

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

More than just Greetings

Romans 16:1-16

Introduction: Amen. Let's take our Bibles and turn to the passage just read: Romans 16:1-16. One of my favorite cinematic moments is in the movie "The Lord of the Rings"—the first movie, "The Fellowship of the Ring"—when this great team of individuals gathers at Rivendell to embark on a quest. They have this powerful and evil ring that must be destroyed. So they cobble together this diverse and awkward group of nine people to travel to Mordor to destroy the ring. You have an elf named Legolas. You have a wizard named Gandalf. You have a dwarf named Gimli (and dwarves hate elves by the way). You have two men: Strider and Boromir. And then you have four hobbits: Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin. And this group covenants together for a common purpose. They set aside their differences for a shared objective: to destroy the ring in the fires of Mordor. That's how I think about the church. That's what I think about when I hear this long list of names in the Roman church mentioned by the Apostle Paul in Romans 16... this group of diverse people gathered together for a common cause.¹

I've been reading this book about WW2 and specifically the part of the war that was fought in North Africa.² And one thing that I didn't really know before this book is how diverse the British Eighth Army was in North Africa. The Eighth Army is famous for defeating Erwin Rommel and chasing the Germans out of Africa. Bernard Montgomery was probably the most famous British person in the world other than Winston Churchill during. And the army that he led wasn't just Brits. It also included soldiers from Australia, Poland, New Zealand, Canada, and even Sikhs from India. It was a very diverse army that was brought together for one singular purpose: defeat the Nazis in WW2.

Now when I think about the church, and when I think about Harvest Decatur specifically, I think we have a similar makeup and objective. We are different people gathered from different backgrounds, marshalling together for the same purpose: We make disciples! And that mindset derives from Jesus and the commandment that Jesus gave to his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20. But it also derives from places in the NT like Romans 16 where we see Paul... not just greeting people in the church in Rome... but greeting them with a purpose. Who would have thought that such a simple passage with these greetings at the end of this letter could be so pregnant with significance? Who would have thought that we could derive such pleasure and significance from Paul closing his letter by mentioning something like 26 people by name? That's amazing!³

By the way, can I just say this? Let's just be clear about something. Paul was not an "ivory tower theologian" who just sat in isolation writing doctrinal treatises. Paul was a people-person.⁴ Paul loved people, and he loved the church.

This is interesting to me in the Book of Romans. First Paul is theological (chapters 1-11). Then Paul is practical (chapters 12-15). And now, at the end of the letter in Romans 16, Paul is personal. And we can learn some important principles when Paul gets personal in this last chapter.

Go ahead and write this down as #1 in your notes. I'm calling today's message, "More than just Greetings" from the Apostle Paul.⁵ And I want to give you today...

¹ I'm indebted to Tommy Nelson for this illustration. See his sermon, "Known But to God", 10-14-07: <https://www.dbcmedia.org/sermons/known-but-to-god/>

² Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002).

³ Grant R. Osborne, *Romans: Verse by Verse* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2017), 395 suggests that "Paul has never visited the church at Rome, and he wants to establish a personal relationship with them by showing all his contacts in the church."

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 565: "Paul was a friend maker as well as a soul winner."

⁵ HEINRICH BULLINGER: "Chapter 16 at first glance seems to be simple and of little importance; however, underneath it holds more than what at first meets the eye. Even though the whole chapter seems to be devoted to straightforward greetings, nevertheless these greetings wonderfully place the duty of charity before our eyes. They relate friendliness and compassion, and teach us to show appropriate and due honor to each person. Now it is especially notable that Paul here praises no one on account of wealth or some other good fortune, but on account of faith, love, simplicity, hospitality and other virtues of this kind. In addition you see that there is no

Three Principles Derived from Romans 16:1-16:

Here's the first:

1. Church is a **celebration** of **diversity**

Church is like "The Fellowship of the Ring." Church is like Bernard Montgomery's Eighth Army. It's a group of likeminded people from different backgrounds that covenant together to love and to serve one another for a common purpose.⁶ **We are different here at Harvest Decatur. But we share Christ in common. And we share Christ's mission in common: Go make disciples (Matt 28:18-20).**

