

# The Power of God unto Salvation: The Organic, Corporate, and Practical Expression of the Gospel in the Epistle to the Romans

by John Pester

The gospel that Paul presents in the Epistle to the Romans is much more than what most Christians commonly understand as a message on redemption for the forgiveness of sins; it is much more than what most Protestant theologians commonly explicate as a treatise on justification by faith; and it is much more than what most religiously-minded commonly consult as a guide for spiritual self-improvement. Rather than being such a limited gospel, it is the gospel of God (1:1), coming from God according to His promise and revealed by Paul as his gospel (v. 2; 2:16; 16:25), and in contrast to the common understandings of humanity generally, the self-righteous particularly, the religious specifically, and the world totally,<sup>1</sup> it is a gospel that imparts the power of God unto salvation, because it is organic in nature, corporate in manifestation, and practical in expression.

The gospel of God that Paul presents in Romans is broad in scope, covering the full compass of God's economy, His plan of salvation that has been ever present in His heart in eternity past (8:29). This plan was initiated in time with the coming of Christ as the seed of David according to the flesh and with the designation of Jesus in His humanity as the Son of God in power out of the resurrection of the dead (1:3-4), and it will consummate with the manifestation of the sons of God in glory at the coming again of our Lord (8:18-19, 23, 30). This economical process is uniquely presented by Paul as his gospel (2:16), but it is not a static message of doctrinal points. Rather, it is a spiritual gift, a word from and with God, that has the power to save and to establish believers in the reality of the manifestation of the economical outworking of God's saving power (1:11), which manifestation is the corporate Body of Christ, composed of both believing Jews and Gentiles, that is expressed in local churches, such as the nascent church in Rome meeting in the home of Prisca and Aquila and the church in

Corinth meeting in the home of Gaius, in a fellowship that includes all the churches of Christ (16:3-5, 23, 16). This fellowship is eternally consequential because it mercifully fulfills God's covenanted and prophetic promises to His chosen people, both Jews and Gentiles, according to the mystery, which was previously kept in silence in the times of the ages but which now has been proclaimed as the gospel (1:2, 16; 16:25-26). And this fellowship also brings glory to the only wise God through Jesus Christ because there is a partaking of the organic life, the divine life, in Christ (v. 27; 11:17; 5:10), there is corporate manifestation of this life in the Body of Christ (12:4-8), and there is a practical expression that effectively crushes God's enemy under the feet of the churches and brings in God's kingdom (16:20; 14:17).

Witness Lee succinctly summarizes these points in his characterization of the subject of Romans as "The Gospel of God—To Make Sinners Sons of God to Constitute the Body of Christ, Which Is Expressed as the Local Churches" (Recovery Version, outline). The sinners in Romans encompass all humanity, both Jews and Gentiles (3:22-23; 11:32, cf. Gal. 3:22); the sons of God include all who have believed through faith, both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 3:28-30; 10:11-13); the Body of Christ is composed of believers who have been grafted into Christ, both Jews and Gentiles (11:17-20, 23-24); and the local churches manifest the peace, the oneness of all believers whose separated standing as either Jew or Gentile has been done away with in their reconciliation to the God of peace (5:1-2, 11; 15:33; 16:20). This is the content of the saving gospel that Paul desired to impart into the believers in Rome and to all those to whom it would be subsequently announced in his travels and through his enduring Epistle (1:11; 15:19, 24), and so within us there needs to be a receiving response.

## Receiving Paul's Gospel in Romans

It is possible to receive the gospel of God not as it comes from God through Paul but as it comes from our minds that have been fashioned according to the age and are in need of renewing (12:2). When we read the text of Romans through the biased lens of our own reasonings and understandings, it is easy to miss Paul's burden for the full salvation of God's people. The only means for overthrowing the biased deficiencies in our unrenewed minds are the Spirit and the word of Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5; Rom. 10:17; Col. 3:16), both of which, as one, are spiritually and mystically embodied in the Word, the text of the Bible, in words that convey spirit and life because they come from God and with God (John 6:63). Thus, the full text of Romans, not merely a few doctrinal "proof texts" commonly touted by various schools of theology, presents the full content of God's saving gospel. Indeed, the same God who breathed out through Paul the words *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (3:23), which speak of our need for a saving gospel, also breathed out through Paul the extended words of greeting in chapter 16, which

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speak of the practical issue of God's saving gospel. Both of these portions in Romans speak of the contents of not only God's gospel but also Paul's gospel, and therefore, it is important to consider Paul's characterizations of his gospel in order to understand his burden, which, in turn, informs his purpose for writing this Epistle.

In *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* Richard N. Longenecker quotes Fenton J. A. Hort, who "long ago observed, 'so long as the purpose of the Epistle remains obscure, the main drift of its doctrinal teaching must remain obscure also'" (128). Both Longenecker and Hort give priority to understanding Paul's purpose over understanding his doctrine, arguing that understanding Paul's purpose is the key to understanding his doctrine. Longenecker says,

It is of very great importance when taking up any of Paul's letters to note what he says in the epistolary frame of that letter about (1) his personal concerns when writing and (2) his purpose or purposes for writing (or what might be called his 'agenda'). (129)

This approach has merit because it brings all of Paul's utterances, those that apparently are only personal and those that seemingly are only doctrinal, into a consideration of the content of the saving gospel of God.

**P**aul speaks of the gospel in personal and intimate terms: "In the day when God judges the secrets of men according to my gospel through Jesus Christ," and "Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel" (Rom. 2:16; 16:25). From an unbeliever's realization of his need for God's saving gospel because of God's judgment on all humanity to the believers' consummate establishment in the reality of the contents of God's saving gospel, God's saving power follows the course uniquely revealed by Paul, making it his gospel. This is the gospel that he fully preached "in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit of God...from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum" (15:19). Longenecker says, "From his own plans as expressed in the letter itself, it is clear that Paul wrote Romans after having completed an extensive ministry to Gentiles throughout the eastern part of the Roman empire" (44). During this journey Paul no doubt came into contact with many unbelievers but also with scattered believers in Corinth, Berea, Thessalonica, and Ephesus. From those he met—whether unbelievers who responded to his preaching or believers who were struggling to live according to an incomplete gospel (Acts 18:24—19:7)—he must have discerned the need for a fuller presentation of the gospel, and so he wrote to the believers in Rome in order to

give to the Christians at Rome what he calls "some spiritual gift" (*τι χρισμα πνευματικόν*),

which he thought of as something uniquely his (cf. his reference to "my gospel" in 16:25; see also 2:16), felt they needed if they were to "mutually encourage" one another (1:11-12), and evidently wanted them to know in order that they might understand accurately and more appreciatively what he was proclaiming in his mission to the Gentiles. (Longenecker 148)

Paul's purpose in preaching his gospel, both on his journeys and in his Epistle to the Romans, involved more than producing an appreciative understanding of God's work among humanity, although this was not an insignificant intention on his part; his deeper burden involved his desire to impart a gift that was inherently spiritual, that is, a gift that conveyed the Spirit with His power to save not only initially but consummately. Paul presented an accurate understanding of the gospel so that the spiritual power, the saving power, inherent in his gift would not remain mysterious and untapped but would be actualized in the experience of those who had believed into Jesus Christ, who came out of the seed of David according to the flesh and was designated the Son of God in power

according to the Spirit of holiness out of the resurrection of the dead (1:3-4).

