

Our Common Oneness

Romans 1 — Our common faith

Beginning with Romans chapter 1, let us look at the factors of our oneness. Paul starts his letter by seeking to immediately establish an experiential point of contact with the saints. If you or I had to deal with saints who were already saved and who were already meeting in a locality, what would we tell them? What would we say to them? How would we handle that kind of situation? What Paul does in his letter to the Romans is what he characteristically does in nearly all his letters — when he begins to speak to the saints, the first thing he mentions is their faith.

In Romans 1:8 Paul says, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.” The experiential point of contact with the saints is faith. Faith is the most common factor between all Christians. As regenerated believers, we all have that something in us called “faith,” which responds to the same object. Faith is simply response to Christ, the unique object of our faith. This is what is common among us — our common faith (Titus 1:4). This common faith is the common response that is in every believer to the same Jesus.

To relate on the level of indwelling faith (2 Tim. 1:5) is the wise way to build a bridge with saints who have differences of thought or practice. Simply fellowship with saints about their indwelling faith. Paul does this consistently in his letters (Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 2:5; 2 Cor. 1:24; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 1:15; Phil. 1:25; Col. 1:4; 1 Thess. 1:3, 8; 2 Thess. 1:3-4; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:5; Titus 1:1, 4; Philem. 5-6). James also fellowships in this way in his letter (James 1:3), and Peter does so in both his letters. In his first letter Peter mentions how the

saints are being kept and guarded by the power of God through faith (1 Pet. 1:5). He also begins his second letter with the fact that the saints have obtained “like precious faith with us [the apostles]” (2 Pet. 1:1). To have received a letter from the apostle Peter must have been overwhelming. He was an apostle that was actually with Jesus in the flesh! The recipients of his letter might have felt spiritually intimidated. But Peter erases any such thought by establishing a bond of commonality between himself and the saints. That bond is the “like precious faith with us [in] the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

By beginning his letters with the realm of faith, Paul establishes an affinity among all the saints because faith has been equally given as a gift to all (Eph. 2:8). The faith Paul speaks of in Romans 1:8 is not the objective faith, that is, the contents of what we believe; but it is the subjective faith that indwells our spirit (2 Cor. 4:13) and responds to Christ. He does not begin with doctrine or teachings on various items. He starts with the inner response in every believer to the Person of Christ.

Recently we came together with a number of believers from different backgrounds, including pastors from other churches. We were all gathered to have some fellowship about what the Lord has been doing among us. Many of the saints who have been helped in the church life shared their experiences. It was precious and very touching, but at the same time I was aware that our locality had been mentioned repeatedly. It could have given the impression that God was working only among us, causing others to feel defensive. In this situation we needed to establish a common ground of fellowship. Even though we had come from different backgrounds and situations and had different understandings, there

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Our Common Oneness
– Pages 1-3, 6-8
- The Body of Christ
– Pages 4-5, 8

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was one common factor in the room, and that was our common faith in the Lord Jesus. We all have the same response to the same Person. That response is our faith.

This is what is so precious between all believers — the living reality of faith. That is why, when the Gentiles received the Spirit (Acts 10) and there was much argument about it among the Jewish believers (Acts 15), Peter’s testimony about his experience in the household of Cornelius was focused on a simple acknowledgment — that God “made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9). When he was interrogated as to why he had contact with the Gentiles (Acts 11), Peter could only reply with, “Who was I that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11:17). Both Jews and Gentiles had received the same gift. Thus, Peter’s reply was an acknowledgment of the mutual faith existing between the saints.

So we start with one common thing as Christian brothers — faith. We all equally possess something that is common to us and real in us, that is, our response to Jesus. You can say, “I love Jesus,” and I can equally say, “I love Jesus.” Just consider what a major thing it is that the faith in us is the same. It is God-given. So Paul begins with the common ground of our common faith. He does not try to settle issues, straighten everyone out on doctrinal points, or seek to have a uniformity of practice. Rather, he relates to that which is common among all believers — the living faith resident within every born-again child of God.