Let me show you the diversity in this list of names in **Romans 16.**⁷ First, there is ethnic diversity. Some of these individuals are Jewish. There's a woman named Mary. There's the famous couple, Priscilla and Aquila, who we know were Jewish. They were kicked out of Rome for being Jewish (see **Acts 18:2**). Paul refers to several of these individuals as his kinsmen, an obvious reference to their shared Jewish heritage. But most of these individuals were Gentiles. I mean some of these Gentile names are derived from Pagan Greek and Roman deities, names like Apelles, Hermes, Hermas, and Narcissus.

And we knew already that there was ethnic diversity in the church in Rome, because the Jews and the Gentiles were disputing with one another about diet and days. Sometimes with diversity, there comes conflict, and people in the church need to learn to get along and love one another.

There's also socioeconomic diversity.⁸ Many of the Gentile names in this list of greetings includes slaves or freed slaves. For example, names like Ampliatus (**16:8**)⁹ and Urbanus (**16:9**) were quite commonly used for slaves or for freed slaves. On the other side of the equation, there's Narcissus (**16:11**) who was a famous and influential servant of Emperor Claudius.¹⁰ Same for Aristobulus; he's connected to the prominent and wealthy Herodian family. Scholars conjecture that he may have been the grandson of Herod the Great.¹¹ So you had social elites at this church, and also the *Dalits* of society.¹²

There's also gender diversity, which may not seem like a big deal, but it is a big deal in the first century world. Paul mentions nine women in this list (including Phoebe). So we have men, and we have women who are represented in the church and are essential to the work of the church (More on that later). And by the way, when I say gender diversity, just to be clear, I mean men and women. For the record, gender is and will always be binary. I've said that before, but I think that's an important think to reiterate in our culture today.

You know there was a common prayer that was prayed in the Jewish world of Paul's day. It was quite common for men to pray a prayer of thanksgiving to God for not making them a woman, a slave, or a Gentile. This is not in the Bible. This is in what's called the Talmud, an ancient Jewish document. And isn't ironic when you read Romans 16, what do you find here? You find Paul greeting and praising women, slaves, and Gentiles, as well as men, freemen, and Jews.¹³

I think what's important for us applicationally in this passage is that God loves to see diversity manifested in the local church. And I'm sure there was even more diversity in Rome than we can even derive from this text. Rome was like a hub for other parts of the world. As the saying went, "All roads lead to

distinction here between believers, because of course the matter of faith and piety is concerned. Therefore they are listed in this catalog of saints and women" Quoted in Philip D. W. Krey et al., eds., *Romans 9-16: New Testament*, vol. VIII, RCS (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 241.

⁶ For an ethnic and socioeconomic breakdown of all the names listed in Romans 16:1-16 and a possible logical order, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, second edition, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 762-3.

⁷ See Timothy Keller, *Romans 8-16 For You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 178-9.

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 918: "For those few who are especially interested in the socioeconomic composition of the early church, [Romans 16] is a gold mine. For there was a tendency in the ancient world to give certain names to certain kinds of people; for example, wealthy people high on the social ladder would give their children certain names; slaves or former slaves would use (or be made to use) others."

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 6, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 272-273: "The name [Ampliatus] is common in Roman inscriptions of the period, and is found repeatedly as borne by members of the imperial household. A branch of the *gens Aurelia* bore this cognomen. Christian members of this branch of the family are buried in the Cemetery of Domitilla on the Via Ardeatina, one of the oldest Christian burying-places in Rome, the beginnings of which go back to the end of the first century."

¹⁰ TILEMANN HESSHUS says, "[I]f this Narcissus is that Narcissus whom Paul mentions, we have a noteworthy example of the boundless mercy of God, because he nonetheless gathered a holy church for himself in the family of such a disgraceful and shameful person." Philip D. W. Krey et al., eds., *Romans 9-16: New Testament*, vol. VIII, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 248.

