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*Your very differences as Jew and Gentile, strong and weak, are meant to be combined in a harmonious chorus of hope in praise to God.*

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## HARMONY AND HOPE

### BLENDING VOICES

The students piled out of their chartered bus onto the church parking lot, bleary-eyed from hours on the road. It would be their fifth concert in four days. The risers were set up in the chancel, the robes unpacked and hung in the church basement, and a brief meal shared. While the students robed and huddled for a few minutes of prayer, they could hear the floorboards above them creak with the arrival of the concertgoers. Not long afterward, they were processing and taking their places on the risers. The pitch pipe sounded their note, the director raised his hands with a confident smile, and the music began. “*Cantate domino canticum novum*” — “Sing to the Lord a new song!” The weariness melted away, the singers’ spirits soared, and joyous music filled the sanctuary.

Choral music, with its wondrous blending of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass, is a metaphor that illustrates how God can use our very differences to produce a harmonious chorus of praise. In a choir, we don’t compete with one another. We cooperate! We’re glad for the unique gift of each voice. Basses wait for a cue from altos. Tenors augment sopranos. All the while the director, by his hands and eyes, keeps the rhythm steady and the dynamics appropriate to the lyrics.

That, says Paul to his readers at Rome, is what God, the Director, has in mind for you! Your very differences as Jew and Gentile, strong and



weak, are meant to be combined in a harmonious chorus of hope in praise to God. A dispirited world, bleary-eyed with grief and despair, will be lifted by the good news of Jesus that you are called to sing. “Those who have never heard will understand” (15:21)!

## LIVING IN HARMONY

### ROMANS 15:1-7

Paul continues his address to the weak and strong begun in Chapter 14. The “strong,” among whom Paul places himself, have a particular obligation to “bear with” the weak (v. 1). The word for “bear with” does not have the negative connotation of “putting up with” someone in grudging fashion, but rather doing one’s assigned supportive role, as a root “supports” (the same verb) the branches of a tree (11:18). The same verb describes the active, loving service we in Christ’s body perform as we “bear” one another’s sin burdens and gently restore those who fall (Gal. 6:2-3).

The wellspring of such service is the ministry of Jesus Christ to us. “For Christ did not please himself” (v. 3), Paul points out. Have you “strong” been reproached by the “weak” because you don’t follow the old Law’s regulations? Does it irk you to have to do what you would be free *not* to? If so, don’t fret. Put your experience in perspective. Abstaining from meat or observing a special holy day isn’t much of a burden in comparison with what Christ had to endure! “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me,” He says (v. 3, citing Ps. 69:9). If Christ did not please Himself, why should we? But He’s MORE than an example. His sacrificial suffering set us all free, Paul argues, to “please [our] neighbor” (v. 2). That’s the source of our song of praise.

The entire Old Testament was written to give us the key signature for our music. That key signature is hope, the hope that sustained old Father Abraham (4:18) in spite of Sarah’s barrenness, the hope we experience in the face of suffering (5:2-5, 8:20-

25). The reading of the Old Testament, which was always part of the Roman house church gatherings, provides the “instruction” believers need. “You’ve heard it,” Paul says. Through its teaching, we receive both “endurance” and “encouragement” that engender that deep-rooted and growing hope (v. 4). If all are singing in the right key, there will come “harmony with one another” (v. 5).

That harmony, Paul wants to affirm, is something different than total agreement on those non-essential matters (food and holy days) that have divided you. It is not a dull uniformity that your Director desires, but a willingness to “accept one another,” whether weak or strong (v. 7 NIV). So in verse 7, Paul repeats the call to “accept” one another with which he began the discussion back in 14:1.

Imagine, for example, how a congregation’s worship life might be transformed if, instead of quarreling over “traditional versus contemporary” style, each group sought to “please his neighbor for his good, to build him up” (v. 2). What would happen if we said, “Let’s do what *you* enjoy this time!” Can you imagine that? Such mutual submission would enrich both, with the result that “together” they might “with one voice glorify... God” (v. 6).

