

ESSENTIAL COMMUNITY

4. Diversity and Unity in Gospel Community

Romans 16:1-16

Romans 16:1-16 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. 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. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. ⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. ⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. ⁸ Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. ⁹ Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. ¹⁰ Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. ¹¹ Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. ¹² Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. ¹³ Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. ¹⁴ Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. ¹⁵ Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. ¹⁶ Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

QUOTE: Donald Grey Barnhouse — *In his salutations to the believers whom he had known, or of whom he had heard, we are given a glimpse of the church life of the city. It is important that we have such knowledge because we thus learn more of how the church should be in our own generation*¹

The names and details in those divinely inspired verses **reveal so much** about **the nature of real community**. We discover that real community is a treasure chest filled with men and women whose lives have been forever altered by the redeeming love of Jesus; whose love for Jesus moves them to use their gifting and

¹ Barnhouse, D. G. (1964). *God's Glory: Romans 14:13–16:27* (p. 122). Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

resources to love and serve their brothers and sisters in Jesus in ways that are memorable.

This list of names tells us that real community is the tangible and observable expression of the diversity and unity of the Kingdom of God — the kind of diversity and unity that our fallen, broken world aches for so deeply. According to the analysis from the University of Virginia's Center for Politics, over half of Trump voters want red states to secede from the union, and 41% of Biden voters want blue states to split off. In other words: *I can only be around those who agree with me*. Those differences are amplified and exacerbated by the various social media platforms

But when we look at this list of names, we see how real community actually answers the uninformed claims that Christianity creates divisions in culture along social and ethnic lines and is at its core misogynistic.

In reality, the communities of believers in Corinth and Rome prove that Christianity is radically counter culture — especially concerning the way the Gospel views women.

QUOTE: Rebecca McLaughlin (Confronting Christianity) — *True Christianity flips the script on the marginalization of women that characterizes many traditional cultures and gives them equal status before God, with a whole new role to play of witnessing to the gospel of Jesus and loving others in his name.*

Nine out of the twenty-six persons named in Paul's closing words are women. We can't miss the fact that Paul thought highly of them. He makes it a point to especially let us know how four of the women in their community "worked hard" — using the word that implies *strong exertion*.

We'll learn more about these women in a bit.

1. I want us to see in these closing words that real community is ethnically diverse and inclusive.

The community of believers in Rome was made up of those who were Gentiles (not descended from Abraham) and those who were ethnically Jewish

(descendants of Abraham). For example: Aquila and Priscilla were Jewish Christians, and Paul makes reference to his *kinsmen* (verses 7 and 11), which most likely means his ethnic brothers and sisters. I say that because earlier in his letter Paul wrote

Romans 9:3** For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of **my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

Centuries of animosity existed between Jews and Gentiles. They were the archetype of In-Group / Out-Group prejudice and hostility, yet here they were in the cosmopolitan center of the world ruling Roman Empire — And they were the living breathing expression of what it looks like to be governed by God. That collection of ethnically diverse men and women living in unity shows the world how relationship with God creates a new humanity

Ephesians 2:14-15 (NIV)** ¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵.... His purpose was to create in himself **one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace

This new humanity is not comprised of a single ethnicity — it is not a humanity that is colorless, but a humanity that is governed by God — united by their shared love for Jesus.

***Revelation 5:9** And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,*

***Revelation 7:9** After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,*

2. The Holy Spirit also shows us in the closing words of Paul that Gospel Community is diverse and inclusive in regard to socio-economic status.

John Stott points out that Ampliatus (verse 8), Urbanus (verse 9), Hermes (verse 14), Philologus and Julia (verse 15) were common names for slaves in first century Rome.² But then Paul lists others who were at least freed people while others were connected in the highest social and political circles. Aristobulus (verse 10) was the grandson of Herod the Great and friend of the Emperor Claudius, and that Narcissus (verse 11) was the well-known, rich and powerful freedman who exercised great influence on Emperor Claudius.

QUOTE: J.B. Lightfoot — said that *“We seem to have established a fair presumption that among the salutations in the Epistle to the Romans some members at least of the imperial household are included.”*

From slaves to the celebrities — from “nobodies” to “somebodies”. That was the composition of the community of believers in 1st century Rome.

HERE’S THE DEAL — Real community is NOT about “doing life” with people who are just like you! Community is about doing life with people who might not be very much like you at all!

Back in Romans 12 Paul said

Romans 12:10 (ESV) Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

Love = Storge. **Storge** is the kind of love that unites people who are almost comically not made for each other! You love them and your life is deeply united to theirs because of who they are in Jesus. Check this out: Four times Paul describes his friends as being *in Christ* (verses 3, 7, 9, and 10). Five times he mentions them as being *in the Lord* (verses 8, 11, twice in verse 12, and again in verse 13). He uses sibling language of ‘sister’ and ‘brother’ two times (verse 1 and verse 14). He calls them ‘beloved’ or ‘my beloved’ (verses 5, 8, 9, and 12).