¹¹ Osbourne, *Romans: Verse by Verse*, 503-4: "[Aristobulus] would have accompanied his brother [Herod Agrippa I] as a hostage and lived in Rome with his brother. Agrippa died in AD 44 and Aristobulus in AD 48-49. He was not a believer, but many in his household that remained in Rome after his death were Christians. Paul is greeting them here."

¹² For a thorough examination of these names and the diversity represented in the church, see Moo, *Romans*, NICOT, 912-27.

¹³ This illustration is taken from J.D. Greear's sermon "The Worldwide Movement," 01-19-21: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI7Kk8CTb30>. Greear also comments on how Paul evangelizes Philippi in Acts 16:11-40. The first three people that Paul (a Jewish man) evangelizes in that community are a woman (Lydia), a slave (the nameless slave girl who was healed of demon possession) and a Gentile (the jailer).

Rome.”¹⁴ And people from all of the Empire came there. And I’m sure some came as Christians, and some got saved in Rome. Some were old Christians, and some were probably baby Christians. Paul says about Andronicus and Junia that they are “well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me (16:7).”¹⁵ They’ve been Christians longer than Paul had been a Christian! It’s good for a church to have a healthy combination of younger and older disciples.

Write this down as #2. Here’s a second principle derived from this passage.

2. Church is a **priesthood** of **believers**

You know, I’ve said this before, but one of the great errors of the church in the Middle Ages is the wide chasm that emerged between the laity and clergy. In other words there was a time in the early church when everyone in the church was serving and everyone was using their gifts to edify one another. But eventually you had these “priests” endowed with all the power in the church. They were educated. They were incredibly powerful. And they kept the Scriptures away from the laity. And they did the so-called “work of the LORD” and the huddled masses of laypeople were relegated to the sidelines.

This is what’s referred to as “sacerdotalism.”¹⁶ It’s this idea that emerged where common folk had to come to the clergy to connect to God. You couldn’t confess to God. You went to the priest and the priest interceded for you. You couldn’t read your Bible, you needed the priest to read it and explain it to you. You couldn’t receive communion yourself. You could only receive part of the communion, or it had to be handed to you by a “holy man of God.”

And the Protestant Reformers saw that and said, “**No, no, no, no, no!**” “**We all have access to God because of Christ’s sacrificial death on our behalf! We are all priests who serve God.**” And a lot of that reformed theology is derived from NT passages like **Romans 12** that says, “**Everyone has a gift and should use it for the edification of the church.**”

Now that doesn’t mean I don’t believe in professional clergy. Obviously, I do. Paul makes a case for that in **1 Timothy 5:17** when he speaks of elders who preach and teach and are worthy of double-honor. I believe in that. But I also believe strongly in the “Priesthood of Believers,”¹⁷ where God has called and empowered all believers to serve and minister on his behalf. So clergy shouldn’t think more highly of themselves than they ought to think. And laity shouldn’t think less of themselves than they ought to think.

And so here’s Paul in **Romans 16**, wrapping up his great letter. What’s fascinating is that he doesn’t even mention who the pastor of the church is in Rome. He doesn’t even say who the elders are. Not because that’s not important. But because he wants to emphasize how all people in the church are important and serve.

And can I say this as a complementarian? The people that Paul mentions the most as “hard workers” in this church are women. Did you notice that? Praise God for faithful women who serve in the local church! **Two of our four staff here at Harvest Decatur are women.**¹⁸

For example, Paul mentions a woman named Mary in **verse 6**. Everyone see that? There are a lot of Marys in the Bible, but none of those Marys are this Mary. Nothing is known about this Mary outside of this one verse in the Bible. And she probably was one of those wallflowers at the church that didn’t get noticed much. But Paul singles her out here. Paul makes a point to say that “**this Mary works hard for you, church in Rome.**” In fact, that word for “work hard” here is the Greek *κοπιῶ* [cop-ee-ah-oh] and it is often translated

¹⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The IVPBBCNT* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Ro 16:3–16: “[M]any people in the ancient Mediterranean migrated there; this would be especially true of Jewish Christians who had returned after Claudius’s death annulled his expulsion order, such as Aquila and Priscilla.”