Based on his burden to bring believers into the experience of God's salvation, Paul begins his long discourse on the content of the gospel by speaking of its power to save: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, both to Jew first and to Greek" (v. 16). Salvation is uppermost in Paul's mind, and the saving power of the gospel comes not from an assent to doctrinal points but from an experience of the saving power of God's life inherent in the gospel. Although the divine life of the Triune God is repeatedly but not emphatically referenced in Paul's personal gospel,<sup>2</sup> it implicitly informs and underpins all his gospel. The divine life is given by faith to those who are dead (v. 17; 4:17); the divine life is the goal of our seeking (2:7); the divine life saves us much more so that we can walk and reign in the newness of its justifying realm (5:10, 17-18; 6:4); the divine life is a gift and the goal of both our righteousness and sanctification, and even of the commandments (5:21; 6:22-23; 7:10); and the divine life operates as a law of the Spirit of life in the three parts of a regenerated believer—spirit, soul, and body (8:2, 6, 10-11)—in order to bring the salvation of God to its ordained conclusion (vv. 29-30).

*P*aul speaks of the gospel as being for both Jews and Greeks: "The gospel...is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, both to Jew first and to Greek," and "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all and rich to all who call upon Him; for 'whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved'...[by hearing] those who announce the news of good things" (1:16; 10:12-13, 15). In speaking so directly about both Jews and Greeks, Paul seemingly is making a case for the additional inclusion of Gentiles as recipients of God's salvation,<sup>3</sup> but if this were so, the phrase *both to Jew first and to Greek* in 1:16 would be unnecessary, because he references all humanity, including Jews and Greeks, in the same verse with the phrase *to everyone who believes*, and he further references all humanity with the word *whoever* in 10:13. He clearly has another purpose for drawing attention not only to the distinction between Jews and Gentiles by virtue of his pairing of the terms *Jew* and *Jews* with *Greek*, *Greeks*, and *Gentiles* (1:16; 2:9-10; 3:9, 29; 9:24; 10:12) but also to a lack of distinction between Jews and Gentiles in the operation of God's power unto salvation (1:16), in the tribulation and anguish that comes upon the souls of those who commit evil (2:9), in the glory and honor and peace that come to everyone who works good (v. 10), in being under the charge of sin (3:9), in being under the same God (v. 29),

in being called by God (9:24), in believing in Christ initially to receive His saving grace (10:11), and in calling upon Him continually to receive the abundant riches of His life in His "much more" salvation (v. 12; 5:10).

As an apostle to the Gentiles, Paul presented the gospel of God to Gentiles from a human perspective; that is, he acknowledged the God-ordained and historically factual distinction between Jews and Gentiles. But the contents of his gospel were a reflection of the divine perspective; that is, he acknowledged no distinction between believing Jews and believing Gentiles because both had been made one Body in Christ, whose oneness in Christ validated the power of the gospel of salvation to produce a corporate salvation. Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles primarily to bring them into the Body of Christ, which also included believing Jews. From the human perspective the Body of Christ is composed of two peoples—Jews and Gentiles. From the divine perspective, however, the Body is one in the one Christ, the Christ who made the two into one by breaking down the middle wall of partition in His ordinance-abolishing death on the cross

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and by organically grafting both Jews and Gentiles through faith into Himself (Eph. 2:14-16; Rom. 11:17). Paul's burden and references to both Jews and Gentiles speak of his purpose to point to the Body of Christ as the issue of God's full salvation.

*P*aul speaks of the gospel's ability to establish believers, according to the revelation of the mystery, through their participation in God's full salvation:

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel, that is, the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which has been kept in silence in the times of the ages but has now been manifested..." (16:25-26)

All the real elements proclaimed in the gospel, including God's justification and the believers' sanctification, incorporation into the Body of Christ, and glorification, have, from the divine perspective, already been accomplished. This is why Paul speaks of the coming glorification of the church in the past tense in 8:30. From the divine

perspective these elements have been accomplished in the divine economy, but from the human perspective they still need to be established, that is, to be set fast and confirmed in the corporate experience of the church. Paul knew that the accomplishments of God in His divine economy would not be fully actualized in the experience of the universal church if a local church, such as the church in Rome, was not established through an apprehension of and entrance into the contents of his gospel. And so he trusted both in the gift of the Spirit as the spiritual content of his gospel and in the One who is able to establish practical and local expressions of the universal church based on the imparted content of his gospel.

This establishing is according to the pure and full gospel of God, that is, the proclaiming and ministering of the all-inclusive Christ, and according to the revelation of the mystery, which has been kept in silence in the times of the ages. Only the pure gospel, the living Christ, and God's revealed mystery can establish us and keep us in oneness for the church life. (Lee, Recovery Version, Rom. 16:25, note 1)

### The desire to impart the organic life of God by speaking the word of Christ so that God's divine life can operate to produce a corporate and practical manifestation of this life is Paul's pressing concern.

Paul's desire to establish the church in Rome speaks of his heart for redeemed humanity to enter into the accomplishments in God's economy, but it also speaks of his realization that an established local expression of the Body of Christ should manifest the reality of the mystery that once was hidden in God's heart but now has been revealed through the gospel. The establishing power of the gospel is rooted in three intrinsic factors that are implicitly present in the Epistle to the Romans: the gospel of God's salvation is organic, corporate, and practically expressed. The gospel manifests an organic salvation, beginning with an organic seed, both human and divine, that grows into an organic tree, both divine and human, through the divine life that saves us much more than we can see when we are in the midst of things that are working together for good (8:24-25, 28). The gospel also manifests a corporate salvation, situated in the organic Body of Christ, involving both Jews and Gentiles who have been made one in the divine life though an organic union produced by a faith that is in and of Christ (12:4-15).<sup>4</sup> And the gospel manifests a practical salvation, involving the transformed living and receiving of believers

who meet as one as a local expression of the revealed mystery of God's organic and corporate salvation.

The purpose behind every personal utterance by Paul in the Epistle to the Romans can be linked to the organic, corporate, and practical factors inherent in Paul's saving gospel, and consequently, behind every seemingly doctrinal utterance in the Epistle to the Romans, there is a desire to enable and further the manifestation of the power inherent in the gospel of God's full salvation. The desire to impart the organic life of God by speaking the word of Christ so that God's divine life can operate to practically produce a corporate and practical manifestation of this life is Paul's pressing concern in the presentation of his gospel.

