GREETINGS—ALONG WITH A WARNING—TO THOSE IN ROME

Romans 16:1–20

By Dub McClish

Introduction

Romans 16:1-20 is one of the most completely personal sections to come from the pen of Paul, indeed from any inspired pen. Out of its twenty verses, sixteen of them relate to personal commendations, greetings to those in Rome, or greetings being sent to Rome from various ones who knew Paul was writing this letter to Rome. In the various commendations and salutations at least twenty-seven personal names are mentioned and numerous, others not actually named, are included in greetings to and from several congregations. This section is concluded with a final fervent plea that relates to the entire doctrinal content of the letter and indeed to all of the Gospel.

The material in these twenty verses falls naturally into the following divisions:
1. Commendation of Phoebe of Cenchrea (vv. 1–2)
2. Greetings to and complimentary descriptions of familiar and unfamiliar saints and greetings from the churches (vv. 3–16)
3. A closing plea regarding doctrinal purity and proper handling of false teachers (vv. 17–20)

Phoebe Of Cenchrea

When Paul left Corinth in the company of Aquila and Priscilla to sail eastward across the Aegean to Ephesus at the close of his second preaching trip, they took ship for voyage from Cenchrea. Here they paused long enough for Paul to shave his head due to an unexplained vow. Except for this occurrence (cf. Acts 18:18), this eastern coastal port of Corinth is not mentioned in Scripture. Quite possibly the church in Cenchrea resulted from Paul’s initial stay in Corinth of nearly two years (vv. 11–17), this visit of Paul, or perhaps from the efforts of brethren in Corinth (only nine miles separated the two cities). By some means Phoebe had, like the Corinthians, heard the blessed Gospel, believed, and been baptized (Acts 18:8). Paul not only knew her, but he knew her well enough to urge the Romans to receive her as a faithful saint should be received and to help her with every need.

Her worthiness was based on three qualities:
1. She was a servant of the Cenchrean church
2. She had helped many
3. She had personally helped Paul.
We know neither the particulars of her help to others, nor to Paul. Some have conjectured that Paul became ill while at Cenchrea, during which time Phoebe was of great help to him, his illness and recovery therefrom being the cause of his self-inflicted baldness.\(^1\) We do well to observe that whatever help Phoebe had rendered was widely known and appreciated, for it had touched many.

Was Phoebe a "deaconess?" Some commentators affirm that she was such in an "official" sense, even as the apostolic church had deacons.\(^2\) Those who so affirm often refer to 1Timothy 3:11 as a statement of the qualifications for female deacons. Likewise, some identify the "enrolled" widows in Ephesus (1 Tim. 5:9–10) as deaconesses. However, I am not convinced that Phoebe or any other woman was ever a "deaconess" in the official sense that certain men were deacons or bishops.

First, there is no more ground to claim an official use of diakonon in Romans 16:1 than there is of diakonos in Romans 13:4. In the latter passage rulers are said to be "servants of God," but obviously this does not mean they were "official" deacons in the church, since most were not even Christians. In Romans 5:8 Paul says that the Christ was a diakonon, and Paul often calls himself a diakonos (cf. 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4, et al.). However, I know none who would claim that either Christ or Paul were "official" deacons (as with the rulers, our Lord was never in the church). Why then assume an official use for the term concerning Phoebe? If the term is used officially here it is the only place in the letter where it is. The 149 scholars who produced the King James and American Standard Versions, respectively, render the term servant instead of deaconess in our text, indicating their conviction that Phoebe was no official deaconess.

Second, Paul's reference to the women in the midst of the qualifications of elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3:11) is most likely a reference to wives, as reflected in the KJV. While gunaikas can be rendered wives or women (as the ASV renders it here), context must determine its meaning, and wives fits better in this context than the generic women. Had Paul wished to refer to deaconesses he could have easily (and surely would have) used the term so signifying. He did not, however. I suggest that he is referring to the wives of both elders and deacons, since both must have wives to be qualified. But would merely a wife of any sort meet the demands of the qualifications of these men? Would not the women described in this verse be peculiarly suited to complement the work of an elder or deacon?

