



Sermon

Greetings, Warning and Doxology

Romans 16

1/10/2017

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We have been following Paul through the larger part of his epistle to the Romans. It has been called among other things, “The Magna Carta of the Christian Faith.” Martin Luther, the Great Reformer said, “This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament.” God used Romans to bring Luther to salvation and a couple of centuries later it was while reading Luther’s commentary on Romans that John Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed and also came into an assurance of salvation by faith. In both cases, they went on from that foundation to lead major revivals: the Reformation and the Evangelical Revival respectively.

It is an extraordinary letter which lays out so much of a foundation for our understanding of the gospel, the Church and Christian life. Yet it is not Paul’s gospel. David Pawson, the famed Bible teacher wrote:

There is nothing in Romans about heaven or hell; there is nothing about Jesus’ return; there nothing about the Kingdom or the church; there is just nothing of what he normally preached. Yet people say Romans is Paul’s gospel. It is no such thing. It is **part** of his gospel.¹

Pawson also writes:

While many have imagined that Romans is a theological tome far removed from Paul’s missionary activity, our analysis indicates that the letter is intensely practical. In addressing the vexed questions surrounding church unity, it provides insights into how the church should develop from its Jewish roots, while at the same time providing clarity on the key issues of faith for God’s people in every generation.²

We could divide the letter up into three blocks:

1. **Faith** Chapter 1-4 are about faith in God
2. **Hope.** Whereas faith looks back to what God has done, hope looks forward to what will be. So in Chapters 5-11, Paul looks to the outworking of relationship with God for the church and for the Jewish people.
3. **Love.** In chapters 12-16, Paul focusses on the present and how the believers work out their faith within society and in the church.

Today we are looking at chapter 16, the conclusion, the final words of greeting, exhortation and blessing.

¹ Pawson D., 2009, “Israel in the New Testament”, Terra Nova Publications, p29 - cited in Ponsonby, S., 2013, “God is for Us”, Monarch Books, Oxford, p24/p451

² Pawson D., 2007, “Unlocking the Bible”, Collins, London, p1033

Verses 1-16 are taken up with personal greetings. These are to Christians Paul knew who had gone to live in Rome.

Going back to a very early commentary from the late 4th century, St Chrysostom said on this very passage:

“I think that many, even of those who have the appearance of being extremely good men, hasten over this part of the epistle as superfluous.... Yet, the ‘gold founders’ people are careful even about the little fragments. ... It is possible even from bare names to find a great treasure.”

I have just returned from a visit to Nelson and Golden Bay. It was a gold mining area in the 19th century. Now when you look for gold you may go panning seeking the flecks of gold amongst the gravel and sand of the rivers or you may mine rock, break it up and extract the gold from the vastly greater quantity of rock carrying it. Either way, the gold is hidden in the rock and sand which is not of itself valuable.

Here too, it is easy to skip over these verses as irrelevant but that would be to miss some valuable nuggets.

Out of the 26 individuals, 2 families and three house churches he greets it is worth noting:

V1: Phoebe

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. ² I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me.”

Paul describes Phoebe as a deacon and a benefactor. Deacon, *diakonos*, was a recognised position of leadership in the very earliest days of the church. That is especially so since Paul says she is a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchrea. The first thing he says is that in this letter he commends her to the church which strongly suggests that she was to deliver the letter to them. The custom was that the courier of a letter was charged with reading it and explaining it. So this Phoebe may have delivered the first commentary on the Letter to the Christians in Rome!

V3-5 Priscilla

“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house.”

Priscilla and Aquila crop up a number of times in Acts. They were a married couple who had a significant teaching in Corinth and Ephesus. They were noted as finding Apollos who was preaching a message of repentance based only on John the Baptist’s teaching. They explained the way of Christ to him, led him to salvation and instructed him. Apollos quickly became a powerful Christian teacher from this foundation.

They are named seven times across Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians and 2 Timothy. It is notable that in five of those references, contrary to custom, she is mentioned before her husband. For this to be the case, either she was the more significant teacher or she had a superior social rank.

V7: Junia

“Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.”

Here is another couple. There has been much debate about the name Junias/Junia – whether it is a masculine or feminine name. The Greek word is in the accusative so appears as Junian. But the nominative if feminine would be *Junia* if masculine theoretically it would be *Junias*.

Because these two are outstanding among the apostles it have been claimed it must be the masculine name. However, there is no record in any literature of this masculine name while Junia is a known name.

It is worth hearing again from St Chrysostom – remember he was a Greek speaker far closer in time to Paul than we are. “How great is the devotion of this woman that she should be counted worthy of the appellation of apostle.” He understood that this was a woman’s name.

