

**Sermon for Sunday, Februariu 6, 2011**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Greetings, Warnings, Blessings**  
**Romans 16:1-33**

**1. Greetings to many – especially commendation of Phoebe, servant of the church**

Paul greets so many people in Romans that we wonder if he is naming everyone he knows to establish stronger ties with the Roman church. He greets twenty-six individuals, two families and three house churches.

But first Paul commends Phoebe, who apparently hand-carried his letter to the Romans. This is the only time Paul wrote such a letter of commendation. Phoebe is a prominent woman, traveling to Rome, almost certainly on legal business. Paul asks the Romans to befriend her – help her find food, lodging and her way. Why? She is a diakonos - a servant, or possibly deacon of the church there.

Phoebe has been a servant of the church, a helper to many, including Paul himself. The work "help" in 16:2 is *prostatis* - typically a "patron."<sup>1</sup> Patrons offered financial aid. More, they represented their friends before authorities. If Phoebe can travel to Rome independently, she is a woman of means, coming for a legal matter. So she had means and she boldly used them to help Paul, perhaps when he was in trouble. And she helped others in her church.

The apostle wants to commend her service and to care for Phoebe. We see the normal desire to show kindness to someone who has shown kindness to us. Jesus says, "Give and it will be given to you" (Luke 6:38). Now Phoebe's name is forever recorded in God's word. Better, God records and remembers every good deed.

May I ask if you are in position to help others, do you seize it? Influential people have a unique capacity to help people. Are you helping as you can? When someone helps you, do you help others in turn, and so continue the cycle?

**The unity and diversity of the church**

At first, Romans 16 looks like a mere list of names. But there is more. There are typical slave names: Ampliatus, Urbanus, Hermes, Philologus and Julia (16:8-15). So the church had common folk, even slaves, known and loved.

Yet in 16:10-11, Paul also greets believers from the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus. These households were large and important. Aristobulus was the grandson of Herod the Great and a friend of Emperor Claudius. Narcissus was a friend of Claudius too. Not that Aristobulus and Narcissus were believers. Rather their households had believers. Paul mentions Rufus; this is the name of the son of Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross for Jesus and later came to faith. But the name is common, so we can't be sure.

So the names in Paul's list are diverse, for the church was diverse, for rich and poor, for slave and free. Furthermore, Paul singled out several women for praise.

**Women singled out for praise**

Paul praises nine women by name in Romans 16. The greetings offer glimpses of the important contributions women made in the church.

---

<sup>1</sup> BAGD and Moo, 916; Cranfield, 783; Keener, New Testament Backgrounds, 447

In 16:3, Paul calls Priscilla and Aquila his co-workers, who risked their lives for him. Like Paul, they were tent-makers. They worked and taught together in Corinth. Priscilla is mentioned ahead of her husband, *perhaps* because she was more prominent. Later, Paul commends four women, Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis, who also "worked hard" (or "very hard") in the Lord (16:6, 12).

Paul also greets Andronicus and Junias. They were probably married, since Andronicus is a man's name and Junias a woman's. Our translation says, "They are outstanding among the apostles". Literally, they are prominent either "with" the apostles or "among" the apostles (16:7). The Greek preposition "ejn" may be used either way. If "with" is correct, Paul means they were prominent "with" – that is, in the view of, the apostles. They held them in high regard.

If "prominent among the apostles" is correct, he means they are prominent among the people called "apostles." Occasionally, people have proposed that Andronicus and Junias are "forgotten" apostles. But Paul does not equate either of them with the Twelve. If he is calling them apostles, he means "apostle" in the common sense of someone selected and "sent out" for a particular purpose. Apostolos means "sent one" so anyone who was sent out for a project could be called an apostle in this loose, non-technical sense. The Bible called Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14), Silas (Acts 17:1ff. cf. 1 Thess. 2:7), Titus (2 Cor 8:13) and Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25) apostles in this sense, when the church sent them out. The idea: Paul honors Andronicus and Junias for the faithful discharge of vital, commissioned tasks.

