

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Connected Christians

Romans 16:1-27

I believe the apostle Paul would be pleased with the kind of gathering we have here this morning. After all, our primary purpose for being here is to worship. We've gathered to praise the one true and wise God, made known in and through Jesus the Messiah, who died for our sins and was raised from the dead, and who reigns as Lord of the world. In and through Jesus, God has revealed and accomplished his reconciling and restoring purpose for humankind, inaugurating a new creation that will be fully unveiled when Christ comes again. The ultimate response to God's faithful love and saving action is to offer ourselves in gratitude, praise, and obedience, grounded in faith. It's through this kind of worship that God is glorified and we're renewed as his people, being remade in the image of Christ.

No wonder Paul closes his letter to the Christians in Rome with a doxology, a praise prayer, that summarizes both the content and purpose of the gospel. Here at the conclusion of his longest, and in the eyes of many, his greatest letter, Paul takes a really deep breath and declares, "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen (vv. 25-27). That's all one sentence. One stand up in your pews, unite your voices, and give God the glory, sentence.

Paul ends his letter the same way he began it, with the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord. From the moment Paul's scribe put pen to paper, the aim of Romans has been to magnify the name of Jesus. Now that doesn't mean that other names are unimportant. In fact, Paul started the whole letter with his own name. "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God. . ." (1:1). In the first chapter we have the name of the sender. In the last chapter we get to hear the names of many of the recipients. Paul wraps things up by opening the sanctuary door and giving us a glimpse of some of the people sitting in the pews in Rome.

Paul begins with a brief letter of recommendation for Phoebe, a woman whom he describes as a deacon in the church. She occupies a position of leadership in the community of Christ's people. She has Paul's deepest respect, and he wants and expects the church in Rome to view her the same way. In fact, Phoebe may very well be the person entrusted with delivering Paul's letter, and perhaps even reading it and interpreting it to the congregation. What's more, to Paul, and to the other believers, she isn't just Phoebe. She's "our sister Phoebe" (v. 1). She's a member of God's family, a holy household where spiritual siblings live in faithful and loving solidarity with one another.

After commending Phoebe to the Roman church, Paul sends greetings to many others in the congregation. Notice that he doesn't just fire off a brief and generic hello to all the folks in the fellowship, punctuated with a smiley face emoji wearing a halo. No, Paul gets specific. He gets down to individuals whom he has known and who have worked with him. These are

men and women, and in some cases husbands and wives, who have stood with him, behind him, and around him in preaching and practicing the gospel. Most of all, they are brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul knows their names. He knows their lives. He knows their stories. He knows their strengths. He knows their weaknesses. He knows their gifts. He knows how hard they've worked. He knows how much they've sacrificed. He knows what they've endured. He knows how far they've come with Christ. He knows how far they still have to go with Christ. These aren't the names of people who happen to have "Friended" Paul on his Facebook page, but haven't really kept in touch. No, these are deep and lasting spiritual bonds, forged in the ongoing task of laboring for the gospel and cultivating the unity of the church. I think that if the first sixteen verses of Romans 16 were set to music, you would be able to hear "Blest Be the Tie" playing in the background.

Hearing Paul send his greetings to so many people in the church in Rome reminds us that as prominent and influential as he was in the spread of the gospel, especially to Gentile populations, Paul had lots of coworkers who partnered with him to announce the saving reign of Christ and bring others into the people of God. They may not have gotten all the publicity and glory that Paul got, but I think Paul would be the first to point out that it's not about his own glory, but about Christ's glory. And when it comes to Christ's glory, each of these church members and coworkers listed in Romans 16 have a share in the glory of Christ.

John Ortberg tells about a time when he and his family lived in Chicago, and a friend would regularly give him tickets to Chicago Bulls games. Ortberg says:

Every year I would take my son, Johnny, to a game. The seats were located alongside the tunnel at the United Center, so when the Bulls ran out on to the floor, when Michael Jordan would run through the tunnel, everybody nearby wanted to give him a high five. They wanted to share his glory.

We all want to touch glory. We want to connect with it. We want to be a part of it, even though we know we are not worthy.

The Bulls had a reserve player named Stacey King. During the 1990 season King only started six games and averaged 15 minutes per game. But one night, during an overtime game against Cleveland, he contributed to an important victory. He said it would always be the greatest memory of his life: the night he and Michael Jordan scored a combined total of 70 points in a NBA playoff game. Michael Jordan scored his career-high 69 points, but King shared in the glory.¹

In his list of greetings, Paul not only addresses people by name but often notes that who they are and what they're doing is "in Christ" or "in the Lord." This is one of Paul's favorite ways of describing the strong, solid connection that exists between Jesus and a believer, and among believers. Individually, and together, believers are bound to Christ and to one another. We each share in Christ's glory through union with him and with one another. Even if you don't have a place of great visibility and prominence in the church, if you're united with Christ by faith, you're just as much a child of God, a member of God's family, and a partner in the work of the gospel.

