57. Romans 16:1–16

I commend to you our sister Phoebe. She is also a deacon in the church at Cenchreae. Give her the welcome in the Lord that Christians deserve and give her whatever assistance she needs from you, for she herself has been a patroness for many including my own self. (16:1–2)

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my associates in Christ Jesus who risked their necks for my life. Not only I but also all the Gentile Churches thank them, and greet the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary who has toiled hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia my compatriots and my fellow prisoners who are outstanding among the missionaries and who became Christians even before I did. Greet Ampliatus who is dear to me in the Lord. Greet Urbanus our co-worker in Christ and greet my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles who is a tested Christian. Greet the members of the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion my compatriot. Greet the members of the household of Narcissus who are Christians. Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa who have toiled in the Lord. Greet the beloved Persis who has toiled hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus who is distinguished in the Lord and his mother who has also been a mother to me. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Christians who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. (16:3–16)

In all probability, Phoebe was the person who brought Paul’s letter to Rome. The fact that Paul commends her to the congregation at Rome suggests that she was previously unknown to them, and it is hard to see how Paul would have been sure that this person would arrive about the same time his letter did unless she was in fact bringing the letter. In the ancient Roman Empire there was no post office available to private citizens,
and, hence, the only way to get a personal letter to its intended recipients would be to commission someone to deliver it.

From what Paul says, it appears that he was in Corinth at the time. He explicitly states that Phoebe is a member of the church at Cenchreae, and Cenchreae was one of the harbors of Corinth (cf. Acts 20:2–3).

Initially, it seems surprising that Paul greets so many people by name in a congregation that he has never visited. Indeed, in the past some scholars even argued that this section could, consequently, not have been part of the letter Paul sent to Rome. In fact, however, Paul’s greetings promote his goal of winning the support of both Jews and Greeks at Rome and elsewhere. No doubt, Paul knew many of the people he greets by name. For example, Prisca (or Priscilla) and Aquila had been his friends for years (Acts. 18:2, 1 Cor. 16:19). Nevertheless, we must assume that many of the others he did not know personally but only by reputation. By greeting them and saying complimentary things about them, he was hoping to establish a relationship with them. It is noteworthy that Paul apparently goes out of his way to greet both Jews and Gentiles. Thus, at two points he identifies people as his “kin” or “compatriots.” Since it is highly unlikely that Paul who had apparently come from Tarsus (Acts 9:11, 21:39, 22:3) had family members at Rome, “compatriot” here must simply mean “Jew.” Hence, by greeting people in this way Paul is reminding his Jewish readers that he too is one of them. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the names in the greetings are Gentile. To be sure, in this period many Jews (especially slaves) had Gentile names. Still, we must assume that the bulk of the Gentile names in the list in fact belonged to people who were originally Pagans. Hence, in his greetings Paul also commends himself to the Gentile faction in the congregation.

It is striking that in his greetings Paul keeps mentioning women who were playing important leadership roles. Thus, Prisca along with her husband Aquila were Paul’s missionary associates, and Paul even mentions her name first, perhaps betraying the fact that he considered her to be the more
important of the two. Andronicus and Junia were probably a husband and wife missionary team, and the word I have translated as “missionaries” is literally “apostles.” By using the term “apostles,” Paul clearly indicates that Jesus himself appeared to this couple at his resurrection and commissioned them to be missionaries. Paul describes Phoebe as “deacon” and a “patroness.” We cannot be certain that at this time the term “deacon” (which literally means “servant”) necessarily indicated that someone was an official church leader, but probably it did. “Patroness” clearly implies that Phoebe was a woman of means who generously supported other Christians, and Paul acknowledges his own indebtedness to her. Moreover, it says much for Phoebe’s stature and ability that Paul entrusted to her the task of delivering this important letter. Paul also stresses that various other women (Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis) have “toiled,” and the fact that he has heard about these exertions suggests that these Christians must have been important for the Roman church as a whole.

Hence, Paul’s greetings are a reminder that in the early church women were often leaders, and it was only subsequently that males gained a monopoly in holding church offices.

Paul’s greetings also strongly suggest that the Roman church was composed of many small congregations that met in people’s houses. Paul greets various groups of people (e.g., the household of Narcissus), and he explicitly sends greetings not only to his old friends Prisca and Aquila, but also to the church in their house. Of course, the early church was not a wealthy organization and did not enjoy government support. Hence, it is most unlikely that Christian groups could normally meet in public buildings. The majority of the private residences that were available undoubtedly belonged to poor people and, hence, were small. Consequently, there had to be many house churches in Rome.