Third, the "enrolled" widows in 1 Timothy 5:9–10 were just that, and to assume that they were deaconesses is eisegesis rather than exegesis. We have clear orders concerning the
qualifications of elders and deacons. That they were to be appointed and that they existed in the early church is a matter of record. We have none of the above for deaconesses. The mere fact that one serves a church in some capacity does not make one an "official" in that church.

Therefore, with Barclay. Whiteside, Lipscomb, and Coffman, respectively, I agree: “Sometimes she is called a deaconess, but it is not likely that she held what might be called an official position in the church.”3 "But the use of the word diakonos, here translated 'servant,' does not prove that she occupied an official position."4 "Some think she was a publicly recognized deaconess, but we find no recognition in the Scriptures of any such class."5

The New Testament word apostle is used in its both official and limited sense and also in a secondary and mere general sense when applied to men like Barnabas and Silas, who were not, strictly speaking, "apostles." The view here is that deaconess as applied to Phoebe, in the same manner, does not mean that she was officially a deacon in the church of the Lord.6

From Paul's commendation of Phoebe by letter, let us learn that as faithful saints move about in whatever age or society, it is wise and Scriptural to take with them such a letter of commendation from a respected eldership or preacher. The Ephesian church did the same for Apollos when he went to Achaia (Acts 18:27–28). Paul likewise instructed the Corinthians to receive Timothy and help him (1 Cor. 16:10–11).

This salutary practice produces at least two observable benefits:

1. It introduces the new saint as worthy of fellowship and suggests that he or she may immediately be assigned appropriate responsibilities among one’s new brethren. (Paul well knew the practical value of some means of introduction, having at first been refused fellowship in Jerusalem for lack of it, Acts 9:26).

2. It preserves the church from the immoral person or false teacher who might corrupt the church to which he moves. We need to restore this practice. Not all who neglect to secure such a letter are to be mistrusted, but those who bear such a letter are certainly a welcome sight to any church. In these days characterized by permissiveness, liberalism, and moral and doctrinal softness among brethren, with the additional element of the constant mobility of society, local churches must use caution in accepting those who wish to "place membership." A smooth-talking false teacher can move in and divide a church in a few months' time.

I commend the practice of the elders with whom I work. When people who are strangers to us ask to "place membership," we do not immediately announce that they "have placed membership" and urge the congregation to warmly welcome them. Rather, we announce that they "have expressed a desire to be members." In the same announcement, we also state that our elders will meet with them very soon to discuss our work with them. Often this is done the
same day. In this discussion meeting some time is spent on doctrinal matters, and the moral condition of the people involved (including their marital situation) and their status at their previous congregation, as well as our own determination to faithfully follow the Word. Frankly, there are some brethren who move to town whom we do not want to be with us if they are unwilling to repent. How much better to find out who they are before they are welcomed with open arms, rather than afterward, when they have had time to adversely influence others.

Although it cannot be positively determined, I infer that Phoebe was the bearer of this letter. Paul was at Corinth when he wrote it (Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 1:14). Phoebe would have come through Corinth from Cenchrea on her westward trip to Rome. If she carried and delivered the letter, one can but wonder at the responsibility that was hers to handle this priceless treasure of Truth safely until it reached its destination.

