

WITH ONE VOICE

By SCOTT GRANT

Eugene Petersons writes:

Every time I move to a new community, I find a church close by and join it—committing myself to worship and work with that company of God’s people. I’ve never been anything other than disappointed: every one turns out to be biblical, through and through: murmurers, complainers, the faithless, the inconstant, those plague with doubt and riddled with sin, boring moralizers, glamorous secularizers. Every once in a while a shaft of blazing beauty seems to break out of nowhere and illuminate these companies, and then I see what my sin-dulled eyes had missed: word of God-shaped, Holy Spirit-created lives of sacrificial humility, incredible courage, heroic virtue, holy praise, joyful suffering, constant prayer, persevering obedience. I see Christ ... ¹

A shaft of blazing beauty broke out at a recent meeting of PBC elders, pastors and deacons. One by one we were offering our prayers to God. Then Bob Thompson took us to heaven on the wings of his soaring voice. No one planned it this way, but next up was Jay Heeb, another deacon. Jay’s folksy voice makes you think that God is sitting right next to him. Their prayers beautifully illustrate the apostle Paul’s vision of the church in which many voices harmonize in a chorus of praise so that we glorify God “with one voice.” When I reflected on the prayers of Bob and Jay, I was glad I found this church and joined it. Oh, like Peterson, I’ve been disappointed. But more and more, I see the shafts of blazing beauty. You have to stay around a while to see them. You also have to stop complaining long enough to learn what to look for.

In Romans 15:1-13, Paul reaches the climax of his letter. Everything he has written in Romans 1-14 pours into this passage in order that the Romans might accept one another and glorify God together.

Romans 15:1-13:

¹Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. ²Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. ³For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, “THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO REPROACHED YOU FELL ON ME.” ⁴For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ⁵Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, ⁶so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. ⁸For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the

truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers,⁹ and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written,

*“THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES,
AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME.”*

¹⁰*Again he says,*

“REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE.”

¹¹*And again,*

*“PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES,
AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM.”*

¹²*Again Isaiah says,*

*“THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE,
AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES,
IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE.”*

¹³*Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Glorifying God with one voice

The “strong” are mostly Gentile believers in the gospel who understand that following Jesus does not mean adherence to the Mosaic Law in regards to food, drink and holy days. The weak are mostly Jewish believers who maintain that adherence to the law is necessary. Theologically, Paul sided with the strong in Romans 14. The coming of Christ redefined the law around the command to love and therefore rescinded commands that had separated Jews from Gentiles. As a Jew, Paul identifies with the strong (“we who are strong”) in order to gain their sympathy for the weak. In the previous chapter, he said the strong should not practice their freedom in such a way as to cause the weak to violate what they think are God’s commandments.

Paul in verses 1-2 summarizes Romans 14 while at the same time deepening his appeal.² The weak are “without strength.” They are vulnerable. The tendency of the powerful in any community is to either crush or ignore the powerless. Those in a position of strength find it difficult to submit to the needs of the weak. Yet that is what Paul asks the strong in the Roman church to do. More precisely, he asks them to “bear” the weaknesses of their brothers: to carry their burdens.³ They should do this through a willingness to forego their freedoms. The weak, in time, may gain strength so that they understand they can eat all foods.

The strong please themselves when they practice their freedoms indiscriminately, but Paul calls each of us to “please his neighbor” for the sake of, literally, “the good,” which equates not to the edification of the individual but to the edification of the church.⁴ The goal is pleasing someone else in a way that builds up God’s community. This perspective precludes indiscriminate acquiescence to the weak, as if the felt needs of certain individuals should always be addressed in a particular way. Needs should be considered in light of God’s purposes for his church. The general appeals of Romans 12:3-13 (“let love be without hypocrisy”) and 13:8-10 (“he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law”) are applied in a particular way in Romans 15:1-2.

Paul bases his appeal, as in Romans 14:9, on the example of Christ, who didn’t please himself but pleased God by placing the needs of others before his own needs. He bore the weaknesses of those without strength. Moreover, he stood between angry

humans and God and absorbed their insults. In actuality, all of us are weak. All of us have been angry with God. Christ, however, intercepted our insults. The load of the strong—to bear the burden of the weak—is light by comparison. Psalm 69, which Paul quotes from in verse 3, concerns the suffering and vindication of a righteous Israelite. As Messiah, Jesus assumes this role, formerly occupied by King David. He suffered, but God vindicated him by raising him from the dead.

Paul's use of Psalm 69 in verse 3 is in keeping with God's purposes to instruct us through what we now call the Old Testament. The scriptures inspire perseverance and encouragement so that we might appreciate the hope that we have: our eternal future as God's people. In retrospect, we can now see that Psalm 69 spoke of how the biblical story would reach its climax in the death and resurrection of Christ. Our hope is based on Christ's fulfillment of the biblical story. As his people, we live in his story, suffering for the sake of others.