It was essential for Paul to greet the various house churches in order to emphasize that the gospel was both for Jews and Greeks. It is most likely that different house churches had different ethnic and theological tendencies. Presumably, the house
church of his old friends Prisca and Aquila favored Paul’s more liberal approach to the Law and included many Gentiles. Other house churches were undoubtedly more conservative and more Jewish. By sending his regards to all the churches, Paul makes it clear that he recognizes the legitimacy of the various local groups.

Questions for reflection:
As we consider what roles women should play in the church today, how significant is it that women were leaders in first-century congregations? Is the Bible or the later tradition of the church more important in helping us discern the proper roles of women? In what ways would our Christian lives be better or worse if we met for worship in individual homes rather than in large church buildings?

58. Romans 16:17–20a

I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause dissension and scandals contrary to the teaching that you learned and to stay away from them. Such people do not serve our Lord Christ but their own impulses, and by slick talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting. Your obedience is well known to everyone, so I rejoice over you. But I want you to be experienced in what is good but not mixed up in what is evil. The God who brings peace will quickly squash Satan under your feet. (16:17–20a)

We do not know what people Paul was attacking when he warns against those who create dissension and scandals. The only dissension at Rome that Paul has mentioned was the dispute between the “strong” and the “weak,” and in discussing that dispute Paul was very diplomatic and did not attack anyone.
Probably, Paul is speaking generally. He is not so much warning his readers about specific individuals as reminding his readers to beware of certain types of people. Of course, he is also implying that the readers should not themselves be a source of division or offense.

By warning against people who cause divisions by unorthodox teaching, Paul implies that he himself is a source of unity. His own teaching is in accordance with the standard Christian message and brings unity. He does not cause scandals.

Hence, these remarks invite his readers to have a positive opinion of him and lend him their support.

Questions for reflection:

Should the church always be on guard against heresy and schism even in relatively quiet times? Or does the fear of heresy and schism act to stifle creativity and growth? How can we distinguish between people who are raising helpful challenges to accepted ways and people who are merely being egotistical and divisive? How can we handle differences of opinion in positive ways?

59. Romans 16:20b

The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. (16:20b)

Paul adds his customary blessing, but it is perhaps especially appropriate in this letter that his last theological comment is about “grace.” Conventional Greco-Roman letters ended with “farewell.” But Paul always concludes by wishing his readers the grace of Jesus. This blessing is especially fitting here. In Romans Paul has insisted that the gospel is for both the Jews and the Greeks because all have sinned, and God in his graciousness is being merciful to all. Accordingly, Romans as a whole is about God’s grace.
Question for reflection:

Do all our reflections about Christianity have to begin and end with an awareness that God is kinder than we deserve? What happens to Christianity when we forget about God’s mercy?

60. Romans 16:21–24

Timothy my co-worker greets you, as do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my compatriots. I, Tertius, who transcribed this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, who hosts me and the entire church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, greets you, as does Brother Quartus. (16:21–23)

[The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.] (16:24)

Paul now sends greetings from various people, and once again he is careful to include both Jews and Gentiles to commend himself to all in Rome and anyone else who might have an opportunity to read this letter. The first four people mentioned are all Jewish. To be sure Timothy, who was one of Paul’s most important assistants (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:10–11), was of mixed ancestry. Nevertheless, he did at Paul’s insistence receive circumcision (Acts 16:1–3) and was, therefore, technically Jewish. Paul explicitly states that Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater are his “compatriots.” The remaining names are etymologically all Pagan and probably belonged to Gentiles.

Today there still exists an inscription from first-century Corinth that states that a civic official named Erastus paid for a large stone pavement. This is probably the same person whom Paul identifies as the “city treasurer” and whose greetings he sends in this letter.

These greetings also make it clear that, in accordance with his normal practice, Paul dictated Romans. Thus, Tertius in
sending his greetings literally states that he was the one who “wrote” the letter. Here, “wrote” does not mean “composed” but “wrote down,” and, consequently, I have chosen to translate the Greek with the word “transcribed.” Paul dictated the letter to Tertius. In dictating this letter Paul was apparently following his normal practice since some of this other epistles end with comments “in my own hand” (1 Cor. 16:21, Gal. 6:11, etc.) thus suggesting that the rest of the letter was written down by someone else.

