

## Romans 16:17-27 Expectations for the Future

### Introduction

It does seem surprising that Paul chooses to add some extra words of advice to this congregation after giving this lengthy list of greetings, however, in our own conversations we do sometimes in our concluding remarks tell someone – ‘now remember don’t forget to ...’ with a focus on one or two particular things we want to ensure they keep at the forefront of their minds. We cannot say for certain that this is what Paul is doing here but I think it is very possible that in general terms he wants to pass on a few final words to a congregation of whom he thinks highly and with whom he hopes to partner in evangelistic work in Spain in a future year. What does Paul have to say in his concluding remarks here?

#### 1. Advice to heed (Romans 16:17-20)

(a) **Be vigilant** (Romans 16:17) *I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.* It does come as a bit of a shock that at such a late stage in the letter that he introduces a warning to this congregation. Is Paul dealing with a current problem in Rome? Probably not as I think the life of that congregation has been spared that problem at that this particular time. But in the Letter to the Church at Philippi, written about four or five years after the letter to the Church at Rome, assuming that the imprisonment Paul describes in that letter was in Rome, he does give a reference to some tensions in the Rome congregation. In Philippians 1:12-18 there is a hint that not everyone in that church got on with Paul or was happy that he was in their city. What was Paul’s advice at that time? It was simply to remain Christ centred and keep our eyes on how He wants us to live and to have the priorities of Jesus in our work and witness. It was a reminder that even in good Christian congregations Christians need to constantly keep working on their relationships with one another. Misunderstandings occur, miscommunications can confuse us, but the core work of evangelism and Christian discipleship are staple features of each and every congregation year by year.

Yet over time currents of teaching or lifestyle issues or particular personalities do attempt to influence congregations of the Christian Church in unhelpful directions. As a result we should always be very careful to test when new ideas or emphases appear in the Christian world. Over the last two thousand years there have been individuals whose contribution has been most harmful to the cause of the Gospel. One example from the early centuries was a man called Marcion (85-160AD). He was the son of the Bishop (pastor) of the Church at Sinope in northern Turkey. He was a wealthy ship-owner who had contacts through his business all over the Roman world. Although the details are unclear he was associated at some point with the Church in Rome but tragically around 144AD fell under the influence of a heretical visiting preacher whose taught a message that was anti-Semitic and included wanting to purify the Bible from any connection with the Jewish people [details are given in a book by Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 1, 27, 1, around 180AD. He was pastor of the Church in Lyon, France, although he was a Greek Christian who had been brought up in Smyrna, Turkey]. Not surprisingly the text he was left with was very thin indeed! But this tampering with the text did have a good outcome as it forced the leaders of the Christian Church to work together closely to confirm the original text of the biblical books already recognised as Scripture. We must remember at that time that the individual New Testament books circulated on scrolls and not every congregation would have had copies of all of them – not least because of the cost of finding

and copying a scroll. The Church in Rome had the painful job of excluding from their ranks those who adopted these heretical beliefs. They even returned a gift of 200,000 sesterces to Marcion which must have been hard! [My very rough calculation is that this was equivalent to at least £250,000] This action approximately a century after Paul's letter shows that this warning Paul gave was taken most seriously by that congregation.