### Organic Salvation in the Gospel in Romans

Paul's gospel begins with God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, whom he identifies as the seed of David: "The gospel of God...concerning His Son, who came out of the seed of David according to the flesh" (1:1, 3). Every seed is a potentiation of organic life, and in His incarnation Christ was organically joined to humanity as a seed to express the divine life in and through the human life: "*The seed of David* implies Christ's human nature. By incarnation, the first step of Christ's process, God was brought into humanity" (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 3, note 4). In Christ's incarnation the divine life was joined to a human descendant of David according the promise spoken beforehand through the prophets in the holy Scriptures (v. 2). This divine life was expressed so fully through the sinless humanity of Jesus Christ that He was designated the Son of God in resurrection in His humanity; that is, His humanity was divinized through the operation of the Spirit of holiness (v. 4). Thomas R. Schreiner in *Romans* notes, in contrast to the hesitancy of other commentators, that Christ's designation as the Son of God is related to His humanity as the seed of David:<sup>5</sup>

The one who existed eternally as the Son was appointed the Son of God in power as the Son of David. The new dimension was not his sonship but his heavenly installation as God's Son by virtue of his Davidic sonship. In other words, the Son reigned with the Father from all eternity, but as a result of his incarnation and atoning work he was appointed to be the Son of God as one who was now both God and man. (38-39)

Throughout Romans the organic nature of God's salvation is underscored by the repeated use of the word *seed* in relation to both Christ, who, as the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), is the focus of God's promise, and to the

believers, who, as the seed of Abraham (v. 29), have received the promise of the divine seed through faith. Romans 4:13 and 16 speak of the promise of the seed made to Abraham and to his seed; verse 18 speaks of the multiplication of the promised seed; 9:7-8 speaks of the spiritual nature of the promised seed; verse 29 speaks of our being saved by the promised seed; and 11:1 speaks of our status as a true Israelite through our connection to the promised seed. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation because it begins with the promise of an organic seed that saves us from our sins, grows and multiplies in us, and transforms us into a new creation—an organic manifestation of the seed of life imparted into us by faith—the true Israel of God (9:6; Gal. 6:15-16).

This organic seed is both a divine seed, identified by the term *His Son* in Romans 1:3, and a human seed, identified by the term *seed of David* in the same verse. This seed is growing in us through the process of justification and sanctification that is revealed in the chapters 3 through 8, and it is increasingly conforming us to the image of the Son who is the Firstborn among many brothers (8:29). This growing seed is an organic constitution of both the redeeming, justifying, and sanctifying God and His redeemed, justified, and sanctified believers. The growing together of God and redeemed humanity is mediated through the divinized humanity of Christ that has been incorporated into and applied by the Spirit of life through Christ's redeeming death and life-imparting resurrection. Paul speaks explicitly of this organic growing through our experience of the elements of His death and resurrection: "If we have grown together with Him in the likeness of His death, indeed we will also be in the likeness of His resurrection" (6:5). In a footnote on the word *grown* in verse 5, Witness Lee associates the growth of this seed with our organic union with Christ:

This denotes an organic union in which growth takes place, so that one partakes of the life and characteristics of the other. In the organic union with Christ, whatever Christ passed through has become our history. His death and resurrection are now ours because we are in Him and are organically joined to Him. This is grafting (11:24). Such a grafting (1) discharges all our negative elements, (2) resurrects our God-created faculties, (3) uplifts our faculties, (4) enriches our faculties, and (5) saturates our entire being to transform us. (Recovery Version, note 1)

In *Romans: Verse-by-verse* William R. Newell comments on the following translation of 6:5: "For if we became united with [Him] in the likeness of His death, so shall we be also [in the likeness] of His resurrection," associating our growing together with Christ with the organic

process of grafting; Newell says, "The word [*united*] means to *grow together*—as a graft in a tree, so that the graft shares the tree's life" (209). In a footnote to the words *grow together*, he further states that "the proper word means to be actually enlived together with" (209). This enlivening together, as illustrated by grafting, "produces an organic union...It is the uniting of two lives as one so that they may share one mingled life and one living" (Lee, Recovery Version, Rom. 11:17, note 1). In contrast to Newell's and Lee's focus on a horticultural metaphor in 6:5, Schreiner argues that Paul's metaphor is biological:

Some scholars have understood σύμφυτοι to derive from the verb συμφυτεύειν (*symphyteuein*, to plant together). On this understanding the word is a horticultural metaphor denoting believers being implanted together with Christ in the likeness or form of his death. Few scholars today, however, would agree with this derivation; it is almost universally acknowledged that σύμφυτοι stems from the verb συμφύειν (*sympheuin*, to grow together...). The metaphor is biological rather than horticultural. (313)

The gospel begins with the promise of an organic seed that saves us from our sins, grows and multiplies in us, and transforms us into a new creation—an organic manifestation of the seed of life imparted into us by faith.

In either case, whether the metaphor is biological or horticultural, *grown together* or *growing together* implies an organic process involving the union of the divine life with our redeemed human life as mediated by the resurrected and divinely designated human life of the seed of David. As a consequence, Schreiner's insistence that the metaphor is biological rather than horticultural does not obviate Paul's organic perspective in verse 5. In fact, Schreiner's distinction disappears when *grown together* rather than *planted together* is used, because *grown together* can imply both a biological and a horticultural process. And in fact, Paul uses both biological and horticultural terminology in Romans to describe the development of the organic salvation inherent in the gospel.

Paul employs both biological and horticultural terms when he speaks of the human biological seed of David in 1:4 growing into a cultivated olive tree in chapter 11. The working out of God's selection in Romans 9 through 11 relies heavily upon Paul's extended use of the metaphor of grafting. This metaphor reflects an organic

process—grafting; and it focuses on organic objects—an olive tree with both root and fatness, branches from a wild olive tree, and natural branches that were broken off but that can and will be grafted in again (11:17, 19, 21, 23-24, 26). The olive tree with its natural and grafted branches is “described as the people of God, which is composed of both Jews and Gentiles” (Schreiner 605). The branches of the olive tree are the believing Jews who have been grafted into Christ out of faith and the believing Gentiles who have been grafted into Christ through faith (vv. 23-24; 3:30). The root of the cultivated olive tree is widely regarded as the three patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who are referred to in 11:28 as “the fathers.” The fathers are “the root that supports the branches of God’s cultivated olive tree, Israel” (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 16, note 1). Even with Paul’s prominent focus on the tree, the branches, and the root in his organic metaphor of grafting, however, the factor that actualizes the reality behind the metaphor—the believers’ organic union with the Lord—is presented in his less prominent reference to the fatness that flows through the root of the olive tree and is manifested through the flourishing branches of the olive

expresses the Triune God. (Lee, Recovery Version, Rom. 11:17, note 2)

If Paul’s reference to fatness is less than prominent in our understanding, it is only because the operation of the divine life in the person of Christ and in us as believers is assumed throughout Romans and also because of our inability to see God’s salvation in Romans as anything more than a forensic salvation. Paul’s use of the organic metaphor of grafting to present his revelation of the organic nature of God’s salvation is even more appropriate when we understand that the grafting metaphor reflects the reality of our organic union, of our being one spirit with the Lord, a union that is initiated by faith (vv. 19-20, 23; 1 Cor. 6:17).