After beginning with the realm of our common faith, Paul then deals with the differences existing between the saints by showing that the gospel is a common gospel for all peoples. In Romans 1:14 he says, “I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise.” Why does he talk this way? Why does he talk about different kinds of peoples and being a debtor to everyone? It is because there were differences in the concepts of the saints in Rome. There were different views about various issues, as Romans 14 reflects. So Paul brings everyone to the fundamentals. He is ready to announce the gospel to those in Rome. Then he says in verse 16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.”

Why does Paul say, “for the Jew first and also for the Greek”? Why does he keep repeating such statements throughout his letter? It is because this places the Jew and the Gentile on the same standing. His intention is to show that in every dimension under the revelation of the mystery, there is no distinction between Jew and Greek. Paul is seeking to tear down the walls between Jew and Greek by proving that with the gospel there is no difference between them. The gospel belongs to everyone.

The kind of fellowship Paul imparts in Romans shows that in every major point of God’s salvation and

economy, all believers stand on common ground. This includes commonness in the gospel (Rom. 1), commonness in sinnerhood (Rom. 2—3), commonness in redemption (Rom. 3), commonness in faith (Rom. 4), commonness in justification and reconciliation (Rom. 5), commonness in our identity with Christ (Rom. 6), commonness in our struggles with the law and the flesh (Rom. 7), commonness in the realm of the Spirit (Rom. 8), commonness in being the people of God (Rom. 9—11), commonness in the Body (Rom. 12), commonness in our living the Christian life in this world (Rom. 13), commonness in the organic nature of our relationships (Rom. 14—15), and commonness in our practical contact with the saints (Rom. 16).

By all these major points, Paul shows us the real inner fabric, or nature, of the church and what are the common factors of the oneness between us. We are common not only in our sinnerhood, our redemption, and our justification, but also in “the revelation of the mystery” in its outward expression, that is, in our practical meeting together as the church. This is the ultimate issue of our “obedience of faith” (Rom. 16:25-26).

Such an understanding of our oneness really opens up the book of Romans in a clear way to see how Paul establishes the saints. He does not come in to establish them by organizing a local church according to the boundary of the city limits of Rome. He does not start by trying to gather the six or seven different groups of saints to meet in one place. He does not say, “Let us set up one church in this city on the ground of locality.” He simply says, “To all who are in Rome.” And then in 16 chapters he unveils the major areas of the believers’ commonality. These major areas are the revelation of the mystery that will establish them as the one Body of Christ expressed in that city.

Paul’s emphasis on the gospel in Romans 1:13b-16 is all-inclusive. It is to *everyone* who believes. Why everyone? The reason Paul uses “everyone” so much throughout this letter is that some in Rome were exclusive in their understanding and practice. They thought the gospel was only for the Jews. The initial preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles in Acts 10 was a major crisis for the Jews. Watching the Gentiles receive the Spirit was a big step toward forcing them out of their narrow mold. Here in Romans Paul is still dealing with the narrowness of those who had a one-track mind concerning who could and who could not be saved. This is why Paul emphasizes “all” and “everyone” throughout this letter. To say that the gospel is to the Jew “first” is not saying that it is to the Jew “only.” Yes, the Jews are historically and logically the ones that should respond to the gospel first. Paul recognizes this, but then he adds “and also for the Greek.” Surely we have to acknowledge the Jewish people under God’s sovereignty. The Messiah, according to the flesh, came out from them. Thus, they are mentioned first. But Paul handles the

Jews' narrowness from the very beginning of Romans by saying that he is a debtor to *all men* and that the gospel is to "everyone" who believes.

