

Romans 16:1-27

Paul's Personal Greetings

A. Notes on the Text¹

See Main Thoughts, 4, below.

Verses 1-15 contain greetings to co-workers and helpers of Paul in the service of the gospel in Rome, while vv. 21-23 contain greetings from Corinth (where this letter was written) to the church in Rome.

Verses 1, 2

Sister Phoebe is a deaconess of the Christian church at Cenchrea. It is the eastern seaport of Corinth in Greece (the western port was Lechéum). Thus, Phoebe travels to Rome, probably delegated to the church at Rome by and in the service of the church at Cenchrea. Her task was to help the gospel workers in Rome and apparently she had shown her ability for this service in Cenchrea. She receives an apostolic commendation, a good attestation (testimonial). Church attestations as we have them now were not yet known at that time. Phoebe is not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament.

Verses 3, 4

Following the commendation of Phoebe, the apostle now gives a series of directions to greet no less than 26 other people. These directions mean: keep communion with these people, for they were the workers of the first hour in the founding of the church at Rome, and they brought you the good news. (See Main Thoughts, 5.)

Priscilla (or Prisca) and Aquila are also mentioned in Acts 18:2,18,26; 1 Corinthians 16:19; and 2 Timothy 4:19. They were Jews from Pontus. Like Urbanus (v. 9) they are "fellow-workers" of Paul in the spreading of the gospel. Paul never uses the name "fellow-worker" for ordinary Christians, but always for people who had a task in spreading the gospel with him.

Besides a number of unidentified fellow-workers (Philippians 4:3), the following are known to us from Paul's letters: Aquila and Priscilla, Urbanus, Timothy (Romans 16:21; 1 Thessalonians 3:2), Titus (2 Corinthians 8:23), Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25), Clement (Philippians 4:3), Aristarchus (Colossians 4:10,11; Philemon 24), Jesus-Justus (Colossians 4:10,11), Philemon (Philemon 1), Demas and Luke (Philemon 24) and Stephanas and his household (1 Corinthians 16:15,16). The expression "God's fellow workers" in 1

¹ *Ed. Note:* Regarding this chapter's content: for the most part the author follows Prof. Dr. J. van Bruggen's view in *Het raadsel van Romeinen 16*, (1970).

Corinthians 3:9 refers to Paul and Apollos who laid the foundation of the church, while the church itself is called God's field or God's building (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:16; 2 Corinthians 1:24; 6:1). (J. van Bruggen)²

Verse 5

"The church that meets at their house": the first Christian churches initially did not have their own church buildings and therefore they met in all kinds of buildings (see, e.g. Acts 19:9), but sometimes also in the homes of church members. In a large city like Rome the Christians met by district (see also 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15 and Philemon 2).

Epenetus is called "the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia." Asia is not the continent of Asia but a part of the Roman province of Asia Minor, whose capital was Ephesus. Thus, he came to Rome from Asia Minor in the service of the gospel.

Verses 6ff.

Nothing else is known to us about Mary, or Andronicus and Junias, who are Paul's kinsmen, that is, Christians from the Jewish tribe of Benjamin.

The New Testament also calls them: "fellow prisoners" of Paul. Prof. Van Bruggen reads this metaphorically: "prisoners" in the service of Christ. But that seems a bit far-fetched to me. It is probable that they were imprisoned somewhere together with Paul, but we do not know when or where.

They are also called: "outstanding among the apostles"; they do not belong to the twelve (thirteen) apostles, but to a wider circle of disciples of Christ who may also have been called "apostles" at times.

"They were in Christ before I was": persons who had come to the faith in Christ before Paul. Prof. Van Bruggen reads it as follows: who sped to Rome with the gospel before Paul. That is possible, but, in my opinion, unlikely.

Verses 8ff.

The names mentioned in vv. 8-12 and 14-15 are all unknown to us; Rufus (v. 13) seems more familiar. Many exegetes think (perhaps correctly) that this refers to Mark 15:21.

"Chosen": literally "elect", does not refer to personal election to salvation, but to election for the special service of the gospel, hence, fellow-worker.

In summary, two remarks about the list of names:

(a) besides the difference in race (Jewish and Gentile Christians), the difference in names is also noteworthy. Jewish, Greek and Latin names are all intermingled; and names which are typical slave names (Ampliatius, Persis, Phlegon) appear next to names of heathen gods (Hermes, Hermas). The

² Ed. Note: Quote is from *Het raadsel van Romeinen 16* (1970).

name Stachys is often found among the slaves of the imperial house (see Philippians 4:22). 1 Corinthians 1:26ff. apparently applies here.