What we say about women and ministry should match the biblical record, as it recounts the blessed ministries of women through redemptive history. Women have many ministries, but not every ministry. They are not monarchs, priests, the twelve apostles, or elders, but they do work effectively alongside leaders such as Paul.

Notice again that Paul commends Phoebe, as a "diakonos" (16:2). The Greek term *diakonos* typically means a servant; but it can mean deacon. The translations we use (New International Version, English Standard Version, New American Standard, and King James Version) call her a "servant" but a few call her a "deaconess" (Revised Standard Version, New Living Testament) of the church. When Paul calls Phoebe "a servant [or "deacon"] of the church in Cenchrea" he may mean she holds an office or he may simply mean she was very helpful. It's hard to tell which view is correct; scholars are divided. But the phrase deacon [or servant] "of the church" suggests that Phoebe had a recognized role in her local congregation.

### **A concrete application**

In its long history, Central Presbyterian Church has always held that the leading offices of the church – pastors, elders, and deacons, should be male, not because of tradition, but because that's what the Bible teaches. Yet Romans 16 presents a picture that indicates we should adjust things a bit.

Don't misunderstand. I am not going to call for female pastors or elders. Paul says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man" and I believe that statement should be taken at face value. He says an elder should be "the husband of one wife" – a man - and that a deacon should be "the husband of one wife" – again, a man.

Nonetheless, we need to see that Paul calls Phoebe a "servant" or possibly "deaconess" *of the church*. Either way she is a servant or deacon of the church, meaning her church recognized her. Further, Paul mentions four women who worked hard and deserve respect. Paul wanted to recognize women as servants of the church. I believe it is right for us to do the same. I don't say this lightly. I've studied this for fifteen years. I wrote a book on it and contributed to others. When we started Romans, I planned to speak to this in Romans 16. I believe we should recognize, train and wisely use of a group of women as servants of the church.

Please understand I am the "senior pastor," but not an autocratic ruler. I don't choose our officers, the whole church does. The committee that examines potential officers is quite independent – and often surprises me. That's the way it should be with independent committees. Still, I propose that we follow Paul and recognize a group of hard-working women within our family, recognized for their service alongside the elders and deacons.

This is not a "liberal position." Conservative Bible commentators like Charles Hodge and John Calvin believe Phoebe was a deaconess. A few think Phoebe was a deacon (Strimple, Piper ("probably"), Schreiner, but not Keener). The churches of Tim Keller, James Boice and other conservative/evangelical Presbyterians have deaconesses.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Luke praises Tabitha for her "acts of charity" and care for widows, who dearly loved her (Acts 9:36-41). Women also served Jesus' disciples financially as they traveled "from their own means" (Luke 8:2-3).

Paul describes an order of true or genuine widows that the church in Ephesus supported financially. They were over sixty, women of prayer, well known for... good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, and helping those in trouble (1 Tim. 5:3-10). These qualifications for membership in the order of widows sound rather familiar.

John Calvin connected the work of the deacons to Paul's widows. He then established two classes of deacon. One group was more administrative, collecting and managing funds. The second group actually cared for the poor and sick. The second order included women; the first did not. So Calvin established an order of commissioned (not ordained) women who did diaconal work. The examples of Phoebe, Tabitha, and Paul's widows also led some early churches to develop an order of deaconesses. But Roman governor Pliny the Younger around 105-110 A.D. calls two maid-servant deaconesses.

The wisdom of the church knows that certain aspects of diaconal ministry are best performed by women. There are matters a woman can best discuss with other women. Sometimes a woman is best assisted by another woman.

I once replied to a call for help from a woman whose husband was starving her by spending all their money on alcohol and gambling. When I arrived at her home and saw stacks of guns, I suddenly wished I had brought a woman along with me. Many times I have brought my wife, and been glad.

In hard cases, a woman may want to turn to another woman who is recognized, trained, and consecrated for service. We can also think of teams that would work better if some members were women. So we can employ the gifts of women and recognize them for their service, in association with the deacons or elders. We might call them deaconesses. They might be chosen, trained, and known as a body of women who work alongside our leaders. Historically, this is an option even in churches that don't ordain women as pastors, elders, or deacons.