Greetings to and from Brethren

Paul's first greetings are to one of the most remarkable Christian couples in the New Testament church, here called "Prisca and Aquila." Paul had met them when he visited Corinth the first time. They had been residents of Rome, but, being Jews, had fled to Corinth upon Claudius' eviction of the Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2). We are not told when they obeyed the Gospel, but since their conversion is not mentioned after Paul met them, I infer that they were Christians when Paul met them. When Paul left Corinth, they went with him as far as Ephesus, where they remained until he had made his circuit through Syria, returning to Ephesus (Acts 18:18–21). During Paul’s absence, Apollos came to Ephesus, preaching many things accurately about Christ, but still knowing only John's baptism. Aquila and Priscilla were spiritually mature and doctrinally strong enough to teach him the Truth on this matter (vv. 25–26). We may pause to observe that they did not shirk their responsibility by rationalizing that Paul would soon return and he could take care of the matter. Neither did they foolishly reason (as most of the present-day world and many of the present-day disciples do) that such doctrinal issues really don't matter anyway as long as Apollos was sincere and full of "love."

At the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians Prisca and Aquila were still in Ephesus with Paul (1 Cor. 16:19). This means they had resided there for longer than three years (Acts 20:31), having preceded Paul there, probably by some months (18:18-21) and apparently remaining there some time after he left. Obviously, the Claudian edict had been lifted by the time of Paul’s letter to Rome, allowing them to return to their former home. However, by the time of Paul’s second Roman imprisonment they had returned to Ephesus (2 Tim. 4:19).
What specific occurrence Paul refers to in which this devout pair risked their necks for his we know not. They were witnesses to the Jew-inspired mob action in Corinth in which Paul was dragged before Gallio (Acts 18:12). They were also in Ephesus when the violence stirred by Demetrius threatened Paul's life (Acts 19:23–32). Whether it was one of these occasions or some other in which they hazarded their own lives for his, we have no way of knowing. He expressed not only his own gratitude, but also that of the churches that loved and respected him. As was the case in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19), so in Rome, they opened their house to brethren as a place for the church to meet. There is no hint in any passage of Scripture of any defect in their moral or doctrinal makeup. They are rather depicted consistently as loyal disciples who had not only served as faithful co-workers with Paul, but who had been refined by the fire of trial. The good they did in their varied residences will not be fully known until the Judgment, but we can even now assess it to be extensive. How appropriate that Prisca and Aquila appear first on Paul's list of salutations!

The succeeding list of greeting which concludes in verse 15 contains the names of many of Paul's acquaintances and kindred, of whom we know hardly anything more than what he mentions in connection with the greetings herein sent. As interesting as this list is, space forbids more than a few summary statements concerning it. Worthy of observation concerning this catalog of names are the following items:

1. That Paul knew so many of them although he had never been to Rome (Rom. 1:13; 15:22–24, 28–29). While he alluded to his acquaintance with some of them from other places, his means and place of acquaintance with most of them is lost to history.
2. We necessarily infer that these had migrated to Rome from other areas of Paul's work. The large number of them is remarkable and raises a question concerning the reason for the migration. While Paul does not tell us the background, it is interesting to conjecture that perhaps a concentrated effort was being made to saturate this metropolis with the Gospel and that faithful saints from allover had responded.
3. Paul gives us a brief glimpse into his own family by naming three who were his "kinsmen." They were surely more than mere Jews, else Prisca and Aquila would have likewise been called "kinsmen." Three other "kinsmen" were with him in Corinth as he wrote (Rom. 16:21), Here are at least six members of his family (uncles, cousins?) who were Christians, some of whom had obeyed Christ before he did.
4. In spite of the claims of Roman Catholicism that Peter had become a resident of Rome before this letter was written, there is no hint of his presence there in this chapter of greetings. Such would have been an unthinkable insult had Peter been there. The absence of
his name from those greeted is the strongest implication that he was not in Rome. Moreover, when Paul later wrote his “prison epistles” from Rome, Peter was never mentioned, although Paul mentions many who had been or who still were with him in his trials. That the apostle Peter was ever in Rome rests only on tradition.

5. The thoughtfulness, gratitude and tenderness of the apostle are all amply demonstrated in these many greetings and notes of commendation.

