

The Fellowship of the Saints

Romans 16:1–16

Man is a social being. He was created not to be in isolation but to live in fellowship both with his Creator and with his fellow-man. God placed man in the Garden of Eden—a perfect environment—and came down to speak with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. Adam was at one with God, with creation and with his divinely-chosen spouse. But when man sinned, fellowship with his Creator was broken. He was ashamed, so he hid from God—an ultimately futile effort! Sin also brought awkwardness between him and the only other human person, his wife, symbolized by the couple’s realization that they were naked. Adam and Eve began to have an inkling of what it means that God is “a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart,” that “there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are *naked* and *open* to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”¹ What kind of God is this who knows us better and more perfectly than we know ourselves? But as the sons and daughters of Adam, we by nature are alienated from God. Isaiah wrote, “Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.”²

John the apostle explains that sin separates both vertically and horizontally. He writes that “truly our *fellowship* is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” and that “if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have *fellowship* one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.”³ Here is the Good News! The blood of Jesus God’s Son cleanses from sin and restores fellowship (κοινωνία, communion) with the Triune God as well as with our neighbor, so that we have “fellowship with one another.” Indeed, this *is* good news: *sin separates; the Gospel unites*. In the church of Christ the fellowship that was lost in the Fall is restored. Hallelujah!

Today’s text is from the last chapter of the book of Romans. The focus of the book of Romans is the Gospel. This theme is stated in the first chapter: “I am not ashamed of the gospel of *Christ*”; it is “the power of God unto salvation.”⁴ Salvation is centered in *Christ*: “The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁵ The author of Romans is the apostle Paul. This is the man who before his conversion was a fanatical persecutor of Christians. But literally within days of his conversion the historian Luke tells us that “straightway he *preached Christ* in the synagogues.” What did he say of him?

¹ Heb. 4:12–13

² Isa. 59:2

³ 1 John 1:3, 7

⁴ Rom. 1:16

⁵ Rom. 6:23

That “he is the Son of God.”⁶ What was Paul’s message from his first day as a Christian preacher? Luke states it in one word: “Christ”! “Straightway he preached *Christ*.”

Paul would later testify, “For to me to live is *Christ*.”⁷ His desire was that in all things *Christ* “might have the preeminence.”⁸ In Romans we learn that the author is “a servant of *Jesus Christ*.” The gospel is about God’s Son *Jesus Christ* our Lord.” The church is made up of “the called of *Jesus Christ*.” This Christ is equal with the Father, for grace and peace come “from God our Father, and the Lord *Jesus Christ*.” The gospel is the gospel “of *Christ*.” The one by whom God will judge the secrets of men at the final day is “*Jesus Christ*.” Righteousness is “by faith in *Jesus Christ*.” Justification and redemption are “in *Christ Jesus*.” “Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through *our Lord Jesus Christ*.” It is *Christ* who “died for the ungodly.” It is through *Christ* that God commends his love toward us, for “while we were yet sinners, *Christ* died for us.”⁹ It is through *Christ* that we who believe in him receive reconciliation.¹⁰ It is through *Christ* that God’s gift of grace has abounded unto many.¹¹ It is by *Christ* that those who “receive abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness shall reign in life.”¹² It is those who are “in *Christ*”—and those only—who will have “no condemnation” at the final judgment.¹³ All these benefits are in Christ! Without a doubt Paul’s great theme is *Christ*—the Christ who got his attention and stopped him in his tracks on the Damascus road and spoke with him and convinced him that he who was crucified is alive and he is Lord of all.

But in Romans 16 the subject is not Christ, but his *church*—specifically, the members of the church in Rome. Remember the context: Paul had never yet visited the churches in Rome. He himself grew up in Tarsus, the chief city in Cilicia, which at the time of his upbringing had a Roman governor.¹⁴ Paul himself had Roman citizenship.¹⁵ But Paul had never yet visited Rome as a Christian. For a long time he had longed to visit the church at Rome and had earnestly prayed that he might have a prosperous journey in the will of God to go there.¹⁶

⁶ Acts 9:20

⁷ Phil. 1:21

⁸ Col. 1:18

⁹ Rom. 1:1, 3, 6, 7; 2:16; 3:22, 24; 5:1, 6, 8

¹⁰ Rom. 5:11 (NKJV)

¹¹ Rom. 5:15

¹² Rom. 5:17

¹³ Rom. 8:1

¹⁴ E. M. Blaiklock, “Tarsus,” *New Bible Dictionary* (Logos Bible Software)

¹⁵ Acts 22:27–28

¹⁶ Rom. 1:10–11

But when we read our text, Romans 16, we are moved by Paul's intimate knowledge of many of the members of the Roman church. He mentions at least 25 in all—25 different individuals by name!

I grew up in a good-sized Baptist church. I knew a lot of folks in our own congregation by name and face. But the church I grew up in was independent—it actually prided itself on being so; consequently, I knew very few people in other churches.