Romans 2—3
Our common sinnerhood

Romans chapter 2 is filled with words that indicate Paul is dismantling the Jews' high thoughts and views about themselves. The reason he so thoroughly exposes the sins of both Jew and Gentile is that he is establishing a foundation of common sinnerhood. Whoever they may be, each one's inner concept of himself had to be dismantled. This was necessary in order to get at the root of the problem of potential division, that is, their pride and high-mindedness. Thus, Paul writes Romans 1:18—3:23 to level everyone to the same ground. He first levels the Gentiles' pride by exposing the sinfulness of the Gentile world. Of course, the Jews are no doubt sitting there in their Jewish pride while Paul gives a detailed description of the Gentiles' sinfulness in Romans 1:29-32: ²⁹ "Being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, ³⁰ backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, ³¹ undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; ³² who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them." This description had the effect of leveling any pride in the Gentiles. However, it might also have had the effect of building up the pride of the Jews who had a deep-seated feeling of superiority.

But the Jews' pride could not last long, because Paul turns to this people in Romans 2 and begins to level the Jewish world. In verse 1 he says, "Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things." He exposes the hypocrisy of the Jewish people. Even though they considered themselves superior to others, their behavior and conduct was hypocritical. When Paul comes to verse 10, he begins to stress "everyone" again: "But glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." By these words, we see that Paul is leveling the high-mindedness of both Jew and Greek. He is bringing everyone to the same level of common sinnerhood.

Ultimately Paul makes a statement that reveals God's own attitude toward mankind, that is, how He relates to mankind, including Jew and Greek. In Romans 2:11 he says, "For there is no [respect of persons] with God." If we ourselves do not have this kind of consciousness and realization, then we are not going to

have the genuine generality of the church. This is because beneath the surface of our being, there may be some kind of high thought, such as "we are it" or "we are something special." It is this kind of thought that Paul levels. He goes on in verse 13 to tell the Jews that not "the hearers of the law" are righteous before God but "the doers of the law." Thus, Paul presents a detailed case. Point by point, he levels every argument rising up in the believers' minds to promote themselves or to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think (Rom. 12:3).

Paul continues in Romans 2:17-21a to expose the interior life of the potentially divisive ones: ¹⁷ "Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, ¹⁸ and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, ¹⁹ and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. ^{21a} You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?" These words reveal the self-image of the Jews: "We know God's will. We rest upon the law." Paul's speaking unmasks the self-deception of the Jews in their proud hearts. From this example of the Jews we can see why it is risky, spiritually speaking, to make claims such as, "We are God's move on the earth." I say this to ourselves. I say it to any believer. Because lurking behind "We are this or that" may be pride that can feed the wrong source.

Paul issues a warning in 1 Corinthians 10:12: "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." Later, in Romans 11:20 he says, "Do not be [high-minded], but fear." This is a good warning for us all. We may be enjoying the genuine church life and participating in what God is desiring on the earth. But we must beware of promoting our standing in a fleshly way, or we may be caught in our own pride and deception.

What Paul is dealing with in Romans is the problem of spiritual presumption, the same problem that we have today. In his day it was clothed in Jew and Gentile, but the inner nature was the same as today — pride, self, and holding on to background in a presumptuous way. The Jews only had an outward facade. By exposing the sinfulness of the Gentiles and the hypocrisy and pride of the Jews, Paul leveled everyone to a common ground of sinnerhood.

Paul did away with the whole problem of self-deception by speaking directly to the Jews' deceived condition in Romans 2:23-27: ²³ "You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? ²⁴ For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you, as it is written. ²⁵ For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has

(Continued on Page 6)

The Body of Christ

Perhaps one of the most striking titles which the New Testament ascribes to the church is “the Body of Christ.” We might expect that the church would be called “His people,” “His flock,” or “His disciples.” But to call the church *His Body* is so unexpected and unusual that we can only conclude that it came out of a revelation from the Holy Spirit. It is too original, too unique, to be something conceived by man. It could only be of divine origin.