**A Plea for Doctrinal Purity**

Stronger and plainer words on the necessity of maintaining doctrinal purity cannot be found in or out of the New Testament than these in Paul's final plea of the epistle. Paul says, “I beseech you.” *Beseech* translates *parakalo*. The term is a compound of *para* (along side of or beside) and *kaleo* (to call), thus to call one alongside of oneself. It is a strong term of appealing, urging, exhorting, and encouraging to a given action. Although Paul, as an apostle, could have commanded what he writes here, he issues a strong, imploring appeal instead. The exhortation nonetheless has the strength of a charge, order, or command. This plea is not merely a polite suggestion, but an earnest entreaty. The substance of the appeal is that the Roman brethren must carefully guard and preserve the true doctrine of Christ they had learned. The principal means by which they were to so do were two: (1) “Mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling contrary to the doctrine,” and (2) “turn away from them.”

There was never a more devilish doctrine than that which teaches or implies that Truth and doctrinal purity are insignificant. None can read the New Testament with an unprejudiced eye and keep from seeing the constant emphasis upon it. It begins with such representative statements of our Lord as, “Beware of false prophets…” (Mat. 7:15), “If ye abide in my word, then are ye truly my disciples” (John 8:31), and “He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my sayings, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I spake, the same shall judge him in the last day” (12:48). Such emphasis does not end until almost the final words of the final book, which words sternly warn men neither to add to nor subtract from the revealed Word (Rev. 22:18–19). No New Testament author neglects this emphasis.

The motive of this strong and consistent theme rests in the fact that the Word of God through Christ is God's spiritual “seed” (Luke 8:11). If men faithfully preserve and plant this seed it can do nought but produce the plant that is imprinted by God on its spiritual genes. Moreover, when the seed germinates and produces God's plant, that spiritual plant, the church, can remain pure, healthy, and strong only so long as it feeds upon the pure doctrine of the Gospel.
Apostasy cannot be defined apart from doctrinal corruption. When one or a hundred saints move away from Christ it is because they have embraced a different "gospel"—a perverted one (Gal. 1:6–7). The reason why so many congregations of the present are so different from those of even one generation ago is because the message—the doctrine—has been changed. The two—the doctrine and the church—are inseparably linked. Doctrinal changes set in motion a vicious cycle, almost incapable of being interrupted. Changes in doctrine create changes in practice—and thus the church is changed. The more the church changes, the more its members eschew the Truth they have abandoned, causing yet further digressions by the church.

The foregoing is why the inspired men were so boldly militant in their preservation of Divine Truth. As they did, so must we contend earnestly for the faith, be always ready to give answer for our hope, and be set for the defense of the Gospel (Jude 3; 1 Pet. 3:15; Phil. 1:16). For these very reasons Paul wrote this magnificent appeal to conclude his letter to Rome. No better illustration of what happens when men ignore this appeal can be found than the totally apostate church of Rome which began as the church of Christ in Rome to whom Paul wrote this letter.

False doctrine does not exist independent of false teachers. Therefore, the originators and/or propagators of the divisive doctrines must be dealt with. They are to be "marked." *Mark* is from *skopein*, a present infinitive form of *skopeo*, meaning to "look (out) for, notice, keep one's eyes on someone or something."® (Our English family of “scope” words derive from this Greek term.) Every Christian is to practice vigilance for false teachers. How strange that anyone claiming loyalty to Christ and respect for New Testament teaching and example would sympathize with purveyors of perverted teaching rather than exposing and/or rebuking them. The only way some brethren "look out for" the teacher of contrary doctrines is to supply his needs and protect him. Paul is demanding the practice of discrimination concerning teachers and teaching. Quite pitifully some (including elders) are so ignorant of the Truth that they do not recognize error when they hear it or see it. Those who know little of the Truth are hardly in position to discern error. Others count it a mark of spiritual superiority never to "keep books" or "files" on any brother (as they are wont to pejoratively style it). Only a fool places his hand over the gas gauge in his car thinking the gas will last indefinitely as long as he doesn't see it register "empty." Brethren are no wiser who pride themselves in denying who is teaching or practicing this or that, thinking that ignoring it will cause it to disappear. A generation of ignoring instead of taking note has shown the predictable evil fruits of disobeying Divine injunction.
Some argue that the idea of "branding" is not in the word translated mark. This contention is doubtless true concerning this single word of the text. However, does not the act of taking note of false teachers so as to be able to avoid them and to warn others of them demand that we “brand” or expose them for what they are? Was not this our Lord’s practice (Mat. 16:6)? This was both the practice and precept of Paul (1 Tim. 1:3, 20; 2 Tim. 2: 16–17; 4:1–4; Tit. 1:9–13, et al.). If Paul did not give this charge to the end that divisive teachers might be identified and exposed then the charge has no meaning.