¹⁵ *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), Ro 16:7 has “They are outstanding among the apostles.” This is a valid (but not preferable) translation, and has created much controversy regarding the mention of female apostle (i.e. Junia). This is a tempest in a teapot, though. Even if the NIV translation is retained, the word “apostle” (Greek: ἀπόστολος) is used very broadly for “evangelists” and “missionaries,” and doesn’t always have the technical, precise nuance of NT usage elsewhere for authoritative founder of the church. See Moo, *Romans*, NICOT, 921-4 and Mounce, *Romans*, NAC, 275-6. Keller, *Romans 8-16 For You*, 179 differentiates between “capital-A Apostles” who wrote the words of Scripture and met the risen Christ and “small-a apostles” (sent-ones or missionaries). That’s a helpful distinction.

¹⁶ “**sacerdotalism**. The emphasis in the Roman Catholic tradition, especially as proclaimed in the Middle Ages, on the powers of earthly priests as essential mediators between God and humankind. Sacerdotalism teaches that by virtue of ordination priests have the gifting of the Spirit whereby they are able to transform mundane physical elements (water, bread and wine) into means of grace.” Taken from Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 104.

¹⁷ “**priesthood of believers**. The Reformation principle that declares that the privilege and freedom of all believing Christians is to stand before God in personal communion through Christ, directly receiving forgiveness without the necessary recourse to human intermediaries. As priests (1 Pet 2:5, 9), believers directly offer sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to God and minister to the needs of others. Ordained pastors, in turn, are not different from other believers in spiritual status but only in function and appointment.” Grenz, et al. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 95.

¹⁸ While many condemn the Bible as male-centered and misogynistic, Osborne, *Romans: Verse by Verse*, 498 is right when he says, “Jesus and Paul gave women a much higher place in the church than first-century society did generally.”

“labor” or “toil.”¹⁹ It’s the same word that Peter uses when he told Jesus that he fished all night and caught nothing. “Master, we toiled [κοπιάω] all night and took nothing” (**Luke 5:5**). Mary was a faithful laborer in the Roman church, and Paul took notice.²⁰

That word κοπιάω is also used in **verse 12** for a woman named Persis. Persis “has worked hard in the Lord,” says Paul. Also Paul refers to Tryphaena and Tryphosa, two women, as “workers.”²¹ Ironically the meaning of those two names in Greek, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, are “dainty” and “delicate.”²² They were probably twin sisters who were given similar names. Paul says here, **“your names might mean ‘dainty’ and ‘delicate,’ but you are dutiful laborers for the Lord.”**

There’s also the presence Priscilla in this list. Everyone see her name in **verse 3**. Priscilla is the diminutive form of Prisca, like **Tony is the diminutive of Anthony**.²³ Luke calls her Priscilla. Paul calls her Prisca. And she is more often than not listed before her husband Aquila in the NT.²⁴ Many scholars assume this is because she was the more prominent and more recognized of the two.²⁵ Nothing wrong with that. **Sometimes people call us “Tony and Sanja.” Sometimes people call us “Sanja and Tony.” Sometimes people call us “Sony and Tanja.” That’s fine too!**

Priscilla and Aquila were very important to Paul. You can sense this in his greeting. Look at **verse 5**.

³ Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴ who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. ⁵ Greet also the church in their house.

Notice that the church in Rome met in their house. Churches in that day didn’t have buildings like we do. They couldn’t afford it, and the Romans probably wouldn’t allow it. So they met in homes.²⁶ And Priscilla and Aquila opened up their homes every week for worship. Talk about working for the Lord! Talk about hospitality!

And they risked their necks for Paul too. That’ll knit your heart together with someone. If you remember from the book of **Acts**, Paul had taken Priscilla and Aquila from Corinth to Ephesus as part of his missionary entourage (**Acts 18:1-28**). After they were chased out of Rome for being Jewish, they landed on their feet and went to work for Christ. **A lot of people, when they get married, they stop working for Christ. Or they get complacent and risk averse.** Not Priscilla and Aquila! They risked their lives for Paul. I don’t know when that happened. Like I said last week, Paul was always on the verge of getting killed, so who knows when they risked their own lives to save his. That could’ve happened anywhere.²⁷ And now this couple is back in Rome, again risking their lives by welcoming the church into their home in the belly of the beast.