(b) **Be warned** (Romans 16:18)<sup>18</sup> *For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people.* In the vast majority of churches there is no problem with this kind of challenge. There is always the potential for people making wrong choices in their conduct or expressing opinions that may not be grounded securely in the biblical text, which is why Luke in Acts 17:11-12 commended the new believers who founded the first Christian congregation in a place called Berea. He wrote: *Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*<sup>12</sup> *As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.* This is important for all of us. We have the open Scriptures and have a calling to test a view presented to us to see if it matches what we read in God's Word. If something is not in line with Scripture then the Christian is free to reject or ignore such a viewpoint. If however, we may not like something but find it in God's Word then it is us who need to change! But we study God's Word carefully comparing Scripture with scripture and if we are uncertain about a passage or topic talk to another Christian who may be able to point you in the right direction from God's Word. The warning given by Paul was not concerning the kinds of issues over which Christians may agree to disagree. But instead it was much more serious issues that could lead people astray. Another contemporary example are the so-called Christian TV Channels. There are excellent Christian preachers who may teach God's Word effectively but there are other individuals who are proclaiming another gospel under the guise of professed Christianity. A challenge in the first instance for Timothy and others who teach God's Word whether in the pulpit, small groups or in one-to-one settings, but by application to all God's people is given in II Timothy 2:15: *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and **who correctly handles the word of truth.*** To do this well will take serious effort in studying God's Word over a number of years. Playing a musical instrument or succeeding at a sport or anything else worth doing requires much effort to be put in before we can master anything. In the next year ask yourself –how can I get to know my Bible better? Is there an investment I can make to make progress? It may be a decision to join a small home group in the next session; most of us benefit from studying God's Word with other believers. Maybe starting using Bible reading notes daily or changing the Bible-reading scheme this coming year? Sometimes getting a different accurate Bible translation and using it for our personal devotions can be helpful. There are many ways to grow in our knowledge of God's Word to help us discern when false teaching is being proclaimed or when a preacher is suggesting something contrary to the plain teaching of God's Word.

(c) **Be discerning** (Romans 16:19)<sup>19</sup> *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.* Paul although warning about future challenges is delighted with their current progress in the faith; thus far this church is a good news story. The point for action for the Christians in Rome is to keep alert with a view to commending that which is truthful and biblical and rejecting that which is in error.

(d) **Be encouraged** (Romans 16:20)<sup>20</sup> *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.* From the beginning of time the evil one has sought to frustrate God's purposes in history, but he will not succeed. The allusion here is to

Genesis 3:15 in the context of the fall of Adam and Eve into sin and the subsequent loss of their close fellowship with God in Eden. Genesis 3:15 is a prophetic hint that a human being will win a decisive victory over Satan. It states: *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel.* When did this decisive event take place? On the cross where Jesus declared: *finished* (John 19:30) because the work of atonement for the sin of humanity was completed. When we look around the world today it looks as if evil is rampant with massacres on the beaches of Tunisia, yet more carnage at Kobane in Syria; and at a lengthy list of other places. In such a world we read the uplifting lines of Psalm 8:3-6: *When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place, <sup>4</sup>what is mankind that You are mindful of them, human beings that You care for them? <sup>5</sup>You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour. <sup>6</sup>You made them rulers over the works of Your hands; **You put everything under their feet.*** When will this happen? When Jesus comes again; These words were intended to encourage these Italian Christians to persevere in their faith even if there would be events they would pass through within a decade that would seem like the overwhelming victory of evil as a deranged Emperor Nero slaughtered many of them in the first major outbreak of persecution Christians would experience in the capital city of the Roman Empire. In the face of violence and oppression today the followers of the Prince of Peace seem unlikely to be victorious over the powers of darkness around us, but do not be afraid Jesus has won the victory over evil on the cross and it is only when not if it is finally eliminated in God's glorious coming kingdom.

## 2. Greetings to receive (Romans 16:21-24)

Paul in the first half of this chapter asked for greetings to be passed to a large number of people currently in fellowship with the Rome congregation. Here there is a much shorter list of the people who together with Paul send these greetings from the Greek city of Corinth. Who were these eight people?

(a) **From a devoted co-worker** (Romans 16:21a) *Timothy, my co-worker, sends his greetings to you...* Timothy and Paul were incredibly close friends and co-workers in mission. There are a number of New Testament references to their service together for Christ. For example, in I Corinthians 4:16-17 we have a reference to an occasion when this younger church leader was sent on an errand to Corinth by Paul. The apostle wrote: *Therefore I urge you to imitate me.<sup>17</sup> For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.* This vocabulary could hardly express more clearly how close the two men were in attitudes and way of life. It is confirmed by Paul's words concerning Timothy in Philippians 2:19-22: *I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you.<sup>20</sup> I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare.<sup>21</sup> For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.<sup>22</sup> But you know that Timothy **has proved himself**, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.* Paul had extraordinarily high standards so these commendations of Timothy were definitely earned comments.