I believe that “affinity groups” in modern church culture have served to cripple the church — actually prevent Christians from looking like the collection of people involved in the community of believers in Rome. The groups intended to create

² Stott, J. R. W. (2001). *The message of Romans: God’s good news for the world* (p. 395). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

community can actually create myopic tribes within the local church. I'm not saying that affinity groups are utterly failed systems within a community of believers — but they can very easily cater to the broken part of us that wants the security and affirmation that we hope to find by doing life with people who look like we look, think like we think, thus affirming us and making us feel secure.

Check out the two AFFINITY connections that were at the core of their unity and relationships: **fellow workers** (verses 3 and 9) and **fellow sufferers** (verses 4 and 7). Paul was close to these very diverse individuals **because** he **labored** with them **IN** the Kingdom of God . He was close to these very diverse people because he **suffered WITH** them **FOR** the Kingdom of God.

This leads us to the third aspect of this community of believers in Rome.

In his commentary on Romans John Stott refers to it as the most interesting and instructive aspect of the unity and diversity in the communities of believers in Corinth and Rome.

3. Gospel Community Is Diverse and Inclusive in regard to gender

We'll see this as we walk through the list of names

Romans 16:1-2 I commend to you our sister Phoebe... of the church at Cenchreae

Phoebe was led to faith in Jesus during Paul's year and a half of ministry in Corinth.

a servant of the church at Cenchreae,

Cenchreae was one of the two seaports of Corinth (Acts 18:18). The church in that city was probably a daughter of the church in the metropolis of Corinth.

Both the RSV and NIV marginal notes call Phoebe a "deaconess".

F.F. Bruce — *Our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at (ken-cray-I)*

²that 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.

The Message — *Be sure to welcome our friend Phoebe in the way of the Master, with all the generous hospitality we Christians are famous for. I heartily endorse both her and her work. She's a key representative of the church at (ken-cray-I).*

So, here was this woman — a deaconess and key representative within the community of believers in **Cenchreae, (ken-cray-I)**. Some business took her to Rome. Early tradition says that she carried the epistle to the Romans from Paul to the church in the capital. Think of the weightiness of that task!

QUOTE: Donald Grey Barnhouse —

The Holy Spirit has used this single letter to impact lives that would shape Christianity *and* history. Augustine of Hippo was converted in AD 386 while reading **Romans 13:13–14**. Chrysostom — the Archbishop of Constantinople during the late 4th century — had Romans read to him once a week. Martin Luther's understanding of salvation was radically changed in 1513 as he compared Psalm 31:1 to Romans 1:17 (cf. Habakkuk. 2:4) — which led to the Protestant Reformation. John Wesley — the great English evangelist and founder of Methodism was converted in 1738 by hearing Luther's sermon on the introduction to Romans. Luther said this about the book of Romans

QUOTE: Martin Luther — *This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel. It is well worth a Christian's while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul.*

We do not know what business brought Phoebe to Rome, but Paul thought — *I can't think of anyone more trustworthy than this sister in Christ.*

She brought this letter — and this letter **included** a letter of recommendation from the apostle Paul. That recommendation was from Paul's life in the

community of believers in Corinth — *for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.*

QUOTE: A handbook on Paul's Letter to the Romans — *A good friend to many people and also to me*³

³Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,

This couple is an amazing example of what it looks like for a married couple to **love Jesus** and **live on mission**. There was **no compartmentalization** of their lives. They didn't see their marriage as separate from ministry — nor did they see ministry separate from marriage. They dedicated their **time, talents** and **treasures** for the work of the Gospel. Their hands — hearts — and **homes** (plural) were dedicated to the work of the Lord. We might say that their marriage was the altar upon which they offered all that they were, all that they did and all they could ever hope to be — to Jesus

Paul first met this couple in Corinth. They ended up in Corinth because they were forced to leave their home in Rome by the edict of the Emperor Claudius ([Acts 18:2](#)). They became *fellow-workers* with Paul. This couple made it possible for Paul to serve the Lord effectively. They encouraged Paul at a time when he needed it the most. They also spent considerable time in the church at Ephesus ([Acts 18:18, 26](#)).

⁴who risked their necks for my life,

It might be that they risked their necks to save Paul's life during the riot in that city ([Acts 19:23–41](#)).

to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. ⁵Greet also the church in their house.

At the time of writing this letter this couple was living in Rome again — they're not slowing down, they're not holding back — they were continuing to minister, opening their home again to the community of believers.