We must then ask, what does this phrase, “the Body of Christ,” disclose to us about the church? What is it that God sees about the church, and that we need to see, that warrants such a striking title? Unfortunately, this phrase has lost much of its true significance and impact. What the Spirit meant when He used this phrase in the pages of the New Testament is not necessarily what is commonly meant by believers when it is used today. For instance, an established assembly of Christians is often referred to as a “body of believers.” We hear such statements as “I fellowship with a body of believers in my neighborhood.” What is meant is “I fellowship with a group of Christians who have a name, a regular place of meeting, and a certain degree of structure.” The word “body” is used as a collective noun to describe an organized gathering, in much the same way as it would be used to describe any secular assembly.

Other believers think and speak of the Body of Christ in a way that more closely resembles the language of the Bible. They would say that the church is like the Lord’s Body because there is a collective unity yet also a diversity in function, with each believer being similar to a single member of the Body. But notice the words “like” and “similar to.” Such words disclose the widespread view, whether conscious or unconscious, that the phrase “Body of Christ” is used in the Bible as only an illustration or analogy. That is, the church as the Body of Christ is not *really* the Body of Jesus Christ Himself. It is simply *like* the Body of Christ. Thus, the concept of a physical body merely serves as a good illustration of the church. It is analogous, but not actual. To these believers’ understanding, the church itself is a reality, but it is not the true Body of Jesus Christ. The analogy of a body simply brings to light certain features of the church (such as unity and diversity, the individual function of each believer, and the Lordship of Christ). In other words, the church just happens to possess characteristics that are conveniently illustrated by a body. And so it is thought that when the apostles used the phrase “Body of Christ” they never intended it to mean His real Body.

However, we must examine such views in the light of Scripture in order to determine if they are according to the thought of the Holy Spirit. Let us consider the following verses:

And He subjected all things under His feet, and gave Him to be Head over all things to the church, which is His Body, the fullness of the One who fills all in all (Eph. 1:22-23).

. . . and fill up that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His Body, which is the church (Col. 1:24).

For even as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of the body being many are one body, so also is the Christ; for also in one Spirit we were all baptized into one Body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and were all given to drink one Spirit Now you are the Body of Christ, and members in particular (1 Cor. 12:12-13, 27).

It is evident from these verses that the apostle Paul did not use the phrase “the Body of Christ” to refer merely to any organized assembly of Christians. He is speaking of something much higher and deeper than that. Indeed, the Body is spoken of as “the fullness of the One who fills all in all.” Obviously what is being addressed here is something of great spiritual import and weight. For Paul to employ such words as “the fullness of the One who fills all in all” means that his realization of the Body went far beyond the level of organization and structured gathering.

Nor is this phrase, “the Body of Christ,” being used by Paul to provide an illustration. He does not say, “Now you are *like* the Body of Christ.” No. He states clearly, “You *are* the Body of Christ.” This is because the Body of Christ is a spiritual reality. It has a definite existence in the spiritual realm. It is not that our physical bodies have substantive reality, but the spiritual Body of Christ does not. We must remember that to Paul’s realization, spiritual reality is more substantial, eternal, and worthy of regard than physical reality (2 Cor. 4:18). It is the spiritual that possesses the substance and casts the shadow for the physical, and not vice versa (Col. 2:17). So in God’s eyes the *real* Body in the universe is that of His Son. Hence, the church as the Body of Christ is not an analogy. It is a spiritual reality.

Of course, we know that the Lord Jesus in His physical body was raised from the dead and that He presented Himself to His disciples saying, “See My

hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you behold Me having” (Luke 24:39). This means that Jesus was raised physically, and that as a Man today seated on the throne, He possesses a real resurrected body (Acts 7:56; 1 Tim. 2:5; 1 Cor. 15:12-23, 35-44; Phil. 3:21). However, the New Testament also speaks of the Body of Christ in a corporate sense. There is an aspect to the Body of Christ that extends beyond His resurrected body. Many scholars in the past have referred to this aspect as the “mystical Body of Christ.” It is universal in nature, encompassing all believers throughout time and space. The above verses clearly reveal that this corporate, mystical Body of Christ is the church — not as an illustration but as a spiritual reality.