Scholars have now generally concluded this is a woman and so presumably another couple ministering together. The interesting thing is that Paul wrote, “they were outstanding among the apostles.” Apostle is used in two ways in the New Testament. There is the set of 12 chosen by Jesus. But then there are others who are significant leaders especially missionary church planters like Barnabas who is called an apostle in Acts. Obviously, Andronicus and Junias would be of this second type of apostle and they were outstanding among them. Richard Bauckham conjectures that since an apostle should have seen Jesus, Junias may have been the Latin name of the Joanna mentioned in Luke 8:3 & 24:10.³

These three references by Paul to women in leadership in the church are important because the same Paul has written elsewhere that women should not speak in church and should not teach men. These women must have done those things and with his approval and commendation. So we see that scripture and even Paul himself is not in total unison about this matter. Therefore, there must be other factors we need to take into account. This is a small part of the argument for the Biblical validity of women’s ministry.

Here are two more names of interest.

V10b & 11b: Aristobulus & Narcissus

Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. ^{11b} Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.

Aristobulus was a grandson of Herod the Great and a friend of the Emperor Claudius. Narcissus was a rich and powerful freedman who exerted great influence over Claudius. By the time of Paul’s letter, Claudius had been dead for about 3 years and while it is not thought that either of these political figures were Christian, Paul does send greetings to members of their households. These could have been family members or maybe household slaves.

V17-20 Warning

¹⁷ *I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. ¹⁸ For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.*

¹⁹ *Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.*

²⁰ *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.*

After the greetings, Paul turns to a final warning. He has painted his great brush strokes of theology relevant to what he knows of this church. Now he warns them of the ever present danger of false teachers.

Throughout history, there have been false teachers. Teachers who distort the gospel, teachers who misuse it for their own ends – or as Paul puts it, “[They] are not serving our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own appetites.” So he warns them and us to be careful. The true standard is the teaching which they had heard which is what was written down for us in the New Testament. If people teach contrary to the Bible we should keep away from them, even if they use smooth talk and flattery. For their teaching will cause divisions between Christians and put obstacles in the paths of believers and would-be believers. If we don’t want to be naïve believers, we need to do the work of understanding scripture and following it.

Paul’s desire is that we be wise about what is good – that we are wise to recognise good from evil. And that we are innocent about what is evil – that is, we are not drawn into evil practices. So there are three useful

³ Bauckham R., 2002, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, p165-186

tests to apply to any teaching: Biblical, Christological and moral. Does it agree with Scripture? Does it glorify the Lord Jesus Christ? Does it promote goodness?

And we have the encouragement that God will crush Satan under our feet. It is reasonable to infer that Paul was thinking of the Genesis 3 promise that Eve's seed would crush Satan's head. As we are in Christ, we become part of the defeat of evil. But this is only by God's grace which Paul prays would be with us.

V25-27 The Doxology

Let me read you the final verses from the New Living Bible – it makes it easier to follow:

Romans 16:25-27 NLT ²⁵ Now all glory to God, who is able to make you strong, just as my Good News says. This message about Jesus Christ has revealed his plan for you Gentiles, a plan kept secret from the beginning of time. ²⁶ But now as the prophets foretold and as the eternal God has commanded, this message is made known to all Gentiles everywhere, so that they too might believe and obey him. ²⁷ All glory to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, forever. Amen.

In conclusion, Paul reminds them and us of the great important message.

God is able to make us well established and strong through the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are established because rather than being under judgement and separated from God, we are forgiven and brought into relationship. This is like standing on solid rock rather than shifting sands.

The good news Paul presented reveals the place for the nations in the plans of God. This had been secret even though God had prepared it from the very beginning and it was prophesied about in the Old Testament. In earlier times it had not been understood but with the coming of Jesus the means and the revelation had come. It is through the work of Christ that both Jew and Gentile – all peoples – can be saved and creation brought back into relationship with God.

So this message needs to be spread. This last week, Bishop Given asked me to attend the funeral of Capt. David Pearce as his representative. David and Jen visited us here at St Stephen's in 2015. They were the missionaries to Kondoa who first worked with Given Gaula to evangelise Kondoa region. David had been a Taranaki dairy farmer when he was saved. He had a love for Jesus and wanted others to know him. After serving in NZ in Church Army, they went with World Vision to the Sudan and established a refugee camp. Next it was off to Tanzania. In the six years in Kondoa, he and Given planted 17 churches. He built the Bible school buildings and bought land for 20 churches. Since he has retired he has continued to support Given and Kondoa so that now 18 churches have been built all with his contribution and many of them with ours as well. David knew what Paul was talking about. The gospel message must be made known to the nations everywhere. Kondoa region is one part of everywhere which had been neglected – remember we heard earlier this year that it was preached for the very first time in a village there in January! And that message is preached so that they might believe in Jesus and obey him.

What about us? There are two stages: We need to have believed and obeyed. Then we need to be making sure we spread the message of Jesus and his salvation to all peoples everywhere – nearby and far away.

All glory to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, forever. Amen.