(b) **From three fellow Jewish followers of Jesus** (Romans 16:21b) *... as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my fellow Jews.* What do we know about these three Jewish followers of Jesus? Very little of which we can be certain but tentatively we may make some suggestions about their identity. They are likely to be members of one of Paul's mission teams and key members of local churches he planted. First of all, *Lucius* is the most difficult to identify with certainty. It is possible that he was one of key leaders of Paul's home church in Antioch in

Syria. This was the home church to which Paul reported when on home leave so it is not implausible that a visit to him in Corinth had taken place. However, we cannot rule out the fact that it may be another person of the same name unknown to us. The second person here is *Jason*. We are on much stronger ground here in identifying him with one of the key leaders of the church in Thessalonica, Greece. The church in that city met in his home. Acts 17:5-9 makes references to this prominent citizen after a brief account of the success of the mission in reaching both Jews and Greeks with the Gospel. *But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the market-place, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. <sup>6</sup> But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: 'These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, <sup>7</sup> and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.' <sup>8</sup> When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. <sup>9</sup> Then they put Jason and the others on bail and let them go.* The likelihood of this man being with Paul at this time was very probable. The third individual was *Sosipater* (a name commonly abbreviated to *Sopater*). We remember how Paul is gathering colleagues who have made financial collections for the brothers and sisters in the church in Jerusalem. In Acts 20:4 we have a probable identification for this man from the neighbouring congregation in Berea. *He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea...* The picture that emerges very clearly here is one of close fellowship between these churches planted by Paul and his colleagues. They sensed they were part of something much bigger than their local congregations. I thank God that this reality has been part of this congregation and its work for many years in support of missionaries in different parts of the world as well as support for sister churches across Scotland through the Scottish Baptist fund.

(c) **From the scribe who wrote the letter** (Romans 16:22) <sup>22</sup> *I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord.* Tertius has a Latin name that means 'third'. He is almost certainly an enslaved person but is well educated and used by Paul as his secretary to which he dictated this letter. The powerful statement of this apparently ordinary verse is that these Christians were equal in importance. The three free Jewish men mentioned above, including at least one man Jason who was probably a wealthy businessman, had less words associated with them than Tertius. Paul's words about the social transformation of society through the good news of Jesus, recorded in Galatians 3:26-29 state: *So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, <sup>27</sup> for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.* Praise God for this fact. But, it is tragic that it was not until the nineteenth century that the purchase and holding of enslaved persons in the British Empire was abolished. Somewhere along the line the radical transformative power of the Gospel in society had been misplaced.

(d) **From Paul's host in Corinth** (Romans 16:23a) *Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings.* This man's full name was *Gaius Titius Justus*. We read of him in Acts 18:7 when this God-fearing Gentile professes faith in Christ and offers the use of his home for meetings and hospitality to Paul and his mission team after they had been excluded from the synagogue next door! Luke wrote: *Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshipper of God.* This was a large Roman town house in a city with a number of prosperous businessmen – a bit like West Ferry in the days of the jute industry! The vast majority of Christians were enslaved people who were exceptionally poor, but a small number of men and women in each congregation had significant means that enabled them to host and fund a significant part of the work of their local church. In a society of rigid social divisions Gaius must have taken a fair bit of stick for

adopting his new found faith, especially allowing slaves to enter his home for worship and fellowship as equals with free people in an upmarket area of the city. But what a witness as they gathered Sunday by Sunday to sing God's praises and study His Word.