Paul prays that God would use the biblical story to inspire perseverance and encouragement so that we might embrace the story of Christ and embody it. It's a story of hope, culminating in our own vindication and resurrection. The story, with God himself working through his Spirit, has the power to enable us to "be of the same mind with one another according to the Christ Jesus" so that, like Christ, we're all willing to bear the weaknesses of our brothers for the sake of the church.

The goal for such an other-centered approach is that we might "with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul wants the strong and the weak, whether they are Jews or Gentiles, to praise God together, not separately. He wants two people to become one. The strong should be willing to forego their freedoms for this purpose. Paul demonstrated in Romans 1:18-2:29 that both Jews and Gentiles failed to glorify God. When we glorify God together, we honor our Father, who wants one family that comes together under the lordship of Jesus Christ. If men and women as disparate as Jews and Gentiles form one community, Caesar might get the idea that "there is another king" (Acts 17:7).

Accept one another

Although Paul has been mostly concerned with the attitude of the strong toward the weak in Romans 14:1-15:6, in verse 7 he urges all his readers to "accept one another." Paul has been working toward this admonition not only since Romans 14:1 but since Romans 1:1. He wants everyone in the church, with particular reference to Jews and Gentiles who differ in their approach, to welcome each other into the fellowship: to worship together and eat together despite their differences over food.

For Paul, the story of the gospel, so breathtakingly presented in this letter, has this application in this church. Indeed, the gospel tells us that Christ has accepted us. He has welcomed us into his fellowship with the Father and the Spirit. He has welcomed us into his family. Our acceptance of one another, in response to Christ's acceptance of us, brings honor to God. We welcome one another not to foist our opinions on them but to glorify God (Romans 14:1).

Christ became a servant in his Father's house to welcome us into his family. He washed our feet and waited on us, giving us the bread and wine that represent his own body and blood.

He went to the cross for the Jews (the circumcision) in the interest of “the truth of God”—that is, the faithfulness of God. The Gentiles exchanged the truth of God for idols, and the Jews were unfaithful to God’s vocation for them to rescue the Gentiles from sin (Romans 1:25, 3:3-4, 7). However, the Messiah, the representative Jew, embodied the faithfulness of God and overturned the unfaithfulness of Israel in order to confirm the “promises given to the fathers.” God’s promises to the Jewish patriarchs concerning salvation from sin and death and the renewal of creation always envisioned Gentile inclusion (Romans 4:16). Paul said in Romans 1:16 that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to Jews first and also to Gentiles.

Christ went to the cross for the Gentiles in the interest of God’s mercy. God is merciful to all, but his mercy is particularly on display when seen as extended to people who were not originally part of his people (Romans 11:32). As Christ’s service to the Jews confirms the promises, his service to the Gentiles glorifies God by joining them together with the Jews to form one people.⁵

In verses 9-12, Paul draws from all three categories of the Hebrew Scriptures—the law, the prophets and the writings—and from different eras to show that the story of Israel was leading to a climax consisting of the reign of the Messiah, which would inspire Gentile incorporation into the people of God. The psalmists invited Gentile worship (Psalms 18:49, 117:1). Even in the wilderness, shortly after the Lord formed Israel, Moses envisioned Gentiles praising God “with” the Jews, not separate from them (Deuteronomy 32:43). Finally, the prophet Isaiah spoke of “the root of Jesse,” the Messiah, whose reign would include the Gentiles and give them hope (Isaiah 11:10).⁶

Hope, of course, is not just for the Gentiles, for Paul is writing about “the God of hope.” He wishes for God to fill all, both Jews and Gentiles, with the joy and peace that are characteristic of relationship with God and each other in his kingdom (Romans 14:17). Faith, a response to the gospel that transcends any particular ethnic approach to God, makes such community life possible. If God through his Holy Spirit would fill the Romans with joy and peace, then Paul would expect that they would overflow with hope for their future as the people of God.

Living in the story

In Romans 15:1-13, just as in Romans 14, Paul gathers bits of the gospel story so that that we might understand what Jesus has done for us. If Jesus was thinking of his needs, he would have emerged from his encounter with Satan in the wilderness as king of the world. But he would have left us behind. In obedience to the Father, but always with us in mind, he rejected Satan’s offer and set his face toward Jerusalem, taking us with him. When he reached Jerusalem, he served us. He spread out a table for us in the Upper Room and washed our feet. He broke the bread and poured the wine. He knew that we were too weak to climb Jerusalem’s mountain and offer ourselves to God. So he picked up the cross, put us on his back and said, “Let’s go.” He bore our weaknesses. On the cross, he looked next to him, to the insurrectionists, and below him, to the leaders and passers-by, and saw us. We mocked him, telling him that if he really wanted to help us he should come down from the cross and lead us to victory. The nails only pierced his hands and feet; our insults pierced his heart. He could have come down in an instant, but he stayed for hours, until he breathed his last. He knew that what we needed was not what we wanted.

