To act in this way would be out of keeping with the principle of love (v15). Our goal should be to build others up and bring peace in the church (v19). If this means limiting our own freedom for the sake of another’s conscience then it is worth it!

c) Everything must be done from faith (v23)

This is a vital truth. We must constantly check our own motives when we change how things are done in our churches – are we doing it because we will feel better, to make a point to others or to push the limits? If our motivation falls short of faith in God then we are sinning.

THE GOAL AND RESULT OF UNITY (15:1-13)

In these verses Paul expands the issue to focus on the effect that failure to put these principles into action would have on our unity. He gives us vital truths about the very purpose for the local church:

Church is not about pleasing ourselves (v1)

This may seem obvious, but it is a truth that is often neglected in practice. There appears to be a spirit today that approaches church with the question “What do I get out of it” and measures a church by how much it moves the person or how good they feel after leaving. Paul expressly warns us against this kind of attitude. Commitment to a local church should include commitment to all of its activities – even those ones that don’t particularly please us or move us.

Church is about building others up (vv2-4)

Our aim in our service and fellowship in church should be to build others up – to please them for their good. When we consider our church our first question should be “How can I help to build others up? Is my contribution to the church really good for others?” If we spent more time on thinking about how to build up our fellow Christians than we do on thinking about our own needs we would have healthier churches. In doing this we would be truly Christ-like (v3).

Unity brings glory to God (vv5&6)

The gospel is not primarily about us or for our benefit, but for God’s glory! We should have one heart and mouth – the expression of unity from our lips flows from a heart that is devoted to following Christ as Lord. If we feel that this unity is impossible (and often in our discouragement or impatience we may feel like giving up) it is God who encourages and enables us to endure! Let us look to Him and follow Christ’s example so that God may receive the glory!

Unity in God’s purposes transcends non-essential differences (vv7-12)

God’s great purpose (as testified by the four quotes from the Old Testament here) is to bring a people together from different backgrounds – a people who will rejoice in Him (v10), praise Him (v11), and hope in Him (v12). This includes the Gentiles (hence these four quotes are all about the Gentiles) as well as the Jews, so that the non-essential cultural differences that separate us must never divide us! We could extend this to so many other groups today – separated over matters of non-essential doctrine or practice, but united by a God given spirit of unity as we please others not ourselves! If Christians cannot learn to live in unity with believers from other cultural or racial backgrounds it may well be a sign of a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel. If we view it as something that is primarily about our comfort we miss the wonder of God’s great purpose in the gospel.

The result is joy and peace as we trust in God (v13)

This is Paul’s great hope for the church in Rome – that their fellowship might be marked by joy and peace. Together we trust in God and by the power of the Spirit we overflow with hope. As God works in and through us He will bring peace and joy in our relationships to one another.

THE EXPRESSION OF UNITY IN A LOCAL CHURCH (Chapter 16)

The remainder of Chapter 15 contains Paul’s commendation of his words to the church in Rome based on his ministry as an apostle (vv14-22) and a personal request from Paul for the readers to join with him in his ministry by praying for him (vv23-33). These verses give us important insights into Paul’s view of his ministry and his future plans to travel to Rome and on to Spain after his trip to Jerusalem. In Chapter 16 he moves on to personal greetings to those people in Rome who were known to him. In this chapter we can see three aspects of healthy church life that express our unity in Christ:

A] UNITY IN FELLOWSHIP – Cell Group

In Ch 16v5 Paul sends greetings to the church that meets in the house of Priscilla and Aquilla, and in vv10&11 he sends greetings to two households – of Aristobulus and Narcissus. In the early church believers didn’t have buildings of their own to meet in. They met either in the Jewish synagogue or an open place for their larger meetings or in the houses of the members for smaller meetings. In fact, the church in any one city almost certainly consisted of several “house churches” – the unity would be maintained by one leadership

of elders and occasional large group meetings. This pattern is seen in Acts 2:42-47, where we see a larger community meeting in the Temple courts, with many smaller meetings in the homes of members. There is something particularly special about a small group of believers meeting together in a less formal setting, especially in a person's home. In BCCC we believe that cell groups are an important aspect of our fellowship and community life. They provide a different environment from the main church services – one in which fellowship can be deeper, the first steps of pastoral care can be provided, and teaching can be discussed and applied to the lives of the members. We hope that every member of BCCC can also be a committed member of a cell group. Cell groups meet primarily for Bible Study, prayer and informal fellowship and sharing. They may also include a time of praise and may organise evangelistic activities. They do not, however, replace the main services of the church, and the two are intended to complement each other.