We took a step in this direction when we put women with men in the prayer room after our morning services. The elders have already had a positive conversation or two about my proposal this morning and I am asking a team to study the best way to move in this direction, without unnecessary delay.

The correspondence about the Eritreans mentions a woman called mother Mimi, a matron of the Khartoum Evangelical Church. She has translated hundreds of hours of lectures from English into Sudanese Arabic. Her husband and son are elders on the Church Council. They are wealthy, doctors and engineers. They suffer constant harassment from the government for their church activities. The family is recognized for its competence, achievement, and costly commitment to Christ – and the mother is respected alongside her husband and son.

I discussed this with Hillary Coffee, leader of women's ministry here. She said: Imagine the impact on the body of Christ if each of us moved in this line. We would have a church where the qualities and

character of elders, deacons and deaconesses are found in abundance, whether we formally named them or not.

Everyone knows people disagree about this topic. Romans 14 says that as long as we agree about the great things – the gospel - we should neither judge nor condemn each other over small differences.

We have a choice: We can wrangle about ways to do more or less, to do this or that better, name it this, or follow that procedure. Or we can trust each other and say, "We don't agree about everything. But we agree that Paul recognized women who worked hard and that we can do so too and thereby bless the church."

Paul called men to preach, teach and lead, yet he named women for long and faithful service beside him. I hope we see that we can follow the Bible and bless the church if we name and train women for the service Paul describes.

### **Greeting with a kiss**

Paul's greetings end with a command, "Greet one another with a holy kiss," a command that he repeats in other letters (Rom 16:16, 1 Cor 16:20, 2 Cor 13:12, cf. 1 Pet 5:14). I wonder how many of you obeyed this command today. How many kissed in church? Did you disobey? Are you laughing about it?

Reason: The term "holy kiss," along with the Bible's general opposition to sensuality, proves that Paul is not commanding romantic kisses. A holy kiss was a standard greeting in Paul's day. It demonstrates trust and affection. It was ritualized. In a holy kiss two men or two women touched cheek to cheek on both sides. A man did not "kiss" a woman this way.

The idea is that all Christians trust each other, belong to each other. We should feel brotherly love and give a token of that affection (12:10). We show affection and respect with a hug, a hand-shake, even a warm smile and a hello.

### **2. A warning about sinful divisions 16:17-20**

It seems jarringly incongruous for Paul to shift from warm greetings to stiff warnings about the danger of divisions and false teaching in the church. Can you see Paul's logic? He moved from joy over the church's unity in its diversity to the sad fact that some people are a menace to church unity. They cause divisions by rejecting "the teaching" of the apostles.

The word for "teaching" – *didache*/*didachv* – means the settled, foundational instruction of the apostles. The false teachers disrupt the church with heresy, attacks on the core of the faith. Minor disagreements are inevitable; we can handle them. Paul is talking about major divisions caused by so-called Christians who reject the gospel. If we want blessed unity, Paul says, we must watch out for false teachers.

Their problem, Paul adds, is not simple error. They hope to get something from their mistakes – followers, influence, possibly wealth. Paul says they "are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites" – literally their belly (16.18).

Jude's take is similar: "They are godless men and change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord... [they] are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast... and flatter others for their own advantage" (Jude 1:4, 16; Rom 16.18).

Jude and Paul agree that heretics follow certain patterns. They masquerade as believers and infiltrate the church. They talk about God's grace, but their actions pervert that grace and reject the lordship of Christ. They make the grace of God a license for self-indulgence. Rejecting the authority of Christ, they follow their appetites and indulge their lusts (Jude 1:4-16). They want what they want and have no real

interest in the Spirit of God, or even in their own spirits (1:19). To ingratiate themselves with their targets, they flatter and deceive. "They are shepherds who feed only themselves." Literally "they shepherd themselves." They take care of *themselves*. As long as they are pleased, all is well (1:12). A pastor called me aside to warn me about flatterers. Don't trust people who come too quickly, with effusive praise. They want to use you for their agenda.