Also speaking of faithful servants and faithful women risking their lives for the gospel, there’s also this mysterious woman named Phoebe. We don’t know anything about her other than **Romans 16:1-2**. It seems clear from this passage that Phoebe was the one that Paul entrusted to bring the **Letter of Romans** to the church in Rome.²⁸ So she travelled from Corinth where Paul wrote this letter (or Cenchreae, which is just about eight miles from Corinth), and she risked her life to travel to Rome and deliver this letter.

I read a commentator this last week that said that Phoebe travelled to Rome with the future of Christian theology hidden under her cloak.²⁹ That’s quite a task!

Paul says,

¹ I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, ² that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.

¹⁹ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 275: “Although Priscilla and Aquila along with Urbanus are called “fellow workers” (vv. 3, 9), it is interesting that the mention of exhausting work is restricted to women.”

²⁰ CHRYSOSTOM: “How can it be that yet another woman is honored and proclaimed victorious! We men are put to shame yet again. Or rather, we are not merely put to shame; we have a different honor conferred on us. For it is an honor to have such women as these among us, though we are put to shame in that we are left so far behind them.” Quoted in Bray, ed., *Romans (Revised)*, ACCS, 358. Chrysostom’s words are affirming and encouraging albeit a bit clunky and indelicate to our modern ears.

²¹ Paul uses the same Greek word κοπιάω here, but it’s in participial form, hence “workers.”

²² Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 536.

²³ Bruce, *Romans*, TNTC, 271: “Luke regularly uses the language of conversation, in which the diminutive forms were usual; and so he speaks of Priscilla, Sopatros and Silas always, though Paul speaks of Prisca, Sosipatros and Silvanus.”

²⁴ Priscilla/Prisca is mentioned first in Acts 18:18, 26; Rom 16:3; and 2 Tim 4:19. Aquila is first in Acts 18:2 and 1 Cor 16:19.

²⁵ Bruce, *Romans*, TNTC, 271: “Both Paul and Luke generally name Prisca (Priscilla) before her husband; perhaps hers was the more impressive personality.”

²⁶ Keener, *IVPBCNT*, Ro 16:5: “Small synagogues sometimes had to meet in homes before they could purchase buildings; many Greek religious associations did the same; churches did so for the first three centuries, using their income to buy slaves’ freedom, feed the poor and so forth, rather than to build edifices.” Osborne, *Romans: Verse by Verse*, 498-9: “The use of homes for churches was universal until Constantine legalized Christianity in the fourth century.”

²⁷ The most likely scenario involved the riot in Ephesus recorded in Acts 19 when the crowds were shouting, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” Perhaps Priscilla and Aquila used their influence (and wealth?) to rescue Paul and get him out of town safely.

²⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT, 759.

²⁹ See Mounce, *Romans*, NAC, 272n35.

That's Paul's way of saying, **"Take care of this sister, when she gets to Rome. Give her some money and some hospitality when she gets there."** She's a servant of the church, a *διάκονος*.³⁰ She's a trustworthy saint. She's a patron of many and myself, says Paul.³¹ That's high praise from the Apostle Paul.

It's not just the women that Paul references here. He calls Urbanus a "fellow worker in Christ" (16:9). He calls Aquila and Priscilla his "fellow workers" (16:3). He calls Timothy his fellow worker later in 16:21. **Doug Moo** says this in his *Romans Commentary*: **"Paul's reference to coworkers reminds us that Paul was not a "lone ranger" kind of missionary. At every point in his ministry, Paul depended on a significant number of others who were working along with him. And if Paul needed such help, how much more do we. There is no room in modern ministry for the lone ranger approach either."**³²

Another point that Paul is making here is that every person in the church is important, and we all have important duties for the Lord. We are all priests of Christ Jesus. Paul would have agreed with the Reformers about the Priesthood of Believers, and he would have agreed with the Apostle Peter who said to the church, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9).