**P**aul’s use of grafting as an organic metaphor derives from his understanding of the organic nature of the faith that we receive and that justifies us when we hear, appreciate, and receive Christ through His word. Based on this understanding, Paul presents an extended discourse on faith and believing in chapter 10, prior to speaking of grafting in chapter 11. Faith saves us because it brings us into an actual organic union with the saving Christ, a union that is depicted through the metaphor of grafting. This organic faith was initiated when we heard, believed, and received the organic content in the word of Christ.

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tree. The fatness of the root refers to Christ and to the unsearchable riches in His organic life, the divine life that saves us much more following our reconciliation to God (5:10),<sup>6</sup> that is imparted in our spirit (8:10), that is spreading into our soul (v. 6), that will saturate our body (v. 11), and that operates as an organic law to bring us into full conformity with Christ (v. 2). In and through the flow of the fatness of the divine life, God and redeemed humanity become one in life and nature, with God being in redeemed humanity and redeemed humanity being in God (John 14:20), through the grafting together of two lives that are no longer contrary<sup>7</sup> to each other because of the propitiating sacrifice and mediating humanity of the designated Son of God, Jesus (Rom. 11:24; 3:24-25).

When the Gentile believers are grafted into Christ, they are grafted into Israel, the cultivated olive tree, to become fellow partakers of the fatness (Christ) of the root (the patriarchs—[11:16]), the unsearchable riches of God in Christ (Eph. 3:8). They and Israel have become the branches of Christ, the true vine (John 15:1, 5), and with Him the two have become the organism that

Faith has an object, and it issues from its object. This object is Jesus, who is God incarnate. When man hears Him, knows Him, appreciates Him, and treasures Him, He causes faith to be generated in man, enabling man to believe in Him. Thus, He becomes the faith in man by which man believes in Him. Hence, this faith becomes the faith in Him, and it is also the faith that belongs to Him. (Lee, Recovery Version, 3:22, note 1)

When we hear the word of Christ, we hear and receive the faith of Christ, and we are organically joined to Christ and to all His accomplishments in the economy of God’s organic salvation, including His propitiation of us for our sins (v. 25), His justification of us for our faith (v. 24), His reconciliation of us to God (5:10-11), His sanctification of us from our heritage in Adam (vv. 12-21), His identification with us for our growing together with Him (6:1-23), His indwelling of us for our living according to the Spirit of life (8:1-13), and His making of us, who were individualistic in Adam (12:3), members of His one Body according to the apportioned measure of His faith (vv. 4-5). The organic faith of Christ, which becomes our organic faith, ultimately produces fitly framed members of the organic Body of Christ. The emergence of the Body of Christ in chapter 12 speaks of a further development of

the organic salvation that Paul presents in Romans, namely that the process of God's organic salvation is directed toward the participation of all believers, both Jews and Gentiles, in a corporate salvation through a fellow partaking of the root of the fatness of the olive tree into whom all believers have been organically grafted (11:17).

### Corporate Salvation in the Gospel in Romans

Our organic salvation is corporate in nature because our organic union with Christ through faith is realized in our spirit, a union that is both a union with Christ and a union with all the believers in the corporate Body of Christ; we are not individually and separately joined to the Lord. Although Paul does not explicitly reference the Body of Christ until chapter 12, his reference is not a tangential afterthought to his initial presentation of the gospel contents in chapters 1 through 8, and it is not merely the resumption of his development of the gospel following a parenthetical discussion of God's selection in chapters 9 through 11. Rather, it is the overarching goal that informs the contents of chapters 1 through 8, chapters 9 through 11, and chapters 12 through 16 as three distinct but connected sections.

In chapters 1 through 8 God's organic salvation, as it applies to both Jews and Gentiles, the constituents of the Body of Christ, is detailed and defined; in chapters 9 through 11 the process through which Jews and Gentiles are brought into the Body of Christ is explained; and in chapters 12 through 16, the goal of the Body, including its transformed living and practical expression, is attained. In chapters 1 through 8, which begins with the utterly fallen condition of man in sin, death, and division and advances to the point of redeemed humanity receiving the indwelling Christ as the Spirit of life, the divided condition of humanity is reflected in Paul's numerous references to Jews and Greeks, often in the same verse (1:5, 16; 2:9-10, 17, 28-29; 3:1, 9, 29). In chapters 9 through 11, which explain how the Body of Christ comes into existence by overcoming the separation between Jews and Gentiles that was temporarily in effect as a result of God's need to call out a chosen race to advance His wise plan (11:33), Paul's use of *Jews* or *Jew* and *Gentiles* or *Greek* drop dramatically. In these chapters there are only two such instances, 9:24 and 10:12, and in both instances it is not the distinction between Jew and Gentile that is stressed but their identification with one another in God's calling and in their calling upon the name of the Lord to bring them into God's corporate salvation. As a further confirmation of the development of the corporate aspect of salvation in Romans, the terms *Israel* and *Israelites* appear for the first time in chapters 9 through 11, indicating that the true status of a believing Jew and

a believing Gentile is a matter of being spiritually and organically joined to God as His corporate people. In chapters 12 through 16, which detail the reality and living of the Body of Christ that has been brought into existence through God's organic salvation in chapters 1 through 8 and through His wise outworking of His selection according to grace in chapters 9 through 11, there are no references to Jews or Greeks, because from the divine perspective there cannot be Jews and Greeks in the Body of Christ (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).<sup>8</sup>

The revealed mystery that has been manifested is the mystery of a corporate salvation that was prophetically promised to both Jews and Gentiles and that never excluded, even from the very beginning of God's operation among humanity, one group to the ultimate detriment of the other (Rom. 1:2; 16:26; Gal. 3:8, 14).<sup>9</sup> Rather than stressing distinction and separation between Jew and Greek, the gospel of God's salvation stresses a corporate salvation that is derived from the organic contents of the gospel in Romans 1 through 8, that is actualized through an organic faith that brings

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both Jew and Greek into the Body through an organic grafting in chapters 9 through 11, and that is manifested and expressed in chapters 12 through 16. Without understanding these three sections as a progressive development of the organic and corporate aspects of salvation in the gospel of God, it is difficult for many to exegetically link the section comprising chapters 9 through 11 with the section prior to it and with the section after it. Richard N. Longenecker acknowledges this, saying,

[Chapters 9 through 11 have] often been viewed as a self-contained and discrete section of material. But though it is often accepted as a unified and distinguishable body of material, questions have repeatedly been asked regarding how this section is related to the two earlier theological sections and the following exhortation section. (409)

In "Jesus' Divine Sonship in Paul's Epistle to the Romans," L. W. Hurtado sees a relationship between Paul's words concerning Israel in chapters 9 through 11 and the overall gospel content in Romans. However, the connection that

he makes is largely objective, and it still maintains a distinction between Jews and Gentiles because he associates chapters 1 through 8 with Paul's ministry to the Gentiles and chapters 9 through 11 with God's approach to the problem of the unbelief of some Jews, which has excluded them from the benefits of the gospel, seemingly in contradiction to God's promise:

It is commonly recognized that in Romans 1—8 Paul develops and defends for his readers the theological rational for his ministry to the Gentiles. After having done so, he then turns in chapters 9—11 to the logical questions that have to do with Israel in the light of the large-scale rejection of the gospel among the Jews. Romans 9—11 is not, as it has often been treated in Christian tradition, a parenthesis, but integral to the understanding of God's great salvific program as presented in Romans. (232)

The “salvific program” in Romans involves more than Jewish branches being broken off so that Gentile branches could be grafted into Christ (11:17, 19), and it involves

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more than God being able to graft Jewish branches back into the cultivated olive tree (v. 23), which is the apparent focus of chapters 9 through 11. The “salvific program” also goes beyond the focus of Hurtado, who suggests that there are

two major dynamics that run through the epistle to the Romans: (1) God's faithfulness to historic Israel, in spite of the unbelief and disobedience of many in Israel, and (2) God's great generosity in annexing Gentiles into the company of the redeemed, making them sons of God, even though the privileges of Israel (9:1-5) are not theirs by natural rights. (233)

**F**rom the beginning of the record in the Holy Scriptures, God's salvific program, in fact, has been directed toward imparting the divine life into God-created humanity, and following the fall of humanity, it has been directed to recovering all who have been alienated from the life of God due to the transgression of sins emanating from a sinful and corrupted human nature. It has been focused on conforming those who believe in

Christ, regardless of prior cultural and ethnic distinctions, to the one image of Christ, the image of the One in whom all were created.

In the uttermost fall of humanity, as depicted in 1:18 through 32, there was a corporate fall in which all sinned and all were constituted sinners through the disobedience of one man (5:12, 19); thus, there was a need for a corporate salvation. Through ignorance of sin and ignorance of God (3:20), all humanity was apart from Christ (Eph. 2:12), and so God called out a special race through whom He could open a way for all humanity to receive through grace the salvation that He planned and purposed for all in eternity (Rom. 3:2). And so He appeared to Abraham while he was a heathen in Ur of the Chaldeans and spoke a word in the form of a promise of an organic seed who would come in the flesh to condemn sin in the flesh (Acts 7:2; Gen. 12:3, 7; Gal. 3:16; Rom. 8:3). This speaking generated a justifying faith in Abraham, but an enlargement of his response of faith required that sin become exceedingly sinful in the eyes of those whom God called, and so the oracles of God (3:2), including especially the commandments, were entrusted to Israel so that the law would expose the true sinful condition of humanity and conduct those who hear the word of Christ unto Christ (7:8-9; Gal. 3:24), bringing everyone who believes into an organic union with the seed of David and also fulfilling the promise of gaining a corporate seed (v. 29).

**A**lthough Paul is apparently speaking of “the relation of the Christian gospel and God's promises to Israel” and of “how the Christian gospel relates to the hope of Israel” in Romans 9 through 11 (Longenecker 421, 419), he is, in fact, speaking of how the organic and corporate Body of Christ, in which there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile (10:12), has been produced according to God's purpose of selection without violating His righteousness and while also demonstrating His mercy (9:11, 14-15). The Body has been produced through the righteousness that is out of faith, a righteousness that first speaks of Christ's incarnation, which brought Him down from heaven to live a perfect human life on earth, culminating in His redeeming and ordinance-abolishing death (10:6; Eph. 2:15). This righteousness then speaks of Christ's resurrection, which brought Him up from the dead so that He could come as the Spirit to announce peace as the gospel and to be the word who is near to us (v. 17), even in our mouth and in our heart through the word of the proclaimed faith (Rom. 10:7-8).

When the word that can organically impart the riches of God's glory is proclaimed, there is a believing response in vessels of mercy and a response of unbelief in vessels of

wrath fitted for destruction (9:22-23). Nevertheless, God sovereignly used both responses to open the way for the faithful enactment of His promise of an organic seed. Through God's cultivating process of incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection, this seed has grown into an organic tree that is able to receive into Himself those from among the Gentiles who have been redeemed in general and those from among the Jews whose sins have been taken away in particular (11:27). Chapters 9 through 11 ultimately speak of the gracious organic gifts of Christ to His Body and of God's irrevocable corporate calling to produce the Body of Christ (11:29), not only in its intrinsic spiritual reality but also in its intensive practicality. Based on God's willingness to show mercy and the fact that He has shown mercy to both Jews and Gentiles by bringing them into the organic and corporate salvation He prepared according to His wisdom and knowledge and enacted according to His judgments and untraceable ways (vv. 31-33), Paul then implores the members of the Body to enter into the practical salvation that is revealed in chapters 12 through 16.

### Practical Salvation in the Gospel in Romans

In Paul's presentation of God's organic and corporate gospel of salvation in Romans, he unveils also a practical salvation in the Body of Christ that grows out from the gospel's organic elements and that is expressed through the gospel's corporate elements. All the detailed developments of this practical salvation in chapters 12 through 16 are based on Paul's exhortation in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 12:

I exhort you therefore, brothers, through the compassions of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, well pleasing to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be fashioned according to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and well pleasing and perfect.

**C**hapters 12 through 16 practically prove that the will of God is not only the church as a universal expression of the Body of Christ but also that the universal church must be locally expressed through members who live in the grace and peace of the God of peace (1:7; 15:33), in both local churches and in the world (14:19; 12:18). Living in peace in a local church, that is, living in oneness with Christ and the members of His Body (Eph. 2:14), is maintained by exercising gifts that have been given according to grace (Rom. 12:4-8), by living a life of the highest virtues in the organic life of Christ (vv. 9-21), by receiving the fellow members of the Body as Christ has received them (14:1—15:13), and by communicating to the needs of the saints in other localities (vv. 25-33). Living

in peace in the world, as a local expression of the Body of Christ in an earthly locality, is maintained by being subject to authorities (13:1-7), by loving our neighbors (vv. 8-10), by casting off the works of darkness (vv. 11-14), and by continuing to serve humanity with the gospel (15:14-24). Through such a living, the local expression of the church becomes memorable through its members, who have become dear to each other, having been established in the organic and corporate gospel in Romans (ch. 16).

The practical salvation that issues forth from the organic functioning of the corporate Body of Christ begins with our bodies (12:1): Our bodies are needed for the Body, and the practical presentation of our bodies is our most reasonable service. The organic Body of Christ is more than an ethereal, spiritual construct, and it is more than a doctrinal item in need of mere acknowledgement. Rather, the practical local expression of the organic Body of Christ proves God's good, well pleasing, and perfect will (v. 2). This proving is intensely practical because it involves presenting our bodies to serve the Body according to the gifts of grace that have been given to us (v. 6).

**The practical salvation that issues forth from the organic functioning of the Body of Christ begins with our bodies: Our bodies are needed for the Body, and the practical presentation of our bodies is our most reasonable service.**

It also involves the renewing of our minds so that we can sober-mindedly find our place in the Body and graciously receive all the members of the Body regardless of the strength or weakness of their faith (vv. 2-3; 14:1—15:13). Rather than regarding chapters 12 through 15 as a series of exhortations and chapter 16 as an obligatory conclusion, the practical salvation that is presented in these chapters is an overarching theme that consummates the presentation of the gospel of God.