³ Newman, B. M., & Nida, E. A. (1973). *A handbook on Paul's letter to the Romans* (p. 291). New York: United Bible Societies.

It's interesting how the Holy Spirit saw fit for this woman's name to be placed in front of her husband here and in three other places in the New Testament ([Acts 18:18](#); [2 Timothy 4:19](#)). Some believe it's because she came to faith in Jesus before her husband. Others take the position that it was because she was more active in ministry than her husband. Others think it might be owing to the fact that she was a woman of standing in the community while others think it was because she was the dominant personality in the marriage. Here's the thing we don't want to miss: By inspiration of the Holy Spirit Paul chose to **recognize and not criticize** her leadership.

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

Epaenetus may have joined Prisca and Aquila in Ephesus and travelled 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. **I hope we're seeing how real community spans time and distance.**

⁶Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.

We know nothing about this Mary except that she had worked so hard for the community of believers in Rome.

The mere fact that Paul mentions her — and how hard she had worked for the community of believers in Rome — tells us that she and Paul had been a part of a community that was laboring in the mission of God.

⁷Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.

Kinsman = fellow-Jews.

Paul makes a point to say that they were *in Christ* before he was. That phrase is really striking. Today people might say, *"They started going to church before me,"* or *"They got into Christianity before me"* — but not many process Christianity as being in its essence a divinely established union with Jesus — being **IN** Jesus. Remember — THAT reality is **essential** to brotherly love. Any collapse of a

community not based in heresy or continuing in known sin can be traced to the failure to understand just what a Christian is — and all that means concerning our relationship to other Christians

This couple were not only *in Christ before* Paul — they were also *fellow prisoners* with Paul. Paul is letting us know that he was connected with this couple because they were *in Christ and they had suffered* — had been in prison with him — probably because of their shared ministry of being apostles.

They are well known to the apostles

NIV — They are outstanding among the apostles

The word “apostle” has both a narrow and a broad meaning. In its narrow sense it’s a reference to those who were divinely chosen representatives of the risen Christ with a unique authority. In its broad sense — it carries the meaning of *missionary or accredited messenger*

*2 Corinthians 8:23 As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are **messengers** of the churches, the glory of Christ.*

*Philippians 2:25 I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your **messenger** and minister to my need,*

So Junia is another woman singled out in the community of believers in Rome. And though Paul never refers to one of them as elders — we can’t miss the prominent places of service women occupied in the ministry of Paul and within the local churches in the 1st century. For the critics of Christianity to call Paul a male chauvinist is simply not grounded in fact.

⁸Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. ⁹Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. ¹⁰Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ.

We don't know anything about these four men — but Paul knew them! He knew them well enough to call them *my beloved in the Lord.... our fellow worker in Christ.... approved in Christ.*

Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. ¹¹ Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus.

These were the “somebodies” in the eyes of fallen culture — Yet because of Jesus they were “doing life” with those who were the “nobodies” in the eyes of fallen culture. Real community is the living exposition of the Gospel — how the truth of what God has done to save us HUMBLES and EXALTS and UNIFIES!

AGAIN — THINK of the historical and cultural context of this passage! How was the Gospel credible in the very epicenter of the powerful and pagan Roman Empire? How did men and women come to believe that a **specific man** who was nailed to a cross by the authority of Rome is actually the One who has the ultimate and last word over humanity?

¹² Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.

You won't find these three women in the annals of world history — but their names are forever recorded in the Word of God. The Holy Spirit makes them known to us because of their relationship to the Gospel — because they *worked — worked hard* in the mission of God alongside of Paul before they moved to Rome — and because they were woven into the fabric of the community of believers in Rome.

I have to admit that I'm struck by the way God supplied the community of believers in Rome with a number of men and women who had come to faith in Jesus by way of Paul's ministry in Corinth and Ephesus and were a part of those communities. I think of how Metro has been able to taste that as we have been able to be used by God to supply the communities of believers in Wadebridge, England; Dundee, Scotland; Ensenada, Mexico and Newark, New Jersey.

I'm struck by how the local church is truly a treasure of unique persons, each redeemed and rescued by Jesus, each uniquely gifted. I'm struck by the way God

redeems and blesses diversity. I'm struck by the way God can create unity of vision and purpose from such diversity. I'm struck by the way the Gospel answers the deepest longings in our broken world for meaning and belonging. I'm in awe of how the Gospel humbles the somebodies of this world and exalts the nobodies of this world — and brings them together as a living breathing expression of God's Kingdom!

I pray that as we've looked at the way these 1st century believers lived in community **that we've learned a lot** about THIS community called Metro; who we **are** — who we have **yet to become** — and **how we can be** the tangible expression of the rule of God in this world that refuses to be ruled by Him!