Implications of the Title “the Body of Christ”

It is a monumental revelation to see that the Body of Christ is a reality and not an illustration. Why? Because the implications are astounding, even revolutionary. Such a revelation of this reality will thoroughly renew our whole perspective about the church and alter how we conduct ourselves within the church. What are the implications of this reality? First, we will realize that the church is organic and not organizational. Second, we will see that the church has a living Head to whom we must hold. Third, we will understand that the church must have coordination and relatedness between the members. Let us briefly consider all three.

The Church Is Organic

Perhaps the most prominent aspect of the church brought forth by the title “Body of Christ” is that it is organic. What do we mean when we use this term “organic”? To be organic simply means to be living. It means that life is present. A stone is not organic, because there is no life in a stone. Yet a plant, an animal, or a human being is organic because life exists in each. Life animates and vivifies all organic things.

Of course, life is the most crucial and indispensable element of a body. Without life, a body becomes a corpse, which is distasteful to us. We do not like to be in the presence of corpses. They seem foreign to us, even repulsive. The reason is that the most crucial element — life — is missing. But when life is present, a body is normal and natural. With life comes function, movement, growth, and purpose. Such function is not mechanical or organizational, but fluid and spontaneous. To walk or talk or throw a ball are not tasks that need to be organized and mechanically executed. A body is able to carry out these functions effortlessly and

spontaneously. Why? Because of the animating presence of life. A body is not organized. It is not an organization with hierarchy, rules, procedures, policies, or plans of action. A body is organic. Life is circulating and flowing, and the result is fluid function and movement. This is the most basic, intrinsic feature of a body.

Do we realize that the church must be organic? The Bible declares that the church is the Body of Christ. What does this imply? It implies that the most essential, indispensable factor within the church is life. The Body must have life! Whose life? The answer is most obvious — the life of Christ! Paul tells us that Christ is our life (Col. 3:4; Gal. 2:20). He also tells us that we must hold Christ as our Head, “out from whom all the Body, by means of the joints and bands being supplied and knit together, grows with the growth of God” (Col. 2:19; cf. Eph. 4:15-16). The life supply to the Body is “out from whom” — out from Christ, the Head. He is the source of life in the Body. Our natural, human life does not supply the Body, regardless of how gifted, able, talented, or good it may be. Only the life of Christ can make the church organic. And when His life is flowing and circulating in the members of His Body, then there is spontaneous function, movement, growth, and purpose.

Frequently we see a tremendous amount of organization within the church. There are often numerous programs and committees. Members are often exhorted to get involved in the organized affairs and enterprises of the church. If a person has certain talents or skills that are employed in the secular world, those same talents and skills are often put to work in the church. On one hand, we must acknowledge that it is a wonderful thing for believers to practically function in the church with whatever gifts the Lord has given to them; but on the other hand, we must ask, is all of this activity organic, or is it merely organizational? Today, major corporations have programs and committees also. They too employ people’s talents and skills. However, these corporations are not organic. They are strictly organizational. But the church must be different. The church, to be His Body, must be organic. Yes, there should be function — indeed, much function. However, that function must emanate from the life supply of Christ. It must be “out from whom.” There must be an ongoing, present, and active holding to the Head by the members of a local church in order for that church to be in the organic reality of the Body. Otherwise, we will be more organizational than organic. It is not that we are not true believers. It is not that we are not positionally members of the universal Body of Christ. It is not that we do not love the Lord. It simply means that apart from a daily

(Continued on Page 8)

(Continued from Page 3)

become uncircumcision. ²⁶ Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? ²⁷ And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law?" Paul's strong utterance, "Your circumcision has become uncircumcision," is reversing the Jews' claim of being something. Their claim was reversed by virtue of the source from which they were coming.