That's why we, like Paul, his coworkers, and all the folks in the church in Rome, need to be faithful and consistent in encouraging one another and building one another up in Christ. Granted, we may not be at the point where we, in keeping with Paul's instructions in today's text, conclude our opening hymn and Willis says, "Now turn and greet those near you. And don't forget to share a holy kiss." But we are deep enough into our life in Christ that we

know how to reach out to one another with plenty of other expressions of peace and unity that strengthen our connectedness and embody the reconciliation we have in Christ.

In a blog article, Ray Ortlund writes, "The kind of God we really believe in is revealed in how we treat one another. The lovely gospel of Jesus positions us to treat one another like royalty, and every non-gospel positions us to treat one another like dirt. But we *will* follow through horizontally on whatever we believe vertically." Ortlund goes on to identify some "One Another's" he can't find in the New Testament:

Sanctify one another, humble one another, scrutinize one another, pressure one another, embarrass one another, corner one another, interrupt one another, defeat one another, sacrifice one another, shame one another, judge one another, run one another's lives, confess one another's sins, intensify one another's sufferings, point out one another's failings . . .²

Now this doesn't mean that being the church is simply about putting on happy faces and being nice to one another all the time, no matter what the circumstances. We shouldn't be naïve. As Paul indicates in today's text, when individuals create division within the church, or inappropriate teachings make inroads into the congregation, these kinds of situations need to be faced and addressed. "I want you to be wise about what is good," says Paul, and innocent about what is evil" (v. 19b).

Remember that all these people to whom and from whom Paul sends greetings are just that—people, human beings loved by God and redeemed in Christ. But still on their way to full redemption and complete transformation. For now, God, in his eternal wisdom and purpose, has determined that his saving power and glory are embodied and manifested in a community of people who have been reconciled to him and to one another through Christ. This community called the church is to be a sign of where all this, in God's mysterious purposes, is eventually headed, namely, that people of every nation will see the glory of God in Christ, and believe and obey and worship. "To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

That's what this gathering today is all about. It's what's next Sunday's gathering will be all about, and the Sunday after that, and the Sunday after that, and the Sunday after that, all the way until mid November when I return from my sabbatical. No matter who is in this pulpit, our mission remains the same, namely, to give thanks and praise to the one true and wise God, and to announce and embody the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord. Because of that good news, and the response of faith it generates, you and I are have been joined to Christ and to one another. So remember that during the sabbatical period, though we may be apart from one another, we're not disconnected from another. We're always connected to God, to one another, and to all God's people in Christ.

A church was preparing for its pastor's departure on sabbatical. During the worship service, various symbols of leadership and ministry were given to the associate pastor, the church board, lay staff, and others who would be leading the congregation while the pastor was away. The pastor's name was Bud, so one of the symbols given to the staff was a Father Bud doll that had been made for him years ago. On the doll was the sign "WWBD"—"What Would Bud Do?" When the congregation and its leaders faced decisions or problems during the sabbatical period, all they would need to do is ask, "What would Bud do?" When the pastor returned from his sabbatical, he received back many of the symbols. However, when the doll was given back it had a new sign on it that read WFIOFO—"We Figured It Out For Ourselves!"³

We've done a lot of planning, praying, and preparing for this stage of our journey as pastor and congregation. I know that the Holy Spirit will be with you to enable you and to guide you in figuring out many of the things you'll need to do while I'm away. I don't suspect that when I return I'll discover that I've been replaced by a robot, an ordained avatar who stands at the sanctuary door as you leave, extending a mechanical handshake and saying, "Hello, my name is _____. I'm your new pastor." With the way our society is becoming more and more automated, Paul's list of greetings reminds us that the church is still a community of interconnected human beings, a network of saved people, with names, faces, stories, lives, and experiences that help make us who we are.

Over sixteen years ago, you called this human being standing in front of you to be your pastor. As I prepare to step out of my ministry for a while and seek some renewal through the Holy Spirit, know how much I and my family love you. I give thanks to God for you, and for your generosity in offering me this opportunity for spiritual and vocational refreshment. I'm grateful that I can call you my brothers and sisters in Christ. I count you as precious partners in the work of the gospel. And I honor each of you for who you are and what you're doing in the Lord. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

¹ John Ortberg, from the sermon, "For the Glory of God Alone," at <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2012/august/7080612.html>.

² Ray Ortland, "'One Another's' I Can't Find in the New Testament," The Gospel Coalition blog (May 24, 2014).

³ A. Richard Bullock and Richard J. Bruesehoff, *Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2000) 48.