Not only are these teachers to be taken note of, they are to be shunned, avoided (cf. Tit. 3:10; 2 John 10–11). That is, they are not to be listened to or extended any sort of treatment that implies endorsement. It is true of preachers, congregations, and colleges that they are known by the company they keep. If many of our brethren had not been too "smart," "sophisticated," and "bleeding-heart" tolerant over the past twenty years to obey Paul’s inspired instruction in this matter, we could have isolated most of the element that is leading many brethren ever closer to denominationalism. For lack of backbone to turn away from these men and identify them for what they are, many of them are now firmly entrenched and are enjoying an increasing popularity.

This passage emphasizes the dependence of true unity upon doctrine. We must reject the concept of the possibility of Scriptural unity on any basis that ignores or forfeits doctrinal Truth. There can be no heaven-ordained unity in the climate of doctrinal diversity. Scriptural unity surely involves mutual love between the parties concerned, but it requires far more than mere emotional ties. Paul’s words state the matter plainly: where men are taught and receive doctrines that differ from and are contrary to the doctrine, the result is not unity, but "divisions and occasions of stumbling." Such statements as “It is not doctrine that unites us, it is love,” are not only unscriptural, they are totally anti-scriptural. The content of Romans 16:17 alone is sufficient to successfully challenge the insidious Ketcherside-Garrett doctrine of “unity in diversity.”

In the face of divisive, destructive doctrines that are “contrary to the doctrine” many yet cry for patience and tolerance toward teachers of the same. Just how long can false teachers be allowed to ravish the bride of Christ? For example, how long must we wait to apply this order to men like brethren James D. Bales, James Woodroof, Ted Stewart, Raymond Kelcy, Lewis Hale and others who are openly propagating divisive and contrary doctrines on marriage, divorce, and remarriage? These doctrines are leading many to live in fornication with no sense of guilt. Already many congregations under the influence of such teachers have become open havens for the unscripturally divorced and remarried. If we think the influence of these doctrines on the
present generation is a tragedy, the compounded tragedy is readily foreseen when a second
generation grows up under them.

Are these doctrines causing divisions? Most certainly! It is happening both at home and
abroad. I have some heart-breaking letters in my files, received in the past year, of grievous
divisions in Thailand, of problems in Ghana, of grave fears of good brethren concerning Korea,
Taiwan, and the Philippines relating to these doctrines. If now is not the time for faithful brethren
to stand up and say, "We have taken note of these false teachers and their divisive doctrines
and we must turn away from them," then when will be the time? How many more young
preachers and uninformed elders will they be allowed to influence? How many more churches
must be divided and how many more souls lost before we draw the line and say, “This far and
no further?”

As sad as it is to consider and as difficult as it is to do, can we any longer resist the Holy
Spirit's instruction? It is not my place to command others or decide for others on this matter.
However, for my part I have taken note of these men and their doctrines some time ago and I
have turned away from them. I will not knowingly use them, work with them, or encourage them.
If faithful brethren would as one man obey Paul's order concerning the teachers of these
doctrines, some of them would surely be brought to repentance. If not, at least their influence
would be all but neutralized, if not nullified. As it is, they are "not serving our Lord Christ," and
many are being "beguiled by their smooth and fair speech."