It is vital when we consider our church to realise that we are one body even if we have several congregations and cell groups within the church. We must remember that the church as a whole has one vision and one direction, and the activities of separate congregations and cell groups must add to the unity of the church and build into its vision. There is a very real danger of cell groups becoming introspective and even becoming cliques. When individuals, congregations and cell groups act as if they are independent or have no responsibility to other groups in the church it is the road to disunity and will compromise the work of the church. To be a member of a church you must buy into its vision!

B] UNITY IN SERVICE – Excellence in Service

The greetings Paul made to people in Rome give us some key ideas about how we should serve in the church. These principles can be applied to our own service:

1) We are fellow-workers in Christ (v3)

In BCCC we expect that every member should be involved in service (as discussed in Essential Relationships 1). We are all fellow-workers with Christ, and this is the starting point in our attitude to service – we work together on God's great plan of bringing people to him and building the church. This realisation is amazing. God does not need us to accomplish His purposes, but He chooses to make us His servants and fellow-workers. Our aim is to serve and glorify Him, helping others to know Him and to grow to be more like Him.

2) We should work "very hard in the Lord" (v6, v12)

Our approach to service should be one of sacrifice. We should be prepared to work hard, not being lazy or holding back, but doing our very best in His service.

3) We should be tested and approved in Christ (v10)

We must never become focussed on our service for God, but must keep focussed on Him. We do not serve to be approved by man, but by God, and our character is more important than our activity. Service should be the out-flowing of a life devoted to God, not something we do from a sense of duty or to impress others.

C] UNITY IN MISSION – Keeping a Gospel Focus

In Paul's closing words in Romans 16:25-27 he summarises the central themes of the whole epistle:

1) God's character

Paul mentions God's power (v25), eternal nature (v26), and wisdom (v27). All he has written and his entire ministry are to God's glory (v27).

2) The Gospel of Christ

The gospel is centred on Christ and revealed by Him (v25).

3) The Evangelisation of all Nations

This is the mystery that was previously hidden (v25), that was made known through the Old Testament by God's commands, and that has now been revealed. All nations may believe and obey God (v26).

So, then, **Paul's gospel comes from God, centres on Christ and is for all nations!** What an amazing message it is, and no wonder Paul was not ashamed of it (1:16)! We have discussed Small Groups and the need for Christian community in BCCC, but there is a danger in this – that we could become self-focused, comfortable and complacent. We must never lose sight of our great commission (God's command – v26) which is to take the good news of Jesus to the nations. In these lessons we have examined the central truths of the gospel and the implications for our lifestyle and our relationships, but it is right that we finish on

a challenge to take this great message out to a world that is lost and far from God. We evangelise in different ways:

- (i) **Through our character** – the fact that we are living sacrifices, bringing honour to God and different from the world around us (Romans 12:1&2) should show people that there is something different in us.
- (ii) **Through our actions** – as we live out Romans 13:8-14 practically in serving others with the love of Christ we are sharing His love with them.
- (iii) **Through our words** – whenever people ask us we should be able to explain the gospel message to them. We may not all be called to be preachers or evangelists, but we are all called to evangelise.

If we are not supporting one another in the mission of evangelism and discipleship we are not functioning as God calls us to. This is the purpose of the church – to be the light of the world! Let us shine for Christ in this dark age, for the day is almost here (13:12)!

CHALLENGE:

- How are you treating your weaker brothers and sisters?
- Are you prepared to sacrifice non-essentials that matter to you for the sake of others?
- Are you committed to unity in the vision of the church in fellowship, service and evangelism?