The fact that Paul dictated Romans may help explain why the letter is not more polished. Perhaps the reason that the letter contains so many passages that are stylistically awkward or lacking clarity is that Paul simply talked to Tertius who wrote down what he heard. Paul may never have revised the resulting text.

The brief blessing in 16:24 was probably added to Romans after Paul’s death, perhaps to give the letter a more “theological” conclusion. The blessing does not appear in the earliest and best ancient copies of Romans. Apparently, some scribe felt that such a holy document should not end with personal greetings from otherwise unknown Christians. To remedy the problem, he appended a blessing modeled on the one Paul had written a few verses earlier in 16:20b.

Questions for reflection:

Was it appropriate for Paul to end such a long and “theological” letter by sending greetings from various people? Are these greetings a mere aside, or do they embody in a particularly appropriate way Paul’s insistence that through Jesus we are all—whether Jews or Gentiles—called to become one in love?

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61. Romans 16:25–27

[To him who can strengthen you in accordance with my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, in accordance with the revelation of the mystery which was concealed for long ages but now has been disclosed and through the prophetic writings made known by the command of the eternal God so all the nations will obey the faith, to the only wise God, be glory, through Jesus Christ, forever. Amen.] (16:25–27)

The last verses of the traditional text of Romans probably did not belong to the letter that Paul himself actually dictated. These verses occur in different locations in the manuscripts that include them. Thus, many ancient copies have these verses at the conclusion of chapter 14, rather than at the conclusion of chapter 16, and one very old manuscript has them at the conclusion of 15. Today there still remain a few manuscripts that do not have this section at all. In ancient times there were others since the biblical scholar Jerome (c. 342–420) knew some. If these verses originally belonged to Romans, there is no reason why subsequent scribes would have omitted them or changed their location.

Apparently, the verses originated when an ancient editor chopped off the last two chapters of Romans to make the letter more “universal.” We know that in the second century some copies of Romans lacked chapters fifteen and sixteen. Indeed, the great third-century Biblical scholar, Origen, accused the earlier heretic Marcion of having amputated them. Whether or not Marcion was to blame, the motive for the excision is clear. The last two chapters of Romans dealt with specific issues in Paul’s day and no longer seemed relevant in a later century. Once it became part of the Bible, Paul’s letter was authoritative for all Christians. Hence, some copyist decided to cut out things that could no longer easily be applied to contemporary life. The same concern to make the letter universal also lies behind the fact that the specific references to “Rome” in 1:7 and 1:15 are missing from a few manuscripts. Of course, once the editor
chopped off the original ending of the letter, he had to supply another. Hence, he produced what we know as 16:25-27.

This new ending suggests that Romans is the final revelation of God's eternal plan and clearly indicates that the letter was now part of the Bible. The concluding doxology tells us that "the mystery which was concealed for long ages" now has been disclosed "through the prophetic writings." Accordingly, the editor views Romans itself as a prophetic writing that discloses the eternal purposes of God. Such a view would be virtually unthinkable if Romans was not already part of sacred scripture.

The fact that Romans originally addressed a specific situation but became part of the Bible underlines the greatness of the letter and the dangers of applying it uncritically. It is astounding that a letter which Paul wrote simply to gain support for his missionary work and which in part, at least, he tailored to address specific problems in a first-century congregation could be so profound and universal that it would challenge the Christian world down through the centuries. Yet, the fact that Paul is not addressing the modern world or even the ancient one but only a single congregation (and any other readers who happened to hear about the letter from that congregation) should warn us that we cannot simply take what Paul says and apply it to our own problems without further ado.

Instead, as we conclude our reflections together, we might remember Paul's own emphasis that in interpreting scripture, as in every aspect of the Christian life, we must follow the leading of the Spirit and resist becoming enslaved to the "law." In my own reflections both on what Paul meant and how what he wrote remains helpful, I have tried to honor the wisdom of the original letter and the invitation of the Spirit not to be enslaved to the "letter of the law."

Questions for reflection:

Are we more likely to become profound when we try to produce a viewpoint that is valid for all time or when we respond with love and commitment to a specific situation?
Have some people uncritically tried to apply to our present day what Romans says about certain issues (e.g., homosexuality) when our present social awareness and scientific knowledge are vastly different from what Paul could have known? What have been the results of such applications? What in Romans remains especially important and relevant as we begin the third millennium of Christian history?