

# The Fellowship of the Saints (reprise)

Romans 16:1–16

This morning we have witnessed new members' vows. God is growing his church, and his people are encouraged. It is appropriate that we focus today on Romans 16. Lord willing, we will return to 1 Thessalonians next week. I have three points this morning: (1) *created* for fellowship; (2) *caring* about people; (3) *calling* on the Lord. First,

## 1. Created for fellowship

I saw part of a documentary about a man who chooses to live alone in a remote cabin in Alaska, 60 miles north of the Arctic Circle. His nearest neighbor is 60 miles away. He hunts, fishes and grows a garden. He is nowhere near a convenience store or hospital. It is a lonely life. It is not for everybody.

Man is a social being. He was created by God not to live in isolation but to live in fellowship both with God and with his fellow man. God placed the first man, Adam, in the Garden of Eden—a perfect environment—and came down to speak with Adam and his wife in the cool of the day. Adam was at one with God, with creation and with his soulmate, Eve. Man, out of all the living creatures, was made in the very image of God—the only creature capable of fellowship with the Creator.

When Adam sinned, he lost fellowship with his Creator. He was ashamed, so he hid from God—ultimately a 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 “all things are *naked* and *open* to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”<sup>1</sup> All things! What kind of God is this who knows us better and more perfectly than we know ourselves? But as sons and daughters of Adam, and because of his sin, we who were created for fellowship with God are by nature alienated from God. Fellowship with him has been broken. 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.”<sup>2</sup>

Sin separates both vertically and horizontally. John writes: “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.”<sup>3</sup> Here is 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

---

<sup>1</sup> Heb. 4:13

<sup>2</sup> Isa. 59:2

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 1:3, 7

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 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.”<sup>4</sup> Salvation is centered in *Christ*: “The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”<sup>5</sup> The author of Romans is the apostle Paul, a man who before his conversion was a fanatical persecutor of Christians. But Luke tells us that literally within days of his conversion “straightway he *preached Christ* in the synagogues.” What did he tell people about Christ? That “he is the Son of God.”<sup>6</sup> What was Paul’s message from day one? “Christ”! “Straightway he preached *Christ*.”

In Romans Paul identifies himself as “a servant of *Jesus Christ*”—Christ is the master, Paul is only a servant. His theme is the gospel, the good news about *Jesus Christ* our Lord.” The church is made up of “the called of *Jesus Christ*.” It is those who are “in *Christ*”—and those only—who will have “no condemnation” at the final judgment.<sup>7</sup> Paul’s great theme is *Christ*—the Christ who stopped him in his tracks on the Damascus road and convinced him that he who was crucified is alive and he is Lord of all.

Man was created for fellowship with God. That fellowship was broken because of sin, but it is restored in Christ—praise be to God! Our second point is

## **2. Caring about people**

In Romans 16 the subject is Christ’s *church*. In the opening verses of this chapter we learn a lot about the members of the church in Rome. Paul had never before visited the churches in Rome. He himself grew up in Tarsus, and had Roman citizenship.<sup>8</sup> But Paul had never yet visited Rome. For a long time he had longed to visit Rome. Rome was the most important city in Italy. In Paul’s time it was ruled by the Caesars. It was the capital of the Roman empire. Paul longed to go there and preach Christ.

In our text this morning, Romans 16, we are moved by Paul’s intimate knowledge of many of the members of the Roman church. He mentions 25 different individuals by name!

I grew up in a good-sized Baptist church. I knew a lot of folks in our congregation by name and face. But the church I grew up in was independent—it

---

<sup>4</sup> Rom. 1:16

<sup>5</sup> Rom. 6:23

<sup>6</sup> Acts 9:20

<sup>7</sup> Rom. 8:1

<sup>8</sup> Acts 22:27–28

actually prided itself on being so; consequently, I knew very few people in other churches.

Now here at Grace OPC we pray through the churches of presbytery about twice a year. But let me ask you, how well do you know the people of our sister churches? Probably not very well. And as to the churches of the other Reformed denominations with which the OPC has fraternal relations, most of us do not know them very well either.