After Paul reveals that both Jew and Gentile are sinners on the same level before God, he speaks of the inward realm of the spirit and heart. In Romans 2:28-29 he says, ²⁸ "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh; ²⁹ but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God." Hallelujah! So you can see in these chapters that Paul is leveling all of us to our common sinnerhood.

Finally, in Romans chapter 3 Paul makes some sweeping statements to level everyone to the common ground of being sinners before God. In Romans 3:9-10 he says, ⁹ "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. ¹⁰ As it is written: There is none righteous, no, not one." Then in verses 22-23 he says, ²² "Even the righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe. For there is no [distinction]; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Why does Paul say over and over again that there is "no distinction" and "all" have sinned? It is because his goal in writing this entire letter is to establish *all* the saints in an organic church life, where there is an expression of the revelation of the mystery. For this reason he emphasizes their commonness, even in their sinnerhood.

Romans 3

Our common redemption

Immediately following Romans 3:23, in which he summarizes our common sinnerhood, Paul testifies to our common redemption in verses 24-25: ²⁴ "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God set forth to be a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed." Thus, for all sinners the only ground to boast in is the realm of faith, not the realm of our own works. This is the conclusion of verse 27. Then in verse 29 Paul asks a question that is directly related to the exclusive attitude of the Jews: "Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also." Do you see what Paul is doing? He is opening up God's economy in a way that establishes the

church on a common ground of God belonging *equally* to Jew and Gentile. By speaking in this way he is eradicating the high-mindedness that was present in some believers there in Rome. Their high-mindedness was due to holding on to their Jewish background and assuming that they were superior to others. This attitude was a frustration to the establishing of the church life in Rome. Thus, Paul had to reveal the inner side of the generality of the church, that is, a common gospel, including common sinnerhood and common redemption.

Romans 4

Our common way of salvation — faith

Romans chapter 4 unveils the common ground upon which all men are saved. This includes both Jews and Gentiles. In this chapter Paul uses the example of Abraham and his faith to show that the very father of the Hebrew nation was justified before God on the basis of faith and not works. He establishes the commonality between Jew and Gentile when he says in verse 16, "Abraham, who is the father of us all." Also, in verse 17 he says that Abraham is "a father of many nations." Thus, instead of using Abraham as a factor for the superiority of the Jew, the faith of Abraham is used to establish the common bond between Jew and Gentile. In verse 18 Paul says, "Who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations." It is not merely the Jewish nation here. It is "many nations." Abraham is the father of many nations. Do we see what Paul is doing? He is tearing down the inner prejudices that would cause division in Rome.

The inner fabric of the church is faith. This is our commonality, and it is also the most genuine factor of our oneness. However, perhaps with some believers, the outward doctrine of the ground of the church — one church in one city — may be the main factor of oneness. This teaching concerning how we should meet is present in the New Testament. But when Paul applies its truth to Rome, he does not firstly attempt to organize the saints to be the one church in that city. Instead, he emphasizes the inner nature of the church, that is, the saints' common sinnerhood, redemption, and faith. These are among the major things in God's economy.

Christ and the cross are the major factors for believers to stress in their relationships with one another. Paul does not stress the "right" way to meet as the church. Rather, he stresses, "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). Christ, our foundation, is the major factor between us. God's choice over us in eternity past is another major factor. The saints are the elect of God. We are ones chosen by God! This is what should be acknowledged as major in our relationships.

If we hold to certain teachings on how the church should meet in a mere doctrinal way we will misplace our emphasis. We will be emphasizing the wrong

things. Perhaps, unwittingly, we will be turned from the major organic factors between God's children, and judge and despise others who are not holding to the same teachings that we are. This is just like the Jews who were insisting on circumcision, stressing it as a requirement for all, yet not caring for the realm of faith, the major factor. To them, Paul makes the point in Romans 4:10 that Abraham had righteousness accounted to him *before* he was circumcised. Here Paul is seeking to overthrow a misplaced emphasis that could become a factor of division among the saints.

