

## Romans 16:10,13,17-20 Unity among the believing congregations of the Lord

Paul's greetings are easy to overlook, but I think you will agree that we have discovered much of value in them. Three people I haven't mentioned are Apelles, Rufus and his mother.

Paul commends Apelles as *approved in Christ* (Romans 16:10) In Romans 14 Paul was most concerned that the eating habits of Gentile believers should not become a hindrance to God's work among Jewish people (Romans 14:15,20). After all, *the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and **approved by men*** (Romans 14:17-18). Perhaps Apelles was someone who has really taken this teaching on board. But to be approved also means to be tested. When we do an exam we are being tested or approved by men. The Bible is clear that those with responsibility in the church, especially leaders, must first be tested: *let them also be **tested** [approved] first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless* (1Timothy 3:10). Maybe Apelles being *approved in Christ* indicates he was a mature believer, and maybe he had some specific responsibility. We grow in Christ through study of the word and prayer. But one thing that matures and develops our faith more than anything is suffering (Romans 5:3-5). James said, *Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has **stood the test** he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him* (James 1:12). To say Apelles is *approved in Christ* probably means he had been tested by trials, quite possibly as a direct result of his confession of Jesus as Lord.

Paul greets *Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well* (Romans 16:13). That Rufus is chosen in the Lord doesn't mean he was more chosen than others, but Paul is searching for words of commendation that are not repetitious. Nevertheless, many commentators have suggested that maybe this Rufus was the Rufus mentioned in Mark's gospel, the son of Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross for Jesus (Mark 15:21). The fact that Rufus and his brother Alexander are mentioned by Mark indicates they were well known in the Christian community. I have no idea if they are the same Rufus, but this link does remind us that we have all been chosen to take up our cross and follow Him (Luke 9:23). The privilege of being chosen is that we might suffer with him, so that we might also be glorified with Him (Romans 8:17). This is our calling (1Peter 2:20-21). In the words of the song, we have decided to follow Jesus, with the world behind us and the cross before us.

Rufus' mother is mentioned, who also in some way was a mother to Paul. This reminds us we need spiritual mothers and fathers in Christ in the church, who are mature and approved in Christ.

Paul finishes his greetings, *Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you* (Romans 16:16). This was to be a holy kiss, not an unholy kiss. It was culturally appropriate and a sign of devotion in the community, among those called to be saints. This is the only verse which uses the phrase *assemblies (churches) of Christ*, which indicates a developing community identity, established by Jesus, the Head of the assemblies. This unity in Christ transcended ethnicity, geography or occupation. Psalm 133 speaks prophetically of the unity found in Christ,

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, coming down upon the beard; even Aaron's beard, that comes down upon the collar of his garments; Like the dew of Hermon, that comes down upon the mountains of Zion; for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life forever.*

Aaron, as the high priest, was a type of Jesus, our High Priest who brings us to God through the sacrifice of Himself. The anointing oil speaks of the Holy Spirit who enables us to understand how

the Scriptures speak of Christ. Christian unity isn't something we have to manufacture because it is a gift. We are however to be *eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace* (Ephesians 4:3).

We know church isn't a utopia, but nor should we expect it to be so this side of heaven! It is made up of sinners saved by grace. Some (many?) of the trials we experience come from within the community. There is nothing new about this. In fact the unity of the assemblies in Rome was already being challenged (Romans 16:17-18). Instead of promoting unity, there were individuals who were divisive in what they said (possibly through false teaching,) and by what they did. Their smooth talk and flattery, which reminds me of the snake in the garden who said, "has God really said?", deceived the naive.

These people spoke and lived *contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught*. There must have been a body of Apostolic doctrine (teaching) in circulation, which was more than Paul's letter, that interpreted the Scripture in the light of Christ as the divine Son of God (Romans 1:4). This doctrine is referred to in 1 Timothy 6:3-4 as *the sound (healthy) words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness* (which I take to be the words of Jesus himself and the standards of godliness in the Torah.) These verses also refer to people who teach a different doctrine, producing all kinds of quarrels, envy, dissension etc. This describes the divisive people in Rome well, *who do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own appetites*.

But this is not the way for followers of Christ: *For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil* (Romans 16:19). To follow Christ means to accept Jesus as Lord and to obey his commands (John 14:15). We must be committed to the whole counsel of God. In other words, true unity in Christ can only be found in the truth of Christ. Spurgeon said,

*To remain divided is sinful! Did not our Lord pray, that they may be one, even as we are one"? (John 17:22). A chorus of ecumenical voices keep harping the unity tune. What they are saying is, "Christians of all doctrinal shades and beliefs must come together in one visible organization, regardless... Unite, unite!" Such teaching is false, reckless and dangerous. Truth alone must determine our alignments. Truth comes before unity. Unity without truth is hazardous. Our Lord's prayer in John 17 must be read in its full context. Look at verse 17: "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth." Only those sanctified through the Word can be one in Christ. To teach otherwise is to betray the Gospel.*

This brings me back to the idea of the holy kiss, but a different kind of holy kiss! Psalms 85:10 says, *Mercy and truth are met together: righteousness and peace have kissed each other*. Jesus came full of grace and truth (John 1:17). In the Evangelical world I see two extremes. There are those who are all truth. I listened to a sermon about the errors of Rome and I agreed with every word. But where was the grace? Truth without grace can be harsh. At the other extreme are the hyper-charismatics and emergent church. There's lots of love and grace, but where's the truth? Part of love is to tell the truth about the gospel. Love without the truth can be deception. Grace and truth must meet and kiss each other as we share the gospel.

We are living in a world where it is becoming increasingly difficult to follow Christ with integrity. But Paul gives a final word of encouragement, *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet* (Romans 16:20a). The Lord gives us many victories in our lives and communities, but here Paul is speaking of the great eschatological victory of Messiah over Satan at the end of the age when Jesus returns and establishes his kingdom of righteousness and peace.

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you* (Romans 16:20b).