We in the twenty-first century have many advantages that Paul did not have. In his time there were no electronic communications—telephone, email, text messages, videoconferencing. There was no daily letter delivery. All letters had to be delivered by private courier. Can you imagine the logistical difficulty of finding a trusted person willing to take your letter to Rome and deliver it to the right person? For Paul, that was a distance of over 2,000 miles. There were no cars. Paul and his traveling companions had to walk, ride on donkeys (feeding and caring for the animals along the way) or find a boat going their way. They had to battle the weather, storms, bandits, 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 of churches in our own presbytery, despite the relative ease with which we can send communications. In Romans 16 he mentions *by name* 25 of the saints in Rome. Here were individuals with whom Paul had been communicating. Paul cared about people.

Paul writes: “I commend to you Phoebe our sister.” He commends this woman named Phoebe to the care of the Roman Christians. Phoebe was from the church in Cenchrea 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.<sup>9</sup> Cenchrea was the eastern port town for Corinth, a place through which lots of travelers passed, so there were always people who needed help. Phoebe wanted to help them in the name of Christ—and help them she did. This capable woman 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; such a trip would have been too dangerous. And as this woman traveled, she carried the letter to the Romans, the systematic theology of the New Testament. Can you imagine carrying the only copy of a letter of such great importance? The only copy of the inspired letter to the Romans in all the world at the time would have been of far more value than the Magna Carta or the handwritten original of the US Constitution. These history-changing documents are the words of men, but Romans is the inspired word of the living God!

---

<sup>9</sup> *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon* (Logos Bible Software)

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 fellow Christian qualified to commune at the Lord’s table. When the churches in Rome gathered to worship, 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. A church’s issuing a letter of commendation is a practice carried out in the the present day as well. A letter of commendation is an attestation that the bearer is a member in good standing. If any of you plan to visit another church while traveling on vacation—and I encourage you to do that, whenever you travel—you can request a letter of commendation from our session. While Phoebe was in Rome she should be treated as an esteemed Christian sister and welcomed to the Lord’s table. The Lord’s supper is an expression of the spiritual unity of the people of God, and that spiritual unity extends beyond the walls of our our own congregation to the whole body of Christ worldwide. The body of Christ transcends both time and space; if you belong to Christ, you are welcome in our midst as an esteemed member of the body, eligible to commune.

In verse 3 Paul writes, “Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus.” “Greet” means to *give a word of welcome* to someone. Greeting fellow Christians and welcoming them to the Lord’s table is part of our second-table duty, part of loving our neighbor—“Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Showing an interest in fellow Christians and welcoming them to our church is an aspect of loving our neighbor. Have you ever gone to a place you had never been to before and had people look at you strangely and otherwise totally avoid you and give you the cold shoulder? You may have concluded that your presence was an unwelcome intrusion into their closed society. You might have had the urge to get away as quickly as possible. The church is not supposed to be that kind of place! God’s people are ordinary people who have been reconciled to God. We are former enemies of God who because of Christ have been brought near and been welcomed into his fellowship—not because of our deserving but because of his mercy and grace. We have been reconciled to God, and now he gives us the ministry of reconciliation. We are his ambassadors and want to bring our friends and neighbors into his fellowship.

Jonathan Cruse writes: “What does it mean to be a member of a local church? Those who take church membership seriously recognize it comes with a lot of responsibilities. The faithful church member attends worship regularly and engages meaningfully in the divine service. They pray for the needs of the flock and volunteer their time, talents, and money to support the church’s various ministries.

But joining a church also entails the responsibility to see others join, too. A new church member must never be content to be a church's last member. Witness and evangelism is part and parcel of belonging to a church, as we learn from Jesus' Great Commission: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.'"<sup>10</sup>

Cruse makes a good point: "A new church member must never be content to be a church's last member." An organism that stops growing eventually dies. When a church stops receiving new members it will eventually die. "Go and make disciples" is our Lord's marching orders to the church. All of us have a part.