(b) There are "house congregations" in Rome, and "families" such as those of Aristobulus (v. 10) and Narcissus (v. 11). "Family" may include the household, family and slaves, but can also mean just the slaves in a household. These "households" were probably the beginning of the "house congregations".

Verse 16

The holy kiss is the symbolic expression of the unity of the church. In the early Christian church it was liturgical in character and part of the worship service (1 Corinthians 16:20; 1 Thessalonians 5:26, and 1 Peter 5:14). It meant something more than a handshake, just as it does today (Galatians 2:9).

Verses 17-20

Paul warns against false teachers. (See Main Thoughts, 5 and 6.) Undoubtedly he was thinking of the Judaizers who created confusion and caused apostasy elsewhere.

"Keep away from them": see 2 John 9-11. Dr. D. Holwerda points out correctly that in v. 20 Paul comforts the church with the promise of Genesis 3:15.

"The God of peace": that God who through struggle will bring about the total harmony of peace. (See Luke 2:13,14, where peace is proclaimed by the host of angels).

Verses 21-24

Now follow the greetings of the fellow-workers who are with Paul in Corinth, to the church in Rome.

Timothy (see Acts 16:1; 17:14,15; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10; 2 Corinthians 1:1,19; Philippians 1:1; 2:19; Colossians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 3:2,6; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 1 Timothy 1:2,18; 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:2; Philemon 1; Hebrews 13:23. Note especially 2 Timothy 1:5).

Lucius: probably the same Lucius as the one mentioned in Acts 13:1. Jason: perhaps the person mentioned in Acts 17:5ff. Sosipater could be Sopater from Berea, Acts 20:4. The three last-mentioned were relatives of Paul and Christians from the Jewish tribe of Benjamin.

Tertius wrote the letter, as secretary. It is likely that the apostle dictated all his letters, for sometimes we read that he writes a greeting in his own, i.e. a large hand! (See 1 Corinthians 16:21; Galatians 6:11; Colossians 4:18 and 2 Thessalonians 3:17). Gaius may well be the person named in 1 Corinthians 1:14, for the letter was written from Corinth. In Acts 20:4 we hear about a Gaius from

Derbe (in Asia Minor) and in 19:29 about Gaius from Macedonia, a companion of Paul in Ephesus. In 3 John 1 the name occurs again.

Erastus is the city treasurer (see 2 Timothy 4:20). The Erastus in Acts 19:22 was probably a different person. Quartus is unknown to us.

Verse 24

Written as a footnote in the NIV and RSV, and does not occur in the oldest manuscripts we have of this letter.

Verses 25-27

The doxology is lengthy. "My" gospel (see also 2:16): Paul's gospel is none other than *the* gospel, but because in Rome the gospel was received via Paul's fellow workers and helpers, "his" gospel was well-known there.

"The revelation of the mystery": this refers to the coming of Christ in the flesh.

"Hidden for long ages": the coming of Christ was foretold by the prophets in the old covenant, but could not be proclaimed as an historic fact.

"Hidden" thus means: not yet proclaimed as a fact to "all nations" (all nations of the Roman Empire). Not all of Paul's letters end with "amen," only Romans and Galatians. A doxology always ends with "amen" (see, e.g. Matthew 6:13; Romans 1:25; 9:5; 11:36; Galatians 1:5; Ephesians 3:21; Philippians 4:20; 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16; 2 Timothy 4:18; Hebrews 13:21; Revelation 1:6). It occurs sporadically after a benediction (only in Romans 16:27 and Galatians 6:18). At the end of doxologies and benedictions the word "amen" is meant to express the hope that God will hear. When it precedes assurances ("Truly, truly," John 5:24 and other places) it sounds like an oath. According to 1 Corinthians 14:16, the congregation (and not the minister!) originally used to say "amen" after the prayer and after the sermon. The meaning of "amen" is: it is true and certain (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 129).

B. Main Thoughts

1. In the history of the explanation of chapter 16 the question has arisen whether this chapter does indeed belong to this Epistle to the Christians in Rome. In 1970 Prof. Dr. J. Van Bruggen gave a learned speech about it when he assumed the office of rector. It was entitled: "The riddle of Romans 16." The word "riddle" is a little exaggerated, I think, as is also apparent from the speech itself. However, it is not possible to deal with that question in detail. He is correct in his principal argument.
2. We will note, first, that chapter 16 definitely does belong to this letter. As you know, we no longer have Paul's original manuscript, but only copies, as is the case with all the books of the New Testament. In all of those copies this letter has our 16 chapters. Hence, we must explain chapter 16 in the context of all the other 15 chapters.