He did not please himself. He became our servant. He bore our weaknesses. He absorbed our insults. Why? So that you could know God and spend eternity with him? Well, sure, but that's only part of it, and it's not the part Paul is talking about in Romans 14:1-15:13. Christ went to the cross not only to unite you with God but to throw open the doors to all peoples and unite you with others who are united with God. The gospel involves the salvation of individuals, to be sure, but even more than that it involves the salvation of a people.

We must see ourselves as part of a people. We must see ourselves, as Paul wanted the Romans to see themselves, as part of a local church. We must work out what it means for us to be the people of God together. It requires movement toward the church, patience and a willingness to listen to each other. It requires open dialogue concerning differences. Being the people of God together must be worked out in many different settings in the church, not least the Sunday worship service, which attempts to gather everyone in the church. Better than anything else, the worship service makes the statement to the watching world, to the angels and the demons, and even to ourselves that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The gospel declares that Jesus is Lord over against all rival claimants. Particularly in Paul's day, the gospel declared that Jesus was Lord instead of Caesar, who claimed the same title. Says scholar N.T. Wright:

Second, a church that all too obviously embodies the social, ethnic, cultural, and political divisions of its surrounding world is no real challenge to the Caesars of this world. It is only when representatives of many nations worship the world's true Lord in unity that Caesar might get the hint that there is after all "another king" (Acts 17:7, Ephesians 3:10). To settle for comfortable disunity because that way we can "be ourselves" and keep things the way we have always known them is to court disloyalty to the one Lord and failure in the church's mission to challenge the gospel of Caesar with the gospel of Jesus Christ."⁷

When different kinds of people gather to worship the same Lord, Wright notes, they are saying that "they are not worshipping a merely local deity, the projection of their own culture, but the One True God of all the world."⁸ The Caesar of our day and place is the individual. If people in our world see us coming together for the sake of Christ, they may get the idea that there is someone they must answer to besides themselves.

Although it is not often appreciated even in the church, which has been influenced by our individualistic, market-driven culture, we must recognize that glorifying God together is the goal of everything. If it is the goal of everything, we must learn to appreciate that faith in Christ defines us more than anything else—more than our ethnicity, more than our age and more than our tastes. We must therefore welcome one another into our lives, worshipping together, eating together, serving together and playing together, in response to Christ's acceptance of us, in order to honor God. We must learn to be willing, if necessary, and on occasion, to sacrifice personal preferences for the sake of the unity that glorifies God.

Our culture encourages you to "find your voice." It's good to find your voice, so long as you realize that the goal of the church is to glorify God with one voice. Finding your voice, then, includes understanding that your voice harmonizes with others in the church. Furthermore, if people are using their voices more to complain about the church

than to praise God in the church, it's difficult for the church to glorify God with one voice.

The greatest stories draw you in so that you live vicariously through them. Paul tells the story of Jesus not simply that we might live vicariously through it but that we live in it. He wants us to make it our own. As the people of Jesus, we must learn to live in his story, placing the needs of others before our own needs, bearing the weaknesses of others, dealing with insults and becoming servants.

Why should we live in the story?

If you're honest with yourself, you might say, "Well, why would I want to do that?" Answer: If you're living in the story of Jesus, and therefore living sacrificially, you're living in a story of hope, which culminates in your own resurrection and vindication. "Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary" (Galatians 6:9).

Here's another question: Would God ask you to do something that wasn't good for you? The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus endured the cross "for the joy set before him" (Hebrews 12:2). The prophet Isaiah said that Jesus after his resurrection would "see his offspring" and "be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:10-11). His family—all of us—gives him joy. What gives you joy? To put it another way, what do you want? Don't you want what Jesus wanted? You want to enjoy your family, don't you? As we saw in our study of Romans 14, with a sidelong glance at Psalm 133:1, you want to love and be loved. You want to be part of a spiritual family in which the love of Jesus flows from one to another. If you are a follower of Jesus, you are, in fact, part of a spiritual family. You can run from it if you want, but you'll be running from your destiny, which is to glorify God with men and women from "every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

Elie Wiesel writes about the time the Nazis were rounding up the Jews of his Transylvanian village. The Wiesels' housekeeper, offered to spirit the family away. The villagers thought they would be transferred to a labor camp. In retrospect, if the Wiesels had known that the destination was not a labor camp but a death camp, they would have gone with their housekeeper. But they refused her offer. "But why?" she protested, her voice breaking. Wiesel's father answered: "Because a Jew must never be separated from his community. What happens to everyone else will happen to us as well."⁹ The Wiesels decided to trust the Nazis rather than be disconnected from their community.