Sometimes I fantasize about what Paul would write to Harvest Decatur if he was writing to us. I'm pretty sure he would point out the women of Harvest Decatur that are absolutely essential to our church ministry here. He probably would mention the faithful small group leaders and those who open up their homes for hospitality and small group ministry. I'm sure he would probably mention the Marys and Phobes and Pricilla and Aquilas in our church who faithfully, and sometimes thanklessly, work for Christ. And maybe Paul would mention Pastor Tony or Pastor Ryan or our elders. But he wouldn't say, "Greet the Reverend, Bishop, Pastor, Pontificate Tony Caffey, PhD and kiss his ring for me." He'd probably just mention me as a "servant of Christ Jesus" along with the other faithful people of Harvest Decatur. That's what I mean by the "Priesthood of Believers."

And thirdly. Write this down as #3.

3. Church is a **network** of "Christ-centered" **relationships**

You know a church is not a building. Y'all know that, right. The church in Rome didn't have a building. So what is a church? **There's an old expression in football that goes like this. Football isn't about the X's and the O's; it's about the Jimmys and the Joes!"**

So what is a church? A church is a group of people. **Church is a group of Jimmys and Joes and Janes committed to one another, committed to discipleship, committed to the gospel. It's a body of believers. It's a network of relationships.**³³

And you know theologically there's the church local and the church universal. When Paul's wrote Romans, he had never even been to that church. He's not part of this church formally, and he didn't plant this church. But he knows people in this church. And look how he describes them.

Look at **verse 8**.

⁸ *Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.*

Look at **verse 9**.

and my beloved Stachys.

Look at **verse 12**.

Greet the beloved Persis.

³⁰ Debate swirls about whether Phoebe was indeed an official "Deacon" of the church in Cenchreae. See Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT 760-1. The issue is important, because 1 Timothy 3:8-13 seems to open the possibility of female deacons, or perhaps a separate office of deaconesses (Scriptural support for female elders or pastors is lacking throughout the NT). Osborne, *Romans: Verse by Verse*, 496 sees the office of deacon fully open to women, but he stops short of seeing this as a pastoral or teaching office. The following video by Stephen Wellum entitled "Can Women Be Pastors or Deacons?," 06-20-18, helps to succinctly clarify the issue:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zic0Q6foE_8. For a concise argument affirming women for the office of Deacon, see Thomas Schreiner's article, "Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? Yes," 02-19-19 at the TGC website: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/bible-support-female-deacons-yes/>. Also see the counter article written by Guy Waters entitled: "Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? No." 2-19-19: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/bible-support-female-deacons-no/>

³¹ Bruce, *Romans: Romans*, TNTC, 266: "Phoebe was evidently to Cenchreae what Lydia was to Philippi (cf. Acts 16:15)." THEODORET OF CYR: "It is probable that Phoebe helped Paul by offering him hospitality in her house at Corinth for the short time that he was there. In return Paul opened the whole world to her, and throughout the Mediterranean she became a famous woman." Quoted in Quoted in Bray, ed., *Romans (Revised)*, ACCS, 356.

³² Moo, *Romans*, NICOT, 927.

³³ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 565: "In my own reading of Christian biography, I have discovered that the servants whom God has used the most were people who could make friends. They multiplied themselves in the lives of their friends and associates in the ministry. While there may be a place for the secluded saint who lives alone with God, it is my conviction that most of us need each other. We are sheep, and sheep flock together."

Persis is a woman, and Paul calls her “beloved.” **This is not a #metoo creepy and inappropriate thing.** This is good and proper love shared between the sexes in the local church. Like Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Like Jesus and Lazarus’s sisters, Mary and Martha.

Look at **verse 5**.

Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.

That’s amazing right there. This must have been the first person that Paul led to Christ in Asia. Not modern Asia, but the Asia in the Roman Empire.³⁴ Now this first convert, who is probably an experienced Christian by this point, is in Rome. And Paul calls him “beloved.”

Look also at **verse 13**.