We must not be naïve, for, Paul says they "deceive the minds of naïve people" (Rom. 16:18). There is a good naïveté. It's good to know nothing about drug deals, slave trade, and Ponzi schemes. But there is a bad naïveté, where we aren't ready for evil. Paul wants us to be ready for deceivers.

Yet he also wants us to be hopeful, so he adds, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (16:20a). Satan is defeated, but he doesn't know it yet. A dying snake still has poison in its fangs. It's comforting to know that God will crush Satan. But did you notice – The God of peace will crush Satan?

The God of peace crushes? Yes, for we find peace by defeating evil, not by appeasing it. Some said, "The worst people get their way because they are willing to do anything, and sane people would rather walk away." Or "Don't wrestle a pig. You'll get dirty and the pig will be happy." Yes, there is a time to walk away from small stuff. But evil must be confronted and from the day sin entered the world he would call forth Jesus, warrior redeemer to crush Satan's head (Gen 3:15).

When do we fight? When Jesus is slandered and the gospel perverted. When evil is presented as good and the innocent are deceived. It is a blessing to know that God stands and fights at our side – and it leads us to Paul's final blessings.

### 3. God's blessings on the church

At the end of Romans, Paul speaks God's blessing on the church repeatedly. He speaks God's peace, joy, hope, and grace, all coming by the will of the Father, by the power of the Spirit. All come through Jesus, who won every blessing for us through his death and resurrection. These are God's graces that come through the gospel, not our performance.

- 15:13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- 15:33 The God of peace be with you all.
- 16:20 The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

But as much as we might like to end with God blessing us, Paul chooses to complete his letter by giving us words to bless and praise the Lord. Romans 16:25 begins, "Now to him... be glory forever" Paul then tells us why God deserves praise.

God establishes us by the "gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ" (16:25). Paul calls this his gospel because it's what he preaches and he believes it. The gospel one more time:

In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men (1:17-18)... But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known... This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.... For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace" (3:21-24). This gospel leads us to praise God for good reasons:

First, this gospel establishes us – it lets us or makes us stand firm. In his journeys, Paul planted churches and then returned to visit them and establish them. He secured the foundation, reminded them of the gospel (Acts 14:21, 15:41).

I told you about a friend who had an auto accident – skidding down a hill, he hit a police car. The officer was angry and wrote a report that landed my friend in traffic court. He had to plead to the charge: guilty, innocent, or guilty with an explanation. He was such a good man that being in court paralyzed him and I had to speak for him. We pled guilty with an explanation. It was dark and rainy. He wasn't reckless. He had a distraught friend with him in the car and got distracted. So he was guilty, but he explained to the judge that he is a good driver. Now God is the judge of all flesh. As he surveys our life, we are guilty of worse than distracted driving. But we have a friend, an advocate, Jesus. He pleads for us, not innocent, not guilty, but, "innocent with an explanation. Yes, this man, this woman, has sinned and deserves punishment for it. But I've paid for all the damage, all the mistakes. More, I atoned for all his sins."

This gospel, hidden for ages past, is revealed to *us* in *our* time. It was already known through the prophetic writings but people didn't see that the whole Old Testament points to Jesus until he came, ministered, and explained it to them (Luke 24).

But now the eternal God has commanded that this gospel be proclaimed and known "to all nations. That they might believe and obey him" – for true faith shows itself with deeds. For "faith without works is dead" (Jas. 2). Literally, "To bring about the obedience of faith." For to believe the gospel is to obey it, to obey the first command, to love God and have no other gods.

Five points therefore: The gospel is made known now, through Scripture, by God's command, with the obedience of faith as its goal, for all the nations.

This gospel demands faith and joy and thanks but something more – "To the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ" (16:27). For surely Paul knows all his friends in Rome by name. But God knows all his people by name, welcoming them, innocent with an explanation, into his presence. With all our service to the church, to him, remembered, with every sin forgotten, where we will joyfully sing the praises he deserves, living in delight in his new creation, forever. Amen