**I**n chapter 12 Paul introduces the items that are essential to carrying out the practical salvation that is revealed through the gospel and that proves the will of God—a presented body and a renewed mind. After this brief introduction in verses 1 and 2, Paul begins a detailed treatment of this salvation in verse 3 by speaking of the exercise of the gifts by the many members of the Body. These gifts of grace differ among the members, and more importantly, for our appreciation of them, they differ from the gifts

mentioned in Eph. 4:8, which refer to the gifted persons

given by Christ in His ascension to His Body for its building up. The gifts in life here are also different from the miraculous gifts mentioned in 1 Cor. 12 and 14. The gifts in life are developed by the growth in life and by the transformation in life mentioned in v. 2, out of the inward, initial gifts mentioned in 1 Cor. 1:7. (Lee, Recovery Version, Rom. 12:6, note 1)

The gifts in verses 6 through 8 all involve practical applications and situations: speaking for God through prophesying, serving in the Body, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, showing mercy, and cheerfulness. Although it is possible to view the gifts of prophesying, serving, and teaching in purely spiritual terms, it is much more difficult to apply an over-spiritualized understanding of the word *gifts* to the gifts of exhortation, giving, leading, showing mercy, and cheerfulness. Few may regard a simple and short word of exhortation, a hidden act of giving and generosity, a willing embrace of one who has stumbled, or a cheerful attitude as a spiritual gift, but without all these eight gifts the practical expression of God's corporate salvation would be nearly nonexistent: Without

peace with all men, and do not avenge a wrong in any way (vv. 14-21). These organic expressions of life can be manifested in their fullness only in the corporate and local expressions of the Body of Christ, the local churches.

In chapter 13 the practical salvation contained in the gospel of God is detailed further in relation to the world because the local expressions of God's organic and corporate salvation—the local churches—are practically in the world, even though they are not of the world (John 17:16). In their practical salvation, as it relates to the world, the members of the Body of Christ are free from the fear of authorities because they are subject to the authorities over them (Rom. 13:1-3), they trust in God to recompense evil through His ordained authorities (vv. 2, 4), and they render to all the things that are due (v. 7). Furthermore, they live in a practical environment that is conducive for the building up of the church because they love their neighbors in the world (vv. 8-10), cast off the works of darkness, and put on the Lord Jesus Christ in their encounters with the world and its lust (vv. 12-14; 1 John 2:17).

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the gift of exhortation, the weak would drift away; without the gift of giving, the material needs of the churches, the saints, and the work would be neglected; without the gift of leading, the flock of God would be aimless; without the gift of mercy, the downtrodden would not be lifted up; and without the gift of cheerfulness, much of the supply from the gifts would not be received by others. The grace that produces these gifts in life produces them for the sake of the Body, because each gift can be actualized and expressed only in practical situations involving other fellow members in the Body.

In the practical exercise of these gifts, there is also an opportunity to live a life of the highest virtues that practically saves us. In the Body and through the grace of life, we are saved from many things, including hypocrisy, a lack of brotherly love, criticism of others, slothfulness, a weak spirit, hopelessness, weakness, prayerlessness, selfishness, and isolation (vv. 9-13). Through the grace of life, we bless rather than curse, empathize with others in their real human situations, do not rely on our thoughts and wisdom, do not repay evil for evil, endeavor to live in

In chapter 14 of Romans the reality of God's practical salvation is tested by the capacity of those in a local church to receive any believer regardless of the strength of his faith. It is easy to "receive" a believer outwardly, that is, to merely accept a believer as a brother, but it is much more difficult to actually receive a believer inwardly, that is, to not pass judgment on his considerations. Receiving requires transformation by the renewing of the mind (12:2), a willingness to let others live to the Lord according to the Lord's current leading (14:4-6), a sober realization of the coming judgment seat of God (vv. 10-12), and a desire to live according to the principle of love for the sake of practically manifesting the kingdom of God (vv. 13-23). The extent to which we possess the things of peace and the things that build up rather than tear down is tested daily (v. 19), and our progress in the pursuit of these things reflects the extent of our participation in God's practical salvation.

In chapter 15 the practical salvation of the gospel of God is manifested through our willingness to continually receive one another as Christ has received us to the glory of God (vv. 1-13), our willingness to continually serve humanity with the gospel (vv. 14-24), and our willingness to continually communicate to the needs of the saints (vv. 25-33). Receiving involves a serving love and care for those in the Body (v. 2), announcing the gospel involves a serving love and care for those who live in places where the name of Christ has not been named (v. 20), and communicating to the needs of the churches involves a serving love and care for those members of the Body who practically

reside in places other than just our own. When the believers are received, there is a practical building up of the Body that brings glory to God (vv. 6-7); when Christ is named through the gospel, there is a practical increase and spread of the Body; and when there is a practical, material communication between the churches, there is a furtherance of the spiritual fellowship of life in the Body of Christ.

Finally, in chapter 16 Paul's purpose in speaking of the organic, corporate, and practical salvation contained in the gospel of God is fully manifested in his practical speaking about the practical expression of the organic and corporate Body of Christ as local churches, whose members have been inscribed on Paul's heart. The long list of twenty-seven names included in the final chapter, the unnamed references to *household*, *mother*, *brothers*, *sister*, and *saints* (vv. 10-11, 13-15), and the specific mention of local churches (vv. 1, 4-5, 16) are an unprecedented practical accounting in the New Testament of a vibrant and practical church life that sustained and supplied Paul. The names are names of real believers who had been joined to Paul in his travels and through his ministry, and the places are places in which real groups of believers were meeting as the one church in a practically situated locality. By virtue of their inclusion in the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God affirms that genuine human beings, as saints in local churches, can be established according to the contents of Paul's organic and corporate gospel, can manifest the revealed mystery, and can fulfill the command of the eternal God (16:25-26).

## Conclusion

At the conclusion of Paul's presentation of the gospel of God in the Epistle to the Romans, the power of God to save organically, corporately, and practically is fully illustrated. The gospel of God has the power to save organically because it makes sinners into sons of God by virtue of their being joined in life and nature to the designated Son of God, by virtue of an organic faith that opens a way to receive the divine life that saves much more, and by virtue of their being grafted into Christ as a growing, cultivated olive tree. The gospel of God has the power to save corporately by constituting these many sons of God into the Body of Christ by virtue of their being joined not only to Christ in His humanity as the resurrected seed but also to one another in Christ. And the gospel of God has the power to save practically through the expression of the Body of Christ in and through local churches. Thus, with presented bodies and renewed minds, the will of God can be fully manifested and made known according to the command of the eternal God. The progression of salvation in Romans from the organic to include the corporate and from the corporate to include the practical is largely a

progression as seen from the vantage point of our eternal God; it shows that without the receiving of the divine life, there can be no corporate enlargement of Christ in redeemed humanity, and without a corporate enlargement, there can be no practical expression through local churches. From our human vantage point, however, our experience of salvation can begin with a simple, initial willingness to obey from the heart the form of teaching concerning the practical expression of the church, which will gradually bring us into a consideration of the corporate nature of our relationship with the Lord and with one another, and which will then make us more desperate to receive the divine, organic life of God for the sake of the Body of Christ and to supply the divine, organic life of God to the Body of Christ. This is the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation. May we be so organic, corporate, and practical in our experience. **[AC]**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This article is based substantially on the outline and footnotes to the Epistle to the Romans written by Witness Lee in