Now we here at Grace OPC follow the United Prayer calendar prepared by Ken Hovingh, a retired minister in our presbytery. As a congregation we probably pray through the churches and mission works of our presbytery once or twice a year. But because of confidentiality considerations, the prayer requests from the other churches rarely give specific names, except for those of the pastor and his wife. Perhaps a few of you have visited other congregations in our presbytery on occasion. Most of you probably do not. But let me ask you, how well do you know the people—the fellow saints—in our sister churches? Many of us would have to say, not very well. And as to the churches of the other Reformed denominations with which the Orthodox Presbyterian Church has fraternal relations, most of us do not know them very well either. Many of us in this congregation may have met Bill Watson, an OPC minister whose wife Connie has relatives in Michigan; Bill and Connie worship with us one Sunday every couple years when they are in the area to visit family. They are very special to us. Then we've met some of the ministers who come from time to time to fill the pulpit. Think of Rod Thole, who willingly filled our pulpit for five weeks a few years ago when I had emergency surgery in the Holy Land and had to delay my return. Some of us have attended particular conferences or presbytery meetings and know other OPCers.

Plainly, we in the twenty-first century have advantages that Paul did not have. In his time there were no electronic communications—telephone, email, text messages, videoconferencing. There was no daily postal mail service. All letters were delivered by private courier. For one of us now to travel overland from Paul's home base in Antioch of Syria (now Antakya, Turkey) all the way west to Rome is a distance of over 2,000 miles. Traveling by automobile, the trip is estimated to take 34 hours. But Paul and his traveling companions did not have automobiles. They had to walk, or find crude sailing ships and wait to board them. They had to battle the weather, storms, pirates and other perils. Yet despite the difficulties of travel and sending messages, Paul had a more intimate and thorough knowledge of the churches of Rome, 2,000 miles away, than many of us do, despite the relative ease with which we can send communications. In our text he mentions by name 25 of the saints who were members of churches in Rome; moreover, he uses the word “greet” eighteen times in fourteen verses! Here were individuals with whom Paul had been communicating, and now he wants to greet them.

Our text begins with the words “I commend to you Phoebe our sister.” One of the purposes of Paul’s sending this letter was to commend this woman named Phoebe to the care of the Roman Christians. Phoebe was from the church in Cenchrea near Corinth in Greece. She is identified as a “servant” (lit. *deacon*, with a small *d*) and a “helper” (*protectress*, *patroness*). Here was a capable woman! She had been a “helper of many,” caring for them and supplying their needs with her own resources.¹⁷ Cenchrea was the eastern port town for Corinth, a place through which lots of travelers passed, so there were lots of people who needed help. Phoebe, as an active Christian, wanted to help them in the name of Christ—and help them she did. This capable woman apparently carried Paul’s letter, carrying it a distance of about 750 miles both overland and across the Adriatic Sea in order to reach Rome. Surely she did not travel alone, as such a trip would have been too dangerous. And as she traveled she carried the inspired letter to the Romans, the systematic theology of the New Testament. Can you imagine carrying the only copy of a letter of such importance?

The words “I commend to you” are significant. Not only was Paul commending Phoebe to the Roman Christians’ care—to welcome her into their homes for Christian hospitality—he also was identifying her as a Christian sister qualified to commune at the Lord’s table. When the churches in the vicinity of Rome gathered to worship—that is, to pray and sing praises to God, to hear his word preached, and to observe the Lord’s supper—it would be their privilege to welcome Phoebe, a Christian sister, into their fellowship. Though her membership was in a different local church, she was a fellow-member of the body of Christ and ought to be welcomed to the Lord’s table. Paul makes reference to letters of commendation in 2 Corinthians 3:1 as well. (Depending on your translation it might say “letters of commendation” or “epistles of commendation.”) This is a practice that is carried out to the present day in faithful churches. Just yesterday I received the following email from one of the United Reformed Churches, the denomination with which the OPC produced the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*. The email said this: “Can you provide contact information for Redeemer OPC in Airdrie? We would like to notify the elders there of participation in the Lord’s Supper (per our policy). Thanks!” Here was a cordial letter of commendation from one Reformed church to another regarding the membership status of a family traveling out of their home area to worship in a distant town. Rather than this family just appearing out of nowhere and being received on their own testimony, a letter of commendation is a formal attestation that the bearers are members in good standing in the body of Christ. If any of you plan to visit another church while traveling on vacation, please be advised that you are welcome to ask for a letter of commendation from our session.

¹⁷ *Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon* (Logos Bible Software)

While Phoebe was in Rome she should be treated as an esteemed Christian sister and welcomed to the Lord's table in the churches there. The Lord's supper, as we have said many times, is an expression of the spiritual unity of the people of God, and that spiritual unity extends far beyond the walls of our our own congregation; it extends to the whole body of Christ worldwide. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, Norma and I have dear friends named Alvin and Yui Lin who are members of a faithful church in Singapore. Yui Lin attended Grace OPC during her student days at MSU. She and her husband have visited us twice in the intervening years and hope to visit again. When they come they will be welcomed here as esteemed members of the body of Christ and accorded all the rights and privileges of church membership, as was Phoebe in the first century. The body of Christ transcends both time and space; if you belong to Christ, you are welcome as an esteemed member of the body, eligible to commune in our midst.

