

ROM. 15:14 – 16:27

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VII. The Letter Closing (15:14 - 16:27)

A. Paul's ministry and travel plans (15:14-33)

1. God's chosen minister to the Gentiles (15:14-21)

a. Paul assures these Christians in Rome, whom he has never visited, that he did not intend by his letter to call into question their spiritual maturity. Rather, he wrote them as he did because God has made him a minister of Christ to the Gentiles. He serves the gospel as a (metaphorical) priest whose role is to present the Gentiles to God as an acceptable offering, meaning as people who have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

b. Because he has been called by God in this way, he can legitimately boast in Christ about that ministry. It is not a boasting of his own achievements but a boasting in what Christ has accomplished through him.

c. The success of his ministry is due to divine enablement. Christ is the active worker; Paul is simply the instrument. Gentiles were brought to obedience by both "word and deed," which includes miracles (signs and wonders), and all of which was accomplished through the power of the Spirit.

d. The result of this divinely driven ministry was that, from Jerusalem to Illyricum (a coastal province northwest of Macedonia, right across the Adriatic Sea from Italy), Paul had planted strategic churches in all these regions. As Knox puts it, "[the message had been] 'proclaimed' widely enough and [the church had been] 'planted' firmly enough to assure that the name of Christ would soon be heard throughout its borders."

e. The manner in which this was done was by striving eagerly to preach the gospel where there was no worship of Christ at all. In other words, Paul saw his particular mission as planting strategic churches in virgin gospel territory. Of course, in fulfilling this pioneer-church planting ministry, Paul often engaged in other ministry activities and worked with churches that he did not plant (e.g. Antioch).

f. Paul cites Isa. 52:15b for the point that his church-planting ministry among Gentiles is fulfilling the O.T. prediction about Gentiles coming to see and understand the message about the Servant of the Lord.

2. Plans to visit Rome (15:22-29)

a. The demands of his ministry in planting churches from Jerusalem to Illyricum had often prevented him from coming to Rome. But having planted churches in these regions, Paul hopes to visit Rome on his way to planting the church in Spain.

b. But first, Paul is going to Jerusalem to deliver the collection taken from the Gentile mission churches for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Those Gentiles were not legally obligated to send this money, as in the case of the Jewish temple tax, but they were indebted to the Jewish Christians as the people through whom they received the blessings of Christ. The salvation of the Gentiles comes only by way of the Jewish Messiah and the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel (1:16, 4:13-16, 11:17-24, 15:7-9).

c. After delivering the collection and "having sealed this fruit to them" Paul plans to head to Spain by way of Rome. "Sealing" is often an official affirmation of authenticity, so "sealing" the collection (fruit) perhaps refers to Paul's vouching for the contents, both in terms of amount and purpose. With that mission accomplished, Paul knows that his visit to Rome will be with the full blessings of Christ. In other words, he would not have gone prematurely.

d. We do not know if Paul ever got to Spain. The N.T. never reports such a visit; and the evidence of the Pastoral Epistles suggests that Paul turned back to the east after his trip to Rome. But part of 1 Clement, a letter from Clement of Rome to the Corinthians dating around A.D. 95, can be interpreted to suggest that he did reach Spain.

3. Request for prayer (15:30-33)

a. Paul urges the Christians in Rome to struggle with him in prayers on his behalf that he might be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea. And as we know from Acts 21:27-36, the Romans took him in custody to keep the Jews from killing him.

b. Paul also wants them to pray that the collection will be accepted by the church in Jerusalem. This collection and its reception were loaded with theological overtones. The contribution showed the Gentiles' appreciation of Jewish primacy in the gospel, and the acceptance showed the Jews' acceptance of these churches in the one community of faith. There were conservative Jewish-Christian groups that continued to be hostile toward Paul, and he was concerned that the gift might be rebuffed.

c. If this happens, he might come to them in joy, if it is God's will that he come, and be refreshed by them.

B. Greetings (16:1-23)

1. Commendation of Phoebe (16:1-2)

a. Paul commends to the Roman Christians a sister in Christ named Phoebe. She may well have been the person who carried Paul's letter to the Romans. She is described as a "*diakonos*" of the church in Cenchrea, which has fueled debate about whether

the early church had women "deacons" in the sense of servants who were formally appointed by the church.