When Paul says that our common way of salvation is faith, he does not speak in a mere theological way, but he speaks with the background of the tension between Jew and Gentile. In other words, he is not just teaching about faith, but he is establishing faith as a major organic factor for the oneness in Rome. This is because there were distinctions that could potentially set off an explosion of divisiveness in that locality. Thus, Paul's whole burden throughout the book is to show that there is no difference between Jew and Gentile in any realm. We are all sinners. We are all redeemed by the same blood. We are all saved by the same faith. There is no difference here! Is God "the God of the Jews only"? (Rom. 3:29). Why does Paul talk this way? He is opening up a revelation of the inner content of the church so that the generality of the church would be a reality. This generality is composed of our common status as sinners, as redeemed ones, as ones saved by the same faith. These are among the major factors of oneness between us.

We all acknowledge that we are sinners. We all acknowledge the same blood. And we all acknowledge the same response in us to Jesus. This is what causes the joy in the church. Joy is here not because we have uniformity of practice — not because we are all doing the same thing, or following one way or another. That would destroy the joy in the church life and bring in hypocrisy. It could only result in outward conformity and pretense. Then we would lose the simplicity of being a normal believer redeemed by the blood and enjoying Christ in a pure way in an atmosphere of unfeigned faith and love. We would be subjected to a false atmosphere that is set up to produce mere outward behavior. This would disintegrate our organic relationships and quickly bring in deadness. Paul had this kind of sobering realization when writing to the believers in Rome.

Romans 5

Our common justification and reconciliation

Justification and reconciliation are major factors related to the oneness of believers. In Romans 5:1 Paul says, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The peace that comes from justification is the solid factor of the peace that exists in the Holy Spirit in the ***the Christian*** Vol. 12, No. 1

church life (Rom. 14:17). It is the same peace that will crush Satan under our feet shortly (Rom. 16:20). It is the peace that was made on the cross between God and man, and between man and man, and that is now flowing in the Holy Spirit for us to participate in.

It is this peace derived from justification that is a major factor of our oneness in the church. In Romans 5 we have some of the richest portions in the entire Bible concerning justification and righteousness. We were all made righteous in Christ's one righteous act of obedience on the cross. And our standing in a locality is a standing on this common factor of our justification.

It was this kind of understanding that Paul had when he publicly rebuked Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14). Peter had separated himself from table fellowship with the Gentiles because of the Judaistic influence from the Jerusalem church. This action by Peter was a divisive action in the church, and resulted in sending out the wrong signal to the Gentile believers. That is, Peter's action had the effect of compelling the Gentiles to live like Jews. A divisive issue was created over Jewish practice, and Paul handles this issue by bringing everyone into the truth of justification by faith. In other words, the common factor that places Jews and Gentiles on the same level is justification by faith. Oneness is found on the ground of how God justifies man. This is a major factor of our oneness — justification by faith.

Paul's goal in Romans is to see the saints established according to the revelation of the mystery, that is, to see the organic Body of Christ expressed in Rome. In order for this to be a reality, he builds a strong foundation in chapter 5 on justification and reconciliation.

Romans 6

Our common identification

The common factor of oneness in Romans chapter 6 is our identity with Christ. We have all been identified with Christ by baptism. We have been baptized into Jesus Christ, which includes being baptized into His death (Rom. 6:3-4). This is a major factor of our oneness. Our old man was crucified, and we are walking in newness of life, that is, in union with Christ. Romans 6 shows us that our union and identification with Christ establishes an organic "I" where we are joined to the Lord and are participating together in His life. Our union and participation in Him makes us organically one with each other.

If you have reactions toward me and I have reactions toward you, even though we may be conscious of our reactions toward one another, there is still something common between us — our identification with Christ. We have a common participation in the same Christ to free us from the realm of reactions. In other words, we all have the same union with the same Person.