I would not leave the impression that this is the only divisive doctrine and its teachers the
only ones to which Paul's sober plea applies. The proponents of premillennialism, "all grace, no
law," "salvation by grace—period," theistic evolution, and many other doctrines that are gaining
prominence among us need the same scriptural remedy.

Conclusion

Man is a creature who at times and concerning some things seems incapable of learning
the most obvious lessons of history or Scripture. The church in Rome, with all of those named
and likely many other unnamed members remained the church of Christ so long—and only so
long—as she faithfully preached and practiced apostolic doctrine. When the mood of
compromise, softness and tolerance (perhaps in the name of "love") of false doctrines and their
purveyors began to prevail, it only took two or three generations for the church to lose its identity.
By the beginning of the sixth century the first Roman Catholic pope claimed the papal chair.

The same is yet true. I fear that many congregations that display Church of Christ on
their property are presently in about the same doctrinal mood and position as the Christian
Church was 80 or 100 years ago, only perhaps more "advanced." Some of our congregations are ripe for the instrument or almost any other innovation. The prevailing attitude is to be only "positive." Don't criticize. Don't condemn. Don't expose. Don't make anyone feel bad by making him or her feel guilty. Don't be negative. (The only ones who are allowed to be negative are those who are negative toward negativism!) If we do not change this anti-scriptural direction we will see most of what we know as the church now swept away in another few generations at most. The great preventive of this unspeakable tragedy is the careful execution of Paul's closing charge and appeal to the brethren at Rome.

Endnotes


[Note: I wrote this MS for and I presented a digest of it orally at the Spiritual Sword Lectures, hosted by the Getwell Church of Christ, Memphis, TN, October 16–20, 1983. It was published in the book of the lectures, *The Book of Romans*, ed. Garland Elkins and Thomas B. Warren (Getwell Church of Christ: Memphis, TN)].
The first time that Paul was in prison in *Rome was about AD 60. He was there for two years. Then he travelled again and he went to *Macedonia. He may have travelled as far as Spain before he went back to *Rome. He was in prison again and soon after that the *Emperor Nero had him killed. Paul wrote this second letter to Timothy from prison just before he died.Â But all his friends except Luke had left him (2 Timothy 4:11, 16). Although he had succeeded that time, the *Romans would not set him free. He expects that they will soon kill him (2 Timothy 4:6). Paul writes to encourage Timothy in his Christian life. Warning against divisions (16:17-19). God will crush Satan shortly (16:20). Greetings from Paulâ€™s coworkers (16:21-24). Glory to God, who alone is wise, through Jesus Christ (16:25-27). Romans 16:1. I am introducing: Or â€œrecommend.â€ Paul is apparently introducing Phoebe to the Christians in Rome for the purpose of encouraging them to accept her and to adopt the same attitude toward her that Paul had. (Ro 16:2) The Greek word used here is related to the Greek term Paul used at 2Co 3:1 in the expression â€œletters of recommendation.â€ In Bible times, such letters of recommendation were a common w Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. 12 Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. 13 Greet Rufus,* chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine. d 14 Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. 15 Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the holy ones who are with them. 16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.e. Against Factions.Â so that I rejoice over you, I want you to be wise as to what is good, and simple as to what is evil; h 20 then the God of peace will quickly crush Satan* under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.i. Greetings from Corinth. Romans 16 â€” Greetings to the Christians in Rome. A. Greetings to many different Christians. 1. (1-2) A recommendation of Phoebe. I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.Â ii. Of course, this will not ultimately happen until Satan is bound and cast into the bottomless pit (Revelation 20:1-3); but every victory God wins for us right now is a preview of that event. 2. (21-24) Greetings from those in Corinth with Paul. Timothy, my fellow worker, and Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater, my countrymen, greet you.