Now consider verses 3–16. As I said, Paul uses the word “greet” eighteen times in these verses. It is impossible to overstate the importance of this word “greet.” It means to *welcome* someone, *remember* him to someone. It can even mean *love*. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “If you *love* those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you *greet* your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?”¹⁸ Clearly, “greet” is used in parallel with “love,” which in this context means *be fond of, cherish, be devoted to*.¹⁹ Christ wants us to love not only family members but members of our Christian family—yea, all human beings with whom he brings us into contact in his sovereign providence. As he tells us clearly, we are to love our neighbor²⁰; this is our second-table duty (“love God” is the first table of the law; “love our neighbor” summarizes the second table).

Look at the people to whom Paul refers: Priscilla, Aquila, Epaphroditus, Mary, Andronicus, Junia, Amplias, Urbanus, Stachys, Appelles, Herodion, Narcissus, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, Philologus, Julia, Nereus, Olympas. Some of these names are Greek, others are Roman; one (Mary) is Semitic. Some include interesting detail, others are simply named. Remember, Paul has never himself visited the churches in Rome in person; this is a place that he earnestly wants to go see (and will ultimately go and see as a prisoner). It is doubtful that Paul had met more than one or two of these individuals personally, but he had heard about them, thought about them and prayed for them. Would that each of us would have the same keen interest in the body of Christ! Remember: these are people with whom all of us who are united to the Savior in true faith will fellowship with throughout the unending ages of

¹⁸ Matt. 5:46–47

¹⁹ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, ἀσπάζομαι (Logos Bible Software)

²⁰ Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19

eternity. These individuals were known to the Roman Christians in the first century, but we will get to know them too, as we surround the Lamb and sing his praises at the final day. These are *our* brothers and sisters in Christ!

Surely we cannot read Romans 16 without noticing the overarching lesson: *people are important*. These are people that Christ came to save. He is the head; we are the body—his members. We who are united to him by faith cannot be cut off from him; nothing—absolutely nothing at all—can separate us, or these people in Romans 16, from Christ.²¹ Moreover, he is the mighty Shepherd who infallibly leads his flock into everlasting pastures; out of all of them he shall lose nothing, but raise it up at the last day.²²

Yes, people are important. They are important to Christ, they were important to the apostle Paul, they were important to the churches of Cenchrea and Rome, and they ought to be important to us too. Yet so often we view people as nuisances, as distractions, as burdens. As the Peanuts character Linus famously stated, “I love mankind; it’s *people* I can’t stand.” Perhaps all of us can relate to this at some level. Sometimes we just want to curl up with a good book and be left alone! Another person will have an urgent need at just the time we are extra busy. Yet you and I must accept the fact that our heavenly Father is all-wise and all-sovereign. We know that we are to love our neighbor. And who is our neighbor? As the story of the man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho who fell among thieves tells us, it is the person whom our wise and loving heavenly sovereignly brings across our path at a particular time.

It is noteworthy that four times in our text the apostle uses the word “beloved.” Four of the 25 individuals he mentions are especially called “beloved.” This should be understood as people *especially* beloved. Gill explains that “though *all* the saints were beloved by the apostle, yet there were some ... for whom he might have ... a particular affection; as our Lord, as man, had for his disciple John, though he loved all his disciples.” So it should be for us as well. We should love all the saints—not just in word, but in deed and truth. But there are some to whom our souls are especially knit. It is OK to have special friends, as long as we do not neglect our general duty to love all the saints. To go to church and speak just to one or two special friends to the neglect of everyone else, week after week, is not a fulfilling of our Lord’s command to “love one another.” To view certain Christians as annoyances that get in the way of intimate conversations with special friends is not Christian love. And to come to church and never take the opportunity to greet the saints is wrong, too. Let us each pray for wisdom to know our duty and apply the teaching of Scripture honestly and prayerfully to our own situation. “If ye

²¹ Rom. 8:38–39

²² John 6:39

know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.”²³ As we read through this precious Scripture we see our responsibility to *greet* one another, *receive* one another, *esteem* one another, *pray* for one another, *get to know* one another, *help* one another, *give* thanks for one another. The person who is born of God will recognize these to be both responsibilities and blessed privileges.

Today we have received another brother and sister into our communicant membership. All of us rejoice that God is growing the body of Christ. I received the following two notes from members of this congregation: “Praise the Lord! So happy to hear, looking forward to their reception this Lord’s day!” “Praise God for the two new members! I have been praying for growth since we left! Imagine my surprise when I come back home and my family has grown. God is so good!”

The people of God are called “the *saints*”—not because we are perfect but because God is sanctifying us.

Earlier this morning we sang Psalm 16, which contains the words “The *saints* throughout the earth—in them is my delight, for excellent are they who live as holy in your sight.”²⁴ Are the saints truly our delight? Let us show it by our prayers and love! In a moment we shall sing Psalm 149, which begins “Give praise to the Lord and sing a new song, amid all his *saints* his praises prolong.” To desire to sing to the Lord and worship him in the midst of the saints is an evidence of being born again. May such a fervent desire be evident in each of our lives. Amen.

²³ John 13:17

²⁴ Ps. 16A, *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*