## THE MUSIC CHRIST LEADS

### ROMANS 15:8-13

What is the music Christ came to lead? Ah, nothing less than a full-throated double chorus of Jews and Gentiles! He came, first, as a “servant to the circumcised” (v. 8) to show God’s faithfulness to the promises He made to Israel’s patriarchs. But there’s more. He also came “in order that the Gentiles might glorify God” (v. 9). In His earthly sojourn, Jesus was born as a Jew among Jews, but even in that ministry came encounters with Gentiles like the Roman centurion (Luke 7:2-9) and the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30), both of whom exhibited extraordinary faith. “Jew first, then Greek.” Jesus began the first movement of the glorious music.

Paul takes pains to show that the witness of the entire Old Testament predicts this coming Jewish/Gentile song of praise. Paul does this by citing the three sections of the Hebrew Old Testament to demonstrate God's plan for this double chorus. The Jews divided Scripture into the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings (sometimes called "the Psalms"). Jesus reminded the Emmaus disciples that "everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). In other words, the entire Scripture bears witness to Me! Here Paul does the same. Note the origins of the quotations:

(V. 9) "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name."  
From the **Writings** – Ps. 18:49  
(paralleled in 2 Sam. 22:50)

(V. 10) "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."  
From the **Torah** – Deut. 32:43

(V. 11) "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him."  
From the **Writings** (again) –  
Ps. 117:1

(V. 12) "The root of Jesse will come...in him will the Gentiles hope."  
From the **Prophets** – Is. 11:10

You can see that the entirety of Scripture, says Paul, bears witness to the place of the Gentiles alongside the Jews in God's chorus ("Gentiles" appear in every quote). And what are they doing? Together they will "praise...and sing" (v. 9), "rejoice" (v. 10), and "praise...and...extol him" (v. 11). All that music is in the key of "hope" (v. 12)! The Director is nothing less than the "God of hope" (v. 13)! That music will fulfill its purpose that "you may abound in hope." To that prayer we say a hearty "Amen!"

## PAUL'S MINISTRY CREDENTIALS

### *ROMANS 15:14-21*

Paul has finished his lengthy presentation of the Gospel — the righteousness God gives and the life the believers are to live. Now he is thinking ahead about the future of his Gospel "concert tour." The next stop, he intends, will be Rome itself and the people to whom he is writing this letter. After that brief stopover, his dream is to proceed on to Spain (see v. 24). He hopes to secure their financial support for that crucial venture, as we saw already in lesson one. Since they have not met him face to face, he devotes a portion of the letter to tell them more about himself and his mission to the Gentiles.

In so doing, he begins with a compliment: "I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another" (v. 14). Earlier he had written similar words of praise to the congregation in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:5 and 2 Cor. 8:7). Both congregations were praised for their "knowledge," among other things. His description of the Romans is the polar opposite of his assessment of depraved humanity in Chapter 1: "They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice" (1:29). What a difference the Gospel has made in Rome!

Now he reflects on the letter he has been writing them. "On some points I have written to you very boldly" (v. 15). And well he should, for he told them early on, "I am not ashamed of the gospel" (1:16)! He explains his role: "to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel" (v. 16). He is not, of course, a temple worker of any sort. Rather, he explains, he makes an "offering of the Gentiles." They have been made "acceptable, sanctified by the

*Paul has finished his lengthy presentation of the Gospel — the righteousness God gives and the life the believers are to live. Now he is thinking ahead about the future of his Gospel “concert tour.”*



Holy Spirit.” They have been set apart from the world’s sinful crowd, brought into a righteous new relationship with Jesus Christ, and returned to God. That has been Paul’s high and holy privilege “because of the grace given me by God” (v. 15). “I have reason to be proud” of this work, he says (v. 17). The actual Greek word is “boast,” something no human may do in his own right but only “in the Lord,” (1 Cor. 1:31). Paul is properly mindful that it has been “what Christ has accomplished through me” (v. 18). Now *that’s* how to boast!

