

Romans 16:1–16 (NIV) I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. ² I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me. ³ Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. ⁴ They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. ⁵ Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. ⁶ Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. ⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. ⁸ Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. ⁹ Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. ¹⁰ Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. ¹¹ Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. ¹² Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. ¹³ Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. ¹⁴ Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them. ¹⁵ Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord's people who are with them. ¹⁶ Greet one another with a holy kiss.

As I read this list of all the men and women who worked tirelessly for the gospel, I strikes me how much Paul relied upon these folks—most of whom we will never know their stories and what else they did to further the cause of Christ in the world.

Illus: I am reminded of the Peanuts cartoon where Lucy demands that Linus change the TV channel.

“What makes you think you can walk in here and take over?” asks Linus?

Lucy replies: “These five fingers. Individually, they’re nothing. But when I curl them together into a single unity, they form a weapon too terrible to behold.”

“Which channel do you want?” asks Linus. And in the next panel he looks down at his fingers and says,

“Why can’t you guys get organized like that?”

In reading this list of all the people Paul greets, it occurs to me that the Christian life and mission requires a unified strength that is only found in numbers—when believers unite in the gospel. And Paul does more than *merely acknowledge their help*.

Today, we’ll look at four vital elements of Paul’s closing statement to the church in Rome: (1) the importance of relationships in the church; (2) the need for diversity within those relationships; (3) The importance of avoiding divisive people; (4) the centrality of Christ in our relationships.

1. The importance of relationships in the church. Rom 16:16 “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” Paul’s greeting to so many tells us, if we look carefully, what kinds of relationships we need and that the church provides.

- We need a team. Paul here mentions all the individuals who were directly or indirectly responsible for supporting the gospel and his ministry in the gospel. He calls these people “co-laborers” “ministers/deacons” “apostles/missionaries” and teachers and those who practice hospitality (e.g., Gaius v. 23). He mentions Phoebe who served as a deacon-benefactor and patron of the church. Priscilla and Aquila co-laborers and patrons. Mary, Andronicus and Junia, Urbanus, the women Tryphena and Tryphosa, and Persis. And lastly Tertius—the secretary who penned the letter (Rom 16:22). All of the terms he uses to describe these people are terms of ministry or work.

When we read the book of Acts, we see that God didn’t just choose Paul, he chose Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Silas, and Timothy, and Luke and on the list goes. While God called Paul to be the Apostle to the Gentiles, and while he was the chief spokesman within his ministry companions for the gospel;—*Paul needed a team of people who could support, encourage, resource and share his burden for the gospel.*

Application: So let me ask you today—who is on YOUR team? If you were writing a list like this how long or short would it be? Who are you co-laboring with and who is working hard with you to support you in the Christian life?

- We need a family. Other than co-laboring terms, Paul uses *family* terminology to describe the people who’ve become so meaningful to him. He greets the house (*oikos*) churches of Chloe, Aquila and Priscilla, Aristobulus, Narcissus; his beloved friends (*agapetoi*) Epenetus, Ampliatus, Stachys, Apelles, Persis; and the brothers and sisters including Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas; and Rufus’ mother, who was a mother to Paul also.

More than any other metaphor for the “church” in Scripture, Paul and the NT authors used “family” terms.

Who are your faith-family members? What is your *oikos*—your household in the faith, your *agapetoi*—your most cherished dearly loved friends in the faith? Who are your fathers, your mothers, your brothers and sisters in Christ?

If you are trying to live the Christian life all on your own, without a tribe and without deep Christian community you are an easy mark for Satan. He will exploit your loneliness and isolation deceiving you into thinking you are the only person who has ever faced the trials before you. He will manipulate you into thinking that your isolation is just the way it’s always going to be.

Application: In order for us to do the Christian life we need a team and we need a family. But how do we find this? *We need those who’ve found community to always be welcoming to new people.*

- Paul told the Corinthian Christians “I’m sending Timothy to you, see to it that you receive him and that he has nothing to fear as he carries on my work there” (1 Cor 16:10).
- Jesus said “whoever welcomes this child, welcomes me...” and Jesus was accused of “welcoming sinners and fellowshiping with” the rabble—outcasts. Becoming a welcoming, receiving church takes a lot of work—we have to push against our tendency to become ingrown and stagnant.

But it also takes the initiative of the individual. Some of the responsibility to find community and a ministry is up to you.