3. It is striking that Paul knows so many members of the church in Rome, although he did not found this church himself and had not been there yet. The list of names is longer than that in all the other letters, except the letter to the Colossians. And the remarkable thing is that, so far as we know, the apostle had no part in the founding of the church in Colosse either. Hence the important question is, why is the list of greetings in Romans and Colossians longer than in the other letters?
4. Prof. Van Bruggen has proposed the following as a solution concerning Romans:

Unlike other letters Paul does not use the form: "I greet X," or "My greetings to X," but the imperative: "You must greet X" (vv. 3ff.). This is not clear from most translations. The imperative means: the recipients and readers of the letter in Rome are instructed to convey Paul's greetings to those members of the church who are mentioned by name. Why this instruction? Did not all of them belong to the membership of the church in Rome, perhaps? Did they perhaps belong to a neighbouring church? That cannot be the case. Thus, when this letter is being read, they also are in the audience. Why, then, does Paul greet them via the readers and not directly?³

5. Prof. Van Bruggen answers: greeting is more than a formality, it is a sign of fellowship and acceptance:

It is a symbol of communion (with brothers and not with enemies, Matthew 5:47), it makes contact (Matthew 10:12; Luke 1:40; Acts 25:13), strengthens existing bonds (Mark 9:15; Acts 18:22; 21:7,19), and confirms that a relationship continues (Acts 20:1). A greeting was not a gesture in passing, but demanded time and attention (Luke 10:4) and presupposed a deep interest in the other's situation. Greeting is also: to welcome, to accept, to honour (Mark 9:15; 15:18; Hebrews 11:13; cf. Matthew 23:7 and Mark 12:38). There is every reason to assert that the greeting in the letters is something more than a routine matter.⁴

Hence, the instruction to greet the people mentioned by name means that the congregation in Rome must accept them. And the reason is: they were men and women who were workers and helpers in the service of the gospel; they were the ones who preached the gospel in Rome, and in that way brought about the founding of the church. If the church wants to continue in the pure gospel it should continue to accept the people mentioned.

6. Hence the warning at the end of the list of greetings (3-16) against possible future preachers who deviate from the first and preach a false gospel (vv. 17-20). Now we see the unity of this passage:

³ Ed. Note: Quote is from *Het raadsel van Romeinen 16* (1970).

⁴ Ed. Note: Ibid.

He commends a new helper for the mission field, he calls for lasting contact with those who came and preached the good news that they (the members of the congregation) have received, and he warns against making contact with individuals who arrive with a different message than the brothers and sisters recommended here. (J. van Bruggen)⁵

7. What follows teaches us that this warning was timely. In other churches false teachers had infiltrated the church (false means unfaithful to gospel; see 2 Corinthians 11:13ff.; Galatians 1:7ff. and Colossians 2:23). Why should the church of Rome be exempt from their efforts? We must also remember what happened to Paul in Rome later. In 2 Timothy 4:16ff. he writes about that. From his prison cell in Rome we hear him lament that the whole Roman congregation was conspicuous by its absence when he had to defend himself before the emperor's tribunal. Why did the whole congregation desert him then?

The answer to this may be that the congregation was afraid of suffering for the sake of Christ; that is why they aligned themselves as closely as possible with the Jews, for the Jewish religion was officially recognized by the Roman government. That is why there had not been a confrontation between the Jews and the Christians in Rome when Paul arrived (Acts 28), and why there were strong judaistic tendencies in the church against which Paul was always fighting. It did not make for a joyful reception in Rome. (See also Philippians 1:12ff. [v. 14 about the fear in the church] and Acts 28:22, where the Jews in Rome still call the Christian church a (Jewish) sect.) So we may conclude that in Romans 16:17-20, Paul is warning against Judaism.

8. Prof. Van Bruggen writes in conclusion:

The apostle was not personally the first missionary in Rome. But it was, indeed, his own co-workers and friends who founded the church in Rome, so that this church must be considered to be within the realm of Paul's missionary activities. In his letter to the fledgling church, the apostle ensures that all who are now involved in the work at Rome are mentioned by name, in order that (newly) converted Gentiles will maintain contact with the missionaries and their helpers. He also warns against the danger of other preachers who may come and deviate from the gospel they have received, so that those will not be received into the new Christian fellowship. And finally he closes his letter with a doxology befitting its contents and situation.⁶

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⁵ Ed. Note: Ibid.

⁶ Ed. Note: Ibid.