¹³ *Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well.*

Rufus’s mother had been so close to Paul, probably while he was living in Antioch, that he considered her as a mother as well.³⁵ That’s how tight-knit some of the relationships were in the churches. **That’s how tight-knit some of the relationship should be in our church!**

And look what Paul says at the end of this passage. Look at **verse 16**.

¹⁶ *Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.*

I know this is shocking in our modern world, especially our current COVID-19 world. But it was quite common to great people with a kiss in the ancient world.³⁶ Even in Croatia, that custom is quite prevalent among friends and family members. The churches in Paul adopted this practice as a way of greeting and showing proper affection to one another. Notice Paul says, “holy kiss.”³⁷ That word “holy” is very important there!³⁸

Now for the record, I don’t think we need to adopt that custom slavishly at Harvest Decatur, but I do think that our greetings to one another need to be appropriate, warm, and affectionate. There’s nothing worse than coming to church and being ignored or un-greeted by people. There’s a place for a holy handshake. There’s a place for a fraternal fist-bump. I personally love high-fives. But I know some people think that high-fives are dorky. I personally think high-fives are awesome!

And I want you to notice too how Paul says in **verse 16** that “All the churches of Christ greet you.” So Paul sends his greetings. He tells the church to greet one another. And then he says the churches of Christ, here near me, greet you. I think that’s so important that Paul’s relationships and the relationships of the churches extend beyond themselves. That interconnected relationship extended to other churches and other believers in other places. We need that too. We need relationships with other churches too, so that our church doesn’t become insular and isolated. We need to view ourselves as part of God’s larger network of churches around the world.

You know there’s something so healthy about what Paul shows us here in this chapter. Paul had friends. Paul had relationships with all kinds of people. You know what our tendency in this world, especially as we age, and especially with the advent of television and computers. We isolate. We live lonely, solitary lives away from other people and away from the church. **Harvest Decatur, don’t do that! I feel that tendency in my own life. And I want to be able to sit down someday, like Paul, and express my tender love and affection for many, many people in this church and elsewhere.**

The church, Harvest Decatur, is 1) a celebration of diversity, 2) a priesthood of believers, and 3) a network of Christ-centered relationships. That’s what we learn about the church in **Romans 16:1-16**.

³⁴ Priscilla and Aquila were with Paul in Asia (i.e. Ephesus, the capital of Asia; see Acts 18:18-26). It’s possible that Epaenetus was part of the church in Ephesus with Paul and then travelled to Rome with the couple. See Bruce, *Romans*, TNTC, 270: “Epaenetus may well have attached himself to Prisca and Aquila and gone with them when they returned to Rome. On their return to Rome, they would keep in touch with Paul and, in particular, let him know how the Christian cause was faring there.”

³⁵ If the Simon the Cyrene in Mark 15:21 is the same as “Simeon called Niger” in Acts 13:1-2. See note 39 below.

³⁶ AMBROSIASER: “Paul asks that all those to whom he has written and whom he names be greeted with a holy kiss, that is, in the peace of Christ, not in the desire of the flesh, because these kisses are spiritual, not physical.” Quoted in Bray, ed., *Romans (Revised)*, ACCS, 361.

³⁷ Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT, 772: “Perhaps the word ‘holy’ discourages eroticism, but at the same time it shows that the church was a community of equals marked by love and affection.”

³⁸ CHRYSOSTOM: “By this salutation Paul intended to cast out of them any reason for pride. The great were not to despise the small, nor were the small to envy the great, but pride and envy were to be banished by the kiss, which made everyone equal.” Quoted in Bray, ed., *Romans (Revised)*, ACCS, 361. Chrysostom is probably right to see this as an egalitarian custom in the church that flattened hierarchical distinctions in class, gender, or socioeconomic. It’s probably that this custom was jettisoned by the church after the first or second century AD, therefore Chrysostom, even as early as the fourth century AD, is trying to support the intent of Paul’s command without slavishly obeying the letter of it.