(Continued on Page 8)

(Continued from Page 5)

participation in the life of Christ, we cannot have the organic reality of the Body.

This fact is true in relation not only to the practical affairs of the church, but also to the meetings of the church. Often in church meetings, there is a lack of spontaneity or fluidness. There is also a lack of function by the members of the church. It seems difficult to get much participation in the form of testimony, prayer, or even singing. Members tend to come to the meetings as passive spectators rather than as functioning members. We must ask, why? The reason is quite simple. There is a lack of life. When life wanes, function wanes and spontaneity wanes. Apart from the flow of life, organic functioning will simply not take place, regardless of how much exhortation there is to call it forth. Of course, if the meetings of the church continue in spite of a lack of life, then the normal, spontaneous function that proceeds from life must be replaced with such things as bulletins, inflexible services, entertainment, performances, and rituals.

But when the members of the church are caring for life, then the whole Body is supplied. To care for life means that we maintain a constant intake of the life of Christ through a regular enjoyment of the Word of God, prayer, fellowship, singing, and worship. We are aggressive to drink the Spirit at every opportunity. The Lord Jesus is the source out from whom we live our daily lives. We also deal with those things that hinder and dwarf life, such as sin, the flesh, and the world. In other words, we pay attention to life and are focused upon life. In fact, our greatest priority is to keep the level of Jesus' life ever flowing and increasing.

What then is the issue? The issue is an organic church life. The life of Jesus that is enjoyed in the daily lives of the saints will automatically invigorate the Body. The meetings will be flowing, spontaneous, and enjoyable. We will not need to "crank up" anything. Nor will we need to force anything. There will be an absence of a stiff, mechanical, or contrived atmosphere. The members of the Body will function spontaneously. There will be a current of the Spirit that runs through our singing, prayers, and testimonies. God will presence Himself in the midst of the church. This is how the meetings of the church were meant to be and should be. Yet we must realize that this can only be produced in one way — by the brothers and sisters experiencing the life of Christ in their daily lives. It is not produced by even deciding not to be formal, religious, or ritualistic, and replacing a formal meeting format with an informal meeting format. No! It is not a matter of formality or informality. It is a matter of life. It is a matter of being organic.

Caring for life will affect not only the meetings but

all the practical affairs of the church. Such areas as providing hospitality, maintaining the meeting facility, shepherding new believers, and caring for the poor and needy will be spontaneously fulfilled. But this will not come about by heavy exhortations to "get involved," or by a lot of promoting, recruiting, and organizing activities. The practical needs of the church will be met by saints who are caring for life. How can we be assured of this? Because of the life of Christ. His life has a zeal for God's house (John 2:17). It is a life that is not self-centered but cares for the church (Phil. 2:20-21; 2 Cor. 11:28). It is a "priest life" that loves to serve (Mark 10:45). So when brothers and sisters are filled with the life of Christ, the inevitable issue will be members who have a sensitive consciousness of the needs of the church. They will have a heart to pick up and care for many practical burdens, even if it means much personal sacrifice. Of course, in our natural life we do not have such genuine care for the church. But His life does. Thus, an organic, functioning church life can only result from a rich participation in the life of Christ.

— Kirk Eland

(Continued from Page 7)

So, if we would just humble ourselves, pray together, drop whatever, and just say "Jesus" together, we would participate in our common union and be freed from the realm of sin. We have died to it. Nothing could be more clear, more definite, about every one of us. This is the major thing that binds us together — our union with Christ. It is the factor of our oneness. And it is really the factor that brings the release of the Spirit and joy in the church.*

— Bill Freeman

* This article, the second of a series on Romans, is part of chapter 1 of a new book entitled *Our Common Oneness*, by Bill Freeman. The book may be ordered directly from Ministry Publications, P.O. Box 12222, Scottsdale, AZ 85267 (602) 948-4050. The cost is \$7.50, postpaid.

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