Notice how close Paul felt to the folks about whom he speaks: "who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles . . . who labored much for us . . . my countrymen and my fellow prisoners . . . my beloved in the Lord . . . my beloved." Clearly, these men and women were very important to Paul. He was very indebted to them. They were a part of his spiritual formation.

Do the other members of the body matter to you? Are they an important part of your life? Or do you consider them a distraction, a waste of your time? Do you show a genuine interest in the people the Lord providentially brings to our church? We are all here by divine providence. We could wish things were better or we could accept things as they are and get to work, seeking to build the body. Our responsibility is caring for the body. Our third point is

### **3. Calling on the Lord**

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. Clearly, Paul cared about these people, thought about them and prayed for them, calling on the Lord to do his work in their lives. Would that each of us would have the same keen interest in the body of Christ! Remember: these are people with whom we will fellowship throughout eternity. *We* will get to know these Roman Christians 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 and we should pray for them*. 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 from Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Yes, people are important. They are important to Christ, they were important to the apostle Paul, and they ought to be important to us too. Yet so often we view

---

<sup>10</sup> <https://heidelblog.net/2024/06/church-membership-and-our-witness-to-the-world/> accessed 6-21-24

<sup>11</sup> Rom. 8:38–39

people as nuisances, as distractions, as burdens. Another person will have an urgent need at just the time we are extra busy. Sometimes we have to drop everything to help another person. Yet you and I must accept the fact that our heavenly Father is all-wise. 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 Father sovereignly brings across our path at a particular time.

Paul considered these people beloved and prayed for them. His prayers were not perfunctory and superficial but heartfelt and constant. It is noteworthy that four times in our text the apostle uses the word “beloved.” 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 the command to “love one another.” To view other Christians as annoyances that get in the way of intimate conversations with special friends is not Christian love. 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, and *give* thanks for one another. These are both responsibilities and blessed privileges.

Today we have received new members. All of us should rejoice that God is growing the body of Christ. God is good! This morning I got an email that said simply, “Praise God for new members!!” Indeed!

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

At the start of worship this morning we sang Psalm 116, which contains numerous references to “the saints”:

“Salvation’s cup of blessing now I take, and call upon God’s name; *before his saints* I pay my vow and here my gratitude proclaim.

“*His saints* the Lord delights to save, their death is precious in his sight; he has redeemed me from the grave, and in his service I delight.

“With thankful heart I offer now my gift, and call upon God’s name; *before his saints* I pay my vow and here my gratitude proclaim.

“Within his house, the house of prayer, I dedicate myself to God; *let all his saints* his grace declare and join to sound his praise abroad.”

After the sermon we shall sing Psalm 149, which begins “Give praise to the Lord and sing a new song, amid all his *saints* his praises prolong.” There are also other references to the covenant people: “Let Israel rejoice in his Maker and sing, and children of Zion rejoice in their king” and “The Lord in his people his pleasure will take.”

This is the church of Jesus Christ which is composed of all God’s people in every age, who are the objects of his saving work—whom he came to save, and for whom he suffered and died. There is one head, Christ, and one body, his people,

composed of every tongue and tribe and nation. These are people beloved of the Father from eternity past, given to the Son to be his inheritance, and regenerated by the Holy Spirit, whose eyes have been opened to see their sinfulness, and have looked to Christ in saving faith.

To desire to sing to the Lord and worship him in the midst of the saints is an evidence of being born again. We were *created* for fellowship with God and our fellow saints; through the work of the Spirit we now *care* about people and show that care by *calling* on the Lord on their behalf. We were not saved to sit all our lives in self-imposed solitude. We were not saved to go live in isolation 60 miles above the Arctic Circle. We were saved to be part of the church, praising Christ together, winning the lost together. A new church member must never be content to be a church's last member. Let us pray for grace to be his witnesses in a lost and needy world. May such a fervent desire be evident in each of our lives. Amen.