And to all this, you might say, “Wow, how is this all possible?” “How could this church know each other and love each other? And even love people from other churches?” “And how could this church have existed together from such diverse backgrounds?” That’s the greatest marvel of this text! People from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds coming together and worshipping as one church! How is that possible? “What was the common link that knit their hearts together? What kept them united and strong as a church?”

You know in tackling that question, I think it’s tempting for us to say, “It’s the Apostle Paul. Paul’s the reason they are all together. Paul’s the reason they are committed to one another as the church.” But hold on now, let’s be clear—this is not the church of the Apostle Paul. In fact, Paul had never even been to the church in Rome. Sure, he knows a lot of people there. But he doesn’t know everybody. And he didn’t plant this church.

It’s not the church of the Apostle Paul. Paul himself would be appalled if they or anyone else called themselves “The Church of the Apostle Paul.” What is it? “What was the thing that drew this church ultimately together?” Let me ask that question more precisely, “Who was the person that drew this church ultimately together?” It was their savior, the Lord Jesus. This is not the church of the Apostle Paul. Paul says in **verse 16**, not the churches of Paul, but the “churches of Christ.”

Interestingly enough, there’s a man in this church named “Rufus.” I mentioned him already. You guys see his name in **verse 13**? Most of the names in this list are one-off references to random people we have no idea about. I mean look at the names in **verse 14**.

¹⁴ Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas.

We have no idea who those people are. I can barely pronounce their names. But Rufus—Rufus was different. You know why? Because there’s a place in the Gospel of Mark where Rufus shows up (**Mark 15:21**). You see, when Jesus was carrying his cross to Golgotha, he had been whipped and beaten so profusely that he couldn’t carry his cross any longer. So the Roman guards grabbed this random guy out of the crowd and made him carry Jesus’s cross. It must have been an agonizing thing, not only to carry the cross but also to know that you are helping the Romans by carrying the instrument of death to this man, Jesus.

Well Mark tells us that this man pulled from the crowds was a man named Simon of Cyrene. And Mark and Mark’s readers knew this man by his sons. He had a son named Alexander. And he had a son named Rufus.³⁹ And it’s quite possible that Rufus was there the day that his father carried Jesus’s cross to Golgotha. And it’s quite possible that Rufus was an eyewitness of Jesus’s death on that cross. But even if he wasn’t, let me be clear about something. The thing that knit the hearts of those Roman Christians together was not their affiliation with and loyalty to the Apostle Paul. It was their shared belief in Jesus Christ... his death upon a cross, and his resurrection three days later from the grave. That’s what knits the hearts of people of different backgrounds together. That’s what knits our hearts together. We believe in Jesus Christ. Right? Yeah, we’re different. We’re different. But we hold that in common.

So, let’s be a church, Harvest Decatur, that 1) celebrates our diversity, 2) embraces the priesthood of believers, and 3) taps into the network of Christ-centered relationships found here in our church but also in other likeminded churches. Amen. Pray with me.

³⁹ Paul uses the word ἐκλεκτός (“chosen”) only for Rufus in this passage. This may indicate Rufus’s eminent (famous?) standing in the church as the eyewitness to Jesus’s crucifixion. See Bruce, *Romans*, TNTC, 274-5. The connection to Rufus’s mother further supports this possibility. If Paul met Rufus in Antioch, then Rufus’s father may have been the “Simeon” mentioned in Acts 13:1-2. If so, then Paul’s stay in Antioch (see Acts 11:25-26) is when Simeon’s wife and Rufus’s mother was a mother to Paul. Mark calls Rufus’s father “Simon of Cyrene” in Mark 15:21. Cyrene was a region of North Africa. The Simeon in Acts 13:1-2 is also called “Niger,” a Latin word for dark-skinned. It’s quite possible that this Simeon/Simon was a dark-skinned Jew from North Africa or a God-fearing proselyte Gentile who visited Jerusalem during Passover and witnessed Jesus’s crucifixion and later was part of the church in Antioch. If this was the case, then there is even more ethnic diversity in the Roman church, since Simon’s son, Rufus, is part of that fellowship. This possibility is strengthened all the more if Mark’s gospel was written from Rome as some scholars postulate.