(1) The word means "servant" and is used in that general sense many times in the N.T. So one must look beyond the word itself to determine whether Paul uses it here as a description or as a title.

(2) Historically, apart from an equally ambiguous reference in Pliny's letter to Emperor Trajan (about A.D. 110), there is no mention of female deacons until the third century. That, coupled with the emphasis on male leadership in the church and what I consider the most likely interpretation of 1 Tim. 3:11 ("wives" of deacons), leads me to favor the general term "servant."

b. But granting that Phoebe was not a "deacon" in the formal appointed sense, this woman was obviously an important member of the church in Cenchræa and highly esteemed by Paul.

(1) He asks the Romans to receive her in a manner worthy of the Lord and to help her in whatever way she needs help.

(2) Paul describes her as a "benefactor" or "patron" of many, including himself. According to Moo:

A "patron" was one who came to the aid of others, especially foreigners, by providing housing and financial aid and by representing their interests before local authorities. Cenchræa's status as a busy seaport would make it imperative that a Christian in its church take up this ministry on behalf of visiting Christians. Phoebe, then, was probably a woman of high social standing and some wealth, who put her status, resources, and time at the services of traveling Christians, like Paul, who needed help and support. Paul now urges the Romans to reciprocate.

2. Greetings to Roman Christians (16:3-16)

a. There was a tendency in the ancient world to give certain names to certain kinds of people. Moo says these studies show that a majority of the names are Gentile and that the majority of the names are those of slaves and "freedmen," or the descendants of slaves/freedmen.

b. Paul refers to at least three house churches (vv. 5, 14, 15) in this greeting. As Moo notes:

Early Christians did not have large public facilities for meeting, so they used their own houses. And since even the largest house of the wealthiest Christian would hold no more than seventy or eighty for worship, growth beyond that point required that the Christians split up into house churches.

c. It is quite possible, perhaps even likely, that the second name in v. 7 is the feminine name "Junia" rather than the masculine name "Junias" (a contracted form of Junianus). In that case, Andronicus and Junia are probably husband and wife. There is a debate over whether Paul says they were "outstanding *among* the apostles" or "well known *to* the apostles," but Greek grammarian Daniel Wallace has made a strong case for the latter, which is how the ESV translates it. If Andronicus and Junia are in fact referred to as "apostles," it would be in a nontechnical sense that they were traveling missionaries.

d. It is noteworthy that Paul mentions nine women in this list, five of whom are commended for their labor in the Lord. Though women cannot assume the same roles as men in the church, they were active and important members in the community of faith.

e. I do not understand the command that they "Greet one another with a holy kiss" as a command to kiss. As Moo says, "[t]he kiss was a common form of greeting in the ancient world generally and in Judaism especially." Paul *assumes* they'll greet by kissing but commands that it be a "*holy* kiss." He's saying, "The kiss with which you greet one another is to be holy," meaning a kiss that is a genuine expression of Christian love. The greeting is not to be duplicitous, as was the kiss that betrayed our Lord. If a commander wrote to his troops: "Greet President Bush with a respectful salute," his point wouldn't be that they're to salute – that's a given – but that when they salute they do so with the respect that is due the office of president.

3. A warning, a promise, and a prayer (16:17-20)

a. Paul warns them to watch out for those who create division in the church and threaten the spiritual lives of the members by teaching that is contrary to what they had been taught. He seems to have a certain group in mind, perhaps the Judaizers who plagued him throughout his ministry. They are to avoid or turn away from these false teachers because they are not serving the Lord and because they are able to deceive the unsuspecting by their smooth talk.

b. The existence of the church in Rome was well known, and with that kind of profile it is only a matter of time before the wolves arrive. Paul, of course, rejoices over them, but he wants them to be "innocent" in terms of evil but "wise," meaning not naive, in terms of false teaching. As Bruce puts it, they should not be "so 'simple-minded' that as to swallow whatever is offered." It's the idea behind Jesus' saying about being "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Mat. 10:16).

c. As they practice that discernment, God will give them swift victory over the Satan-inspired heretics.

4. Greetings from Paul's companions (16:21-24) – Erastus is described here as the city's "treasurer," and this is probably the same Erastus mentioned in an inscription from Corinth.

5. Concluding doxology (16:25-27) – Paul ends the letter with a doxology in praise of the God who has in the gospel of Jesus Christ revealed the climax of salvation history.