There follows a very brief resume of his missionary work. We’re familiar with it from the book of Acts, but the people in Rome were likely not. It was done, he says, in five ways: “by word and deed” (v. 18), “by the power of signs and wonders” (v. 19) and by “the Spirit of God.” He does not tell them here about the healing of a crippled man in Lystra (Acts 14:8–10), the exorcism of a demon-possessed girl in Philippi (Acts 16:16–18), or the raising of Eutychus, who had died in a fall from a window (Acts 20:9–12).

The wide-ranging travels of three missionary journeys are succinctly summarized in one phrase, “from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum” (v. 19). He could have mentioned Antioch, where his journeys began, but perhaps he is thinking about how the whole movement of the Gospel originated from the heart of Judaism (Jerusalem), and in fact he had been there, albeit briefly (Gal. 1:18). Illyricum (known in modern times as Yugoslavia), bordered Macedonia to the northwest, more than 1,000 miles from Jerusalem. Though it is doubtful that Paul himself labored there, it is likely that his mission strategy included the sending of co-workers further on from centers where he had established Christian work. The church in Colossae, as an example, was started not by Paul but by his co-worker Epaphras (Col. 1:5–8).

His *modus operandi*, he explains, has always been to preach and establish churches “not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation” (v. 20). His special ambition has been to be a kind of trailblazer, to establish churches in “virgin gospel territory” (Douglas Moo). In that way he avoided any possible rivalry or sense of competition.

In the next lesson, we will take up Paul’s dream of taking the Gospel’s concert tour where no one had yet dared to go. The bus is headed for Spain!

## PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 15:22–16:27

*Lord God, as I open Your word once more, I stop to give You thanks for all the people along the way who have taught me, encouraged me, and shared Your Word with me. Equip me through my study to do the same for others! In Jesus' name. Amen*

For review:

1. What lesson does Paul draw from Christ's ministry for the "strong" among his readers?

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2. How does Paul make clear that the entirety of Scripture undergirds the mission to the Gentiles?

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3. After reading about the weak and the strong, with which group do you more readily identify?

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Romans 15:22–33

4. Paul talks of being "hindered" in his attempts to come to Rome. What more do you learn about hindrances to his mission plans in 1:13? In 1 Thess. 2:18? In Acts 16:6–7?

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5. Verse 26 makes mention of a special offering for the poor in Jerusalem that he must deliver (see 2 Cor. 8:1–15). Why do you think this offering was so important to Paul that he would delay coming to Rome? (See v. 27)

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6. What hint of possible trouble ahead do we get from vv. 30–32?

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7. What would you say are your ambitions in life? Do any of them contain the kind of concern for God's kingdom that Paul evidenced?

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Romans 16:1–16

8. What do you deduce about Phoebe from vv. 1–2? What is Paul asking the Romans to do for her?

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9. What kinds of things does Paul commend as he extends greetings in these verses?

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10. Paul has been branded by some as a “misogynist.” How many women are named in this list? What does he say about them?

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11. If Paul were to describe your role in the Lord’s work, what one-liner would he use?

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Romans 16:17–27

12. He warns against a group of people in vv. 17–18. What danger do they pose?

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What is his simple advice? (Compare 1 Cor. 5:9–13)

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Where do you “draw the line” in defining “contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught” (v. 17)?

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13. More names! For some interesting possible connections, read Acts 13:1, 17:5, 19:22, 20:4.

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14. What happened to verse 24?

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15. How is the Jew-Gentile theme touched on one last time in the doxology that closes this letter (vv. 25–27)?

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16. What discoveries about God, yourself, and the Christian life have you made in reading Romans?

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### Memory Verse Challenge

Instead of adding a new verse this week, take time to review the verses you have already learned. Catch up if you’ve fallen behind.

*Overall, has this effort been a “burden” or a “blessing” (or both!)?*

*Which of these verses, do you think, will be of lasting value in your life?*