The second thing we notice in the final greeting is:

2. The importance of diversity within Christian relationships. This reminds us of Romans 12:4–5 “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” The other thing that strikes me about this greeting is just what a variety of people Paul mentions here and the diversity among them in terms of calling, gifting, and background. Paul here lists people from all walks of life—different genders, social classes, personal gifts of service.

- He mentions people who are fellow Jews—Andronicus and Junia, Herodion, Jason, and Sosipater.
- He mentions women as co-laborers—Priscilla, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Mary, Persis.
- And the men—Aquila, Urbanus, and Apelles, Timothy, Lucius.
- He mentions females who serve as Deaconesses, apostles, and patrons or benefactors—Chloe and Junia.
- And the Greek men who served faithfully such as Aquila and Andronicus.

The Roman church needed every member to function in ministry to build up the body. Those with gifts of generosity, service, teaching, leadership, prophecy, hospitality and administration.

Application: *If Paul had included you on this list how would he have described you?* As a co-laborer in the gospel—one who works hard for the Kingdom of God for the building up of the body? As a deacon—a minister in the church? As a missionary, a pastor-teacher, a recent convert, a beloved friend to all?

Paul is also concerned with...

3. The importance of avoiding divisive people. Rom 16:17–19 “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions...” As important as it is for us to have a diverse group of believers in the local church, as vital as it is for each individual in the church to have a team, and a family, *it’s equally vital that we avoid divisive people*. Divisive people disrupt the calling and mission of the church because they divide over debatable matters—raising their pet peeves to the level of the gospel. Or their just terminally cranky.

Caveat: Paul is not here saying we should or even can avoid toxic, divisive people altogether. Indeed, some of the very people we’re attempting to reach with the Gospel of Jesus are the most toxic people we know. ***But understand there is a difference here between our mission field and our inner circle.*** Jesus was accused of being a friend of sinners, but in his most intimate moments of ministry, prayer, and personal need *Jesus surrounded himself with the 12, and among the 12 the 3* (Peter, James, and John).

- We need to avoid false teachers. Rom 16:17b–18 “who 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.” Again, the issue here is not “contact” or “witness” but “who is nourishing your soul?” The people in your inner circle need to be those who encourage and exhort you in the faith. Those who teach falsely about the Gospel may even think they are serving Jesus—but they’re not. And the most effective false teachers I’ve seen are those who are smooth-talking sycophants, flattering people’s egos while leading them away from the gospel which saves and sanctifies.
- We need to maintain our reputation in the gospel. Rom 16:19 “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.” Everyone in Paul’s day had heard of the Roman Churches’ reputation in the Gospel. Paul wants them to be able to wisely discern what is good, and innocent with regards to things that are evil.

Application: As we seek to practice hospitality to our neighbors, friends, coworkers and family—are we subtly making compromises in order to accommodate the world? In the absence of challenging people’s worldview or beliefs with the gospel, we may find that our toleration of false doctrine or evil morphs into participation and complicity. It’s just a question, but are we

taking pains to avoid putting people in our inner circle who would divide and destroy the unity of the church through false teaching? In this regard we must be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

4. The centrality of Christ and his gospel in our relationships. Rom 16:25–27 “Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, ²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith— ²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.”

This book began with the gospel and it ends with the good news of salvation to Gentiles.

- Paul reminds them that they are established on the gospel—the good news to Jews and shocking for Gentiles—that God now calls all nations to the obedience of faith—that is, the obedience that *is* a response faith to this message.
- Paul reminds them that gospel is established in the OT. Gentile inclusion was hiding in plain sight. It was right there in Isaiah and the Psalms the whole time—it’s right there in Genesis 3:15, and 6 and 11. But like a cypher it needed decoding—and Paul has told them that the cross is the cypher key—the cross is God’s message of salvation to all who believe. First the Jew and then the Gentile.
- Paul reminds them that the gospel comes from the only wise God to whom all glory and honor belongs.

Ultimately, our relationships in the church are defined and shaped by the gospel of the cross.

And in this new cross-shaped community, we find a team of co-laborers as we work together for the good news of Jesus.

We find a family in place of our loneliness and isolation.

That family is beautiful in its diversity and giftedness.

It saves us from false teaching and the ego-stroking nonsense of this world.

And this family and new community is nurtured in the gospel, its inner life nourished in the Word of Christ and those of like mind who share our faith.