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the Recovery Version of the Bible, and hopefully, it develops the themes presented therein without deviating from the form of the teaching that was delivered by Paul and subsequently affirmed by faithful stewards throughout church history who have been competent to teach others also (Rom. 6:17; 1 Cor. 4:2; 2 Tim. 2:2). The four categories of people spoken of here cover all those who are under God's condemnation and in need of an organic, corporate, and practical salvation—humanity generally (Rom. 1:18-32), the self-righteous particularly (2:1-16), the religious specifically (v. 17—3:8), and the world totally (3:9-20). These categories and the subject of the gospel—making sinners into sons of God to constitute the Body of Christ, which is expressed as the local churches—are derived from Witness Lee's interpretation of God's and Paul's gospel.

<sup>2</sup>For example, in Paul's extended treatment of justification in 3:21—5:11, the righteousness of God is emphatically stressed (3:21-22, 26; 4:5, 11, 22) because God's righteousness is the basis for our justification. However, in 5:18 Paul makes a seemingly oblique reference to the divine life, saying, "So then as it was through one righteous act unto justification of life to all men," implicitly indicating that righteousness and justification

are related to life. This is because the righteousness of God that justifies is contained in and conveyed through the impartation of the divine life that occurs when one believes the word of the truth, the gospel of his salvation (Eph. 1:13). Witness Lee comments on *life* in Romans 5:18, saying,

Life is the goal of God's salvation; thus, justification is "of life." Justification is not an end in itself; it is for life. Through justification we have come up to the standard of God's righteousness and correspond with it, so that now He can impart His life to us. Justification changes our outward position; life changes our inward disposition. Justification unto life indicates that life is the focus of this chapter and that the organic union of life is an issue of justification. (Recovery Version, note 2)

<sup>3</sup>Because Paul is regarded as an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21; 26:17; Gal. 1:16; 2:7; Eph. 3:8) and Peter is regarded as an apostle to the Jews (Gal. 2:8), there is a thought that Paul labored exclusively on Gentiles while Peter labored exclusively on Jews, but this is not the case. An apostle is merely a sent one, and while Paul was primarily sent to the Gentiles, he was not

disassociating this designation from His humanity and emphasizing His eternal status as the Son on page 41, Schreiner seems to evidence a concern about the humanity of Jesus being included in His designation as the Son of God in His resurrection, because it would implicitly endorse Athanasius's aphorism related to deification: He was made man that we might be made God. This hesitance to avoid the implication of deification, even as it regards the humanity of Jesus, is often implicitly present in explications of the terms *designated* and *Son of God* in 1:4. In *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, for example, John Stott glosses over Paul's statement concerning designation by simply saying, "The New Testament does not teach that Jesus was appointed, established or installed Son of God at or by the resurrection, since he has been the Son of God eternally" (50). Clearly, however, Paul's use of the term *designated* is an indication that something new occurred in the divine economy in Jesus' resurrection. If nothing new had occurred, there would have been no need for Paul to reference His designation in verse 4; instead, a reference to His resurrection would have been sufficient. What was new was the incorporation of the humanity of the person of Jesus into the Godhead.

<sup>6</sup>Most commentators associate *saved* in 5:10, which says, "If we, being enemies, were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more we will be saved in His life, having been reconciled," with *saved* in verse 9, which says, "Much more then, having now been justified in His blood, we will be saved through Him from the wrath." They conclude that *saved* in verse 10 refers to being saved from God's eschatological wrath at the end of the age. Schreiner says, "Since God has already removed the greatest obstacle to future glory, the guilt and enmity of believers, then he will surely see to it that believers will be spared from eschatological wrath"

(262). Newell says, "'Much more,' being from our side reconciled, shall we be saved now and in the future by and in Christ's risen life which we now share!" (174). In *A Shorter Commentary on Romans*, Karl Barth speaks of a "future salvation" when he comments on Roman 5:9-10 (60). In *The Gospel of God: Expositions of Paul's Letter to the Romans*, R. C. Sproul says, "Not only has Christ's death meant that we are justified at the present, but Christ's resurrection life, which is promised to us in the future, will save us from the wrath of God in judgment" (100). Finally, in *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, J. N. Darby says,

God, then, having reconciled us to Himself according to the prompting of His own heart, when we were enemies, will much more, now that we are justified, go on to the end; and we shall be saved from wrath through Christ. Accordingly he adds, speaking of the means, "If we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son," by that which was, so to speak, His weakness, "much more shall we be saved by His life," the mighty energy in which He lives eternally. Thus the love of God makes peace with regard to that which we were, and gives us

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sent to them exclusively (Acts 9:15), and while Peter was primarily sent to the Jews, he was not sent to them exclusively (10:19-23; 11:17-18; Gal. 2:11-12).

<sup>4</sup>See "The Initial Experience of the Organic Union as Faith" in *Affirmation & Critique* 20.1 (2015) for a more complete development of this statement.

<sup>5</sup>Schreiner does not draw out the implications related to the deification of Christ's humanity in His designation as the Son of God in resurrection, and in fact, shortly after declaring that Christ "was appointed to be the Son of God as one who was now both God and man" (39), he seemingly undercuts this insight by stating,

The resurrection of Jesus did not "make" him the Son of God; it declared and revealed in a powerful way that he was and had always been God's Son. As a descendent of David Jesus was a human being, but his resurrection from the dead declared to all that he was also the eternal Son of God. (41)

By first declaring that Jesus was appointed as the Son of God in His status as both God and man on page 39, but then largely

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security with regard to our future, making us happy withal in the present. (137-138)

Of all these commentators, only Schreiner is moderately troubled by the possibility that the phrase *in His life* might encompass a broader realm of divine activity in the present age, prior to the day of wrath and the revelation of the righteous judgment of God (2:5). He says, “A reference to the resurrection of Christ is certainly intended, but how does the life of Christ save from eschatological wrath?...in 5:10 the ‘life of Christ’ probably designates both his resurrection and his intercessory work for believers” (264). Although Schreiner opens up an inquiry into the “much more” salvation that is in His life, it is still limited by his consideration that *saved in His life* in verse 10 is equal to *saved through Him from the wrath* in verse 9. These phrases are connected, but they are not a restatement of each other nor do they concern the same divine operation. They are connected because justification does, in fact, save us from the wrath that will be revealed in the future. However, the present assurance that God’s justifying righteousness has saved us from His coming wrath on the unrighteous in the future should be a precursor to experiencing His saving life in this age as a much deeper, much further, development of God’s organic salvation, including sanctification, transformation, and conformation, all of which are dependent upon the operation of the divine life in us. Justification in verse 9 saves us from the coming wrath, but His life saves us from much more. It saves us from the law of sin and of death that operates in our members (8:2; 7:23), from our worldliness through its sanctifying power (6:22), from our naturalness and individualism through its transforming and renewing power (12:2), from our divisiveness by joining us to the one Body of Christ (vv. 4-5), and from our self-likeness by conforming us to the image of Christ (8:29).