The Jews of Elie Wiesel's village needed each other in the face of the Nazis, who starved them, stripped them, gassed them and incinerated them. The believers in Rome, both Jews and Gentiles, needed to hold onto each other as they held onto the belief that Jesus was Lord while everyone around them confessed that Caesar was Lord—Caesar, who massacred them after blaming them for the fire that swept through Rome. As believers at Peninsula Bible Church, we need each other as we stand up the more insidious expressions of evil in our day.

You need to be part of a community. You probably want to be part of a community. It may not matter to you as much as it did to the Wiesels, but isn't there something within you that wants it to matter that much?

Is there anything else that you want? Sure there is. You want to do something that matters. You want to live your life in a way that blesses others. Even more than that,

perhaps, you'd like to be part of group that blesses others. You want to be part of—and contribute to—a community with a purpose. The church is such a community. The purpose of the church is to worship God and bring his love to the world. That's what it means to glorify God with one voice. For that to happen, we must learn to love and be loved. We must learn to live in the story of Jesus by sacrificing for one another. If you want to do something that matters, what matters more than glorifying God? You can glorify God on your own, but how much more powerful is it when you are part of a people that glorifies God “with one voice”?

Glorifying God with one voice is not of course limited to the worship service, but neither is it independent of the worship service. When we praise God together, we are fulfilling our purpose, and we are having an influence, at the very least in the unseen world. But we are also equipping ourselves to go into the world and work for the kingdom.

Join us

One morning, I woke up with a vivid memory of something that happened 18 to 20 years ago. Nothing happened to trigger the memory. I hadn't thought of it in many years. I just woke up with it.

I was the shortstop on a softball team. We had a one-run lead in the bottom of the last inning. The other team's best hitter was up. He hit a screaming line drive to left-center field. It looked as if it would be a home run. Our left-fielder ran down the ball. I positioned myself for the cutoff. He threw a perfect strike to me. As I turned around to make the throw to home, I saw the runner rounding third and realized that we had a chance to get him if my throw was good. My throw was on the money. The catcher applied the tag. The runner was out, and we won the game.

I lingered with the memory for several moments and found that I was very fond of it. I enjoyed the memory so much because people came together for a common purpose and everyone did his part. For one beautiful, magical, poetic moment, everything came together.

I think God excavated that memory to show me my heart for the church. I want us to come together to worship the Lord and carry the love of Christ to the world. I want everyone to have a part. I want everything to come together in a beautiful, magical, poetic movement of the Spirit of God.

I want to see those shafts of blazing beauty. Do you want to see them too? Join us—I mean, really join us. Don't hang in the back; move to the center. The best way to do that is to look for a place to serve and dive in. You'll find yourself involved in a community with a purpose. Instead of simply trying to get to know people, serve the Lord with people. You'll be surprised how many people you'll get to know without even trying. Let's look for those blazing shafts of glory, and even create some of them, together.

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¹ Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall*, © 1997 by Eugene Peterson, HarperCollins, New York. P. 101.

² The strong, literally, “owe” (*opheilō*) it to the weak to bear the weaknesses of their brothers. In Romans 15:27, Paul will say that Gentiles are “indebted” (*opheiletēs*) to the Jews because the Jews shared their Messiah with them. Moreover, we “owe” love to each other because Christ paid our debt (Romans 13:8).

³ Verse 1 echoes both Romans 5:6, where Paul said that Christ died for us while we were still, literally, “weak,” and Isaiah 53:4, 11, where it is predicted that the Servant of the Lord (Jesus) would bear sins.

⁴ The pronoun “his,” which appears twice in the translation of verse 2, is not part of Paul’s text. He’s referring not to the good of an individual but to the good of, and edification of, the church. Throughout Romans 12-16, Paul advocates overcoming evil with good.

⁵ In Isaiah 49:6, the Lord told his Servant, who turns out to be Christ: “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

⁶ Jesse was the father of King David. The Messiah would come from David’s line. The quote from Isaiah summarizes Paul’s introductory words concerning the story of Christ, who was “born of a descendant of David” and who was “declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:3-4). Just as he speaks of Gentile submission to the Messiah in verse 12, Paul went on to speak of Gentile obedience to the Lord Jesus in Romans 1:5.

⁷ N.T. Wright, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, © 2002 by Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn. P. 750.

⁸ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans: Part Two*, © 2004 by N.T. Wright, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kent.

⁹ Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, © 1995, Alfred A. Knopf, New York.