(e) **From two other Gentile Christians** (Romans 16:23b) *Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings.* Once again the equality visible in this Christian community comes out in this verse. A humble slave *Quartus*, whose name means 'fourth' –almost certainly someone well down the pecking order of enslaved people in the city, let alone in comparison to free people; yet Paul lists him alongside *Erastus, who is the city's director of public works.* Erastus was one of the most prominent men of Corinth. His official title was an *aedile* or director of the city of Corinth. Two men who without Christ would never have had any meaningful contact but with Christ they are brothers. Paul and his fellow believers had no earthly chance of campaigning for the abolition of the institution of slavery in their day, but the way they lived demonstrated that it had no place in their ranks. What a powerful statement to the people around them. May we too be willing to stand up against the values of the society in our day when they contrast with our Christian convictions as well.

### 3. **A blessing with which to conclude** (Romans 16:25-27)

Paul highlights four things to keep in their minds as a reminder as they serve the Lord.

(a) **The power of God** (Romans 16:25a *Now to Him who is able to establish you ...*How can we make a difference for God in our land? How can we influence people around us? Only through His power; at those times when we feel at our weakest we must claim His enabling. Remember Paul writing from prison could declare in Philippians 4:12-13: *I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.*<sup>13</sup> *I can do all this through him who gives me strength.* In this regard remember Paul's extraordinary prayer in Ephesians 3:20-21: *Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us,*<sup>21</sup> *to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.* Our numbers may be tiny, our commission mind-boggling to reach the whole world with the good news of Jesus, but in one generation the major urban centres of the Roman Empire saw churches planted in their midst, mostly by unknown ordinary Christians. How can we today do the work to which He has called us? In exactly the same way as they did-through the power of the Holy Spirit! Be encouraged!

(b) **The centrality of the Gospel of Christ** (Romans 16:25b) *...in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ...*never forget what is most important and major on it. As Paul declared to the Philippians: *For to me, living means living for Christ* (Philippians 1:21), our Bible verse for the year. It must not ever change.

(c) **The uniqueness of this time in history** (Romans 16:25c-26a *... in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past,*<sup>26</sup> *but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God...*God's timing may be different to ours but He knows what He is doing. Remember with respect to the birth of Jesus Paul wrote these words in Galatians 4:4-5: *But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law,*<sup>5</sup> *to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.* When the Christian Church began it was at a time when an extraordinary proportion of people in their day were no longer convinced of their old religions and were searching for something new. It was a time of unprecedented peace in the empire meaning travel was possible on newly constructed roads and shipping lanes in a way not seen for generations –if it had ever been better than that time. A common language Greek was spoken in all these

countries so the early missionaries did not have to learn lots of new languages or cultures whether in Europe or the Middle East. Was this good luck? No it was God's plan and timing. We have our struggles with the timing of God's work. There are things that we prayed for and sincerely expected to happen but for some reason they didn't. God is not taken by surprise or unable to do what He has promised because He is too busy! On the contrary at the right time we will see His purposes carried out. As Habakkuk the Old Testament reminds us that the future looks glorious for God and His people; *For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.* The Lord will open doors of opportunity for us in His time as we play our part in His service.

(d) **Our foundational purpose** (Romans 16:26b) *...so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith.* We must never forget that in terms of our work mission, the reaching of people for Jesus is central to our priorities in each area of church life. Our equipping as Christian disciples is to enable us to communicate and live out our faith more effectively. Naturally there will need to be reviews from time to time as to how effective particular strategies are and whether new approaches ought to be tried. But whatever we do we must never forget our foundational purpose.

(e) **Our ultimate aim** (Romans 16:27) *...to the only wise God be glory for ever through Jesus Christ! Amen.* Why must mission be the main priority? Because supremely our goal is to glorify God. Psalm 67 is a wonderful combination of a passion for mission and the glory of God: *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face shine on us –<sup>2</sup> so that Your ways may be known on earth, Your salvation among all nations. <sup>3</sup> May the peoples praise You, God; may all the peoples praise You. <sup>4</sup> May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for You rule the peoples with equity and guide the nations of the earth. <sup>5</sup> May the peoples praise You, God; may all the peoples praise You. <sup>6</sup> The land yields its harvest; God, our God, blesses us. <sup>7</sup> May God bless us still, so that all the ends of the earth will fear Him.* May it be our passion and mission as well, for Jesus' sake, Amen.