<sup>7</sup>Explanations of the phrase *contrary to nature* in various commentaries on Romans 11:24, which says, “If you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree and were grafted contrary to nature into the cultivated olive tree...,” are almost exclusively limited to discussions of the actual horticultural practice of grafting. In the common practice of grafting olive trees, a branch from a cultivated olive tree is grafted into a wild olive tree, but the grafting process produces better olives nonetheless. In his metaphor on grafting, Paul apparently reverses this practice by speaking of a wild olive branch being grafted into a cultivated olive tree. In the eyes of most commentators, this reversal alone explains Paul’s use of the phrase *contrary to nature*; that is, because he knew his metaphor went against the common practice, he added the phrase *contrary to nature*. This understanding of Paul’s usage is then applied to the grafting of Gentiles into the cultivated olive tree. Newell illustrates this, saying,

In the process of grafting we select a shoot of a fruit-bearing limb of a desirable tree, and opening the bark of an inferior tree of the same species, we insert the shoot,

tying it in well. Then, behold, this inferior tree supplies sap to this good shoot, but the grafted shoot goes on to bear its own good variety and class of fruit, and not that of the inferior tree. This is *nature*.

Now, the exact contrary has been wrought by God in taking us Gentiles (who, God says, are “by nature a wild olive tree”), and grafting us into the good olive tree to “partake of the root and of the fatness” of the tree of Divine blessing,—of the promises given to Abraham and to his Seed. (428)

John Stott references a lesser known grafting practice that matches Paul’s utterance and illustration, seemingly out of concern to point out that Paul was not poorly informed when he employed his grafting metaphor. Stott says,

In 1905...Sir William Ramsey wrote an interesting article, which is still quoted, in which he drew on both ancient and modern authorities. The process Paul described, he wrote, was still in use in Palestine ‘in exceptional circumstances...’, for ‘it is customary to reinvigorate an olive tree which is ceasing to bear fruit by grafting it with a shoot of the wild-olive, so that the

**There is a need for a mutual cutting before there can be a mutual grafting, and such a mutual cutting is alluded to in Romans 6:6: “Knowing this, that our old man has been crucified with Him.”**

sap of the tree ennobles this wild shoot and the tree now again begins to bear fruit’. Paul’s reference, therefore, is not to ‘the ordinary process of grafting the young olive-tree’ but to ‘the method of invigorating a decadent olive-tree’. In this case what is ‘contrary to nature’ is not the ‘grafting’ but the ‘belonging’, namely that the shoot has been cut from the wild olive to which it naturally belonged and has been grafted into the cultivated olive to which it does not naturally belong. (300)

I think that there is a much deeper spiritual reality behind Paul’s use of the phrase *contrary to nature*, even if it is regarded as a misapplied metaphor (the uncommon grafting of a branch from a wild olive tree into a cultivated olive tree) or as a metaphor that can be applied in “exceptional circumstances.” This is because verse 24 also speaks the wild olive branch being “cut off” prior to being grafted into the cultivated olive tree. Grafting requires a cutting of both branches and tree. There is a need for a mutual cutting before there can be a mutual grafting, and such a mutual cutting is alluded to in 6:5-6. After speaking of the possibility of growing together with Christ in verse 5, Paul says, “Knowing this, that our old man has been crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be annulled, that

we should no longer serve sin as slaves" (v. 6). Hence, the growing together in verse 5 is based on the knowable reality that our old man has been crucified with Christ in verse 6. It is possible for us to grow together with Christ because our old man, our old nature, was crucified (cut off) in Christ's cutting crucifixion. For Christ and the believers to organically grow together, two deaths are needed—the redeeming death of Christ on the cross, which deals with our sins, and the co-crucifying death of our old man, which annuls our body of sin. Our sins need to be forgiven, and our body of sin needs to be annulled so that our redeemed humanity no longer bears the blemishes of our natural human element (Eph. 1:4; 5:26-27). Without the crucifixion of our old man, our old nature, an organic union between the redeeming God and redeemed humanity would not be possible, because our old sinful nature would remain as an impediment to our being brought into the flow, the fellowship, of the fatness of the root. After all, what fellowship does light have with darkness (2 Cor. 6:14)?

Thus, *contrary to nature*, I think, implies that our grafting is contrary to what we were by nature prior to our faith in Christ. By nature, we were sinners with a sinful life, and a grafting according to nature was not possible, because our God is holy. Hence, our grafting into the cultivated olive tree is a grafting

### A grafting according to our sinful life and nature was not possible, because our God is holy, but such a grafting has been made possible because our old man was crucified with Christ.

that is contrary to nature, a grafting that goes against what we were by nature, but a grafting that has been made possible by our old man being crucified with Christ. In this light, the word *contrary* in the phrase *contrary to nature* becomes even more significant because it speaks of the power in the gospel to make this contrary economic development, a development that goes against our fallen human nature, possible. The power of God in the gospel, marvelously, is surpassingly great toward us who believe (Eph. 1:19).

<sup>8</sup>There are twelve references to *Gentiles* in Romans 15 and 16. In all but one of these instances, the references are to Gentiles who are still in the world and in need of the gospel (15:9-12, 16, 18; 16:26) or to Gentiles in their status prior to sharing in the spiritual things that God planned in His organic and corporate salvation (15:27), not to Gentiles as constituents of the Body of Christ. Romans 16:4, which speaks of the "churches of the Gentiles," is the one instance in which this term of distinction is used in connection with the church, the Body of Christ. In this instance, however, Paul clearly views the church from the perspective of its practical expression as local churches on the earth. While the use of the word

*churches* evidences an acknowledgement of the churches' divine status in the Body of Christ, *of the Gentiles* speaks primarily of the source of the fruit of Paul's apostleship, a ministry conducted predominantly in Gentile lands. In this regard, *churches of the Gentiles* should be read not as "churches currently composed of Gentiles," but rather as "churches that have come out of the Gentile world." The fact that Paul recognized that there were churches composed largely of believers from lands that were predominantly Gentile in ethnicity does not countermand the truth that there are no Jews or Gentiles in the Body of Christ, as confirmed in chapters 12 through 16.

<sup>9</sup>Galatians 3:14 says, "In order that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." The phrase *the promise of the Spirit* is significant because it includes the words *the promise*; that is, the verse does not say, "...that we might receive the Spirit through faith." This indicates that the prophetic promise of the Spirit was also a promise of blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3), even though Abraham, as the father of the called race of the Jews, was the instrumental means for the deliverance of God's promised gospel. When God called Abraham, His calling was accompanied not only with a promise to make Abraham a great nation but also with a promise to bless all the nations through him. Thus, His promise included both Jews and Gentiles from the very beginning.

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