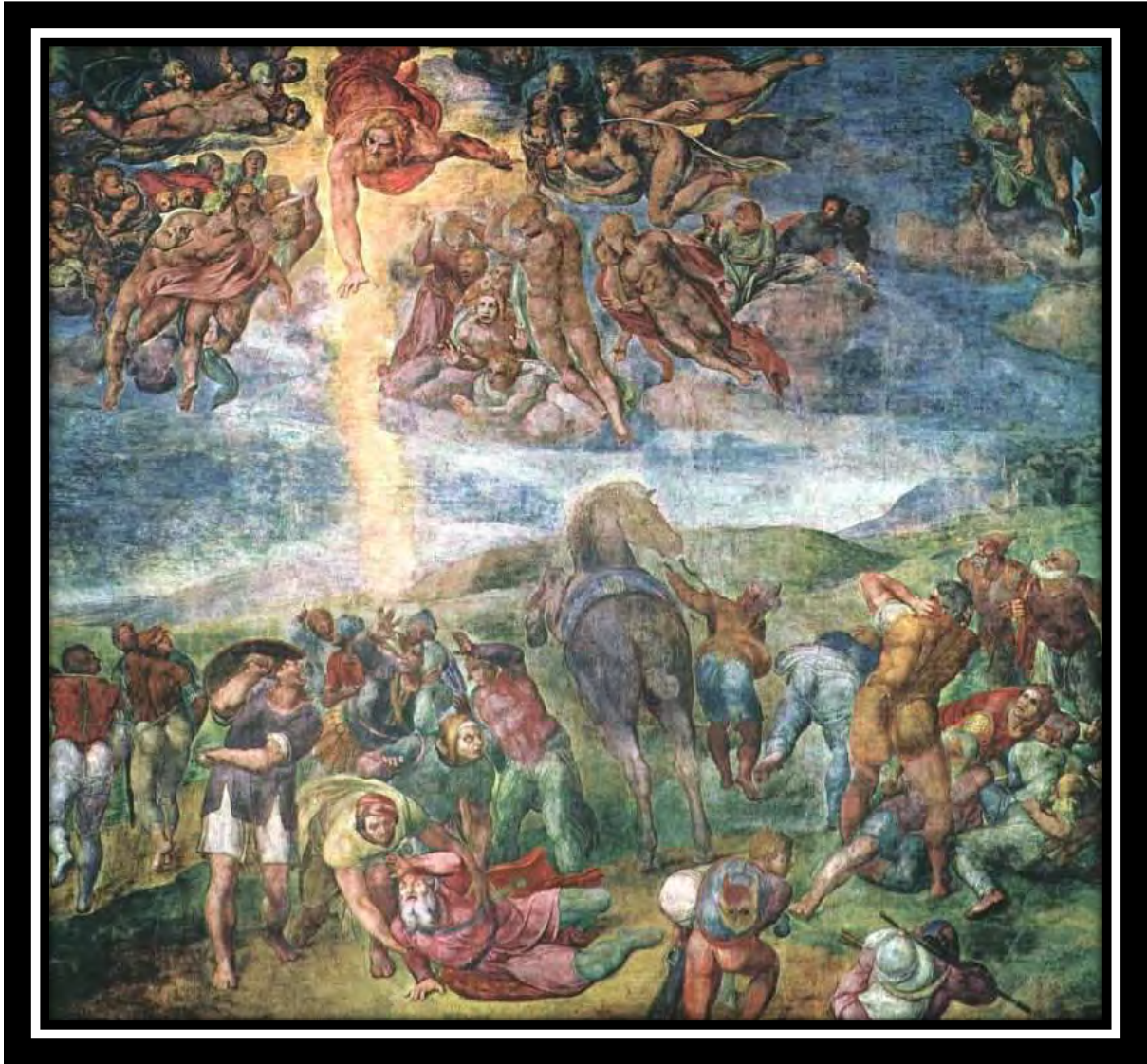


ROMANS—WEEK 15

BINDING FELLOWSHIP



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is the Conversion of Saul by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Paul concludes this letter by asking for prayer and instructing his readers to love everyone, naming some specifically. He also cautions them to keep an eye on people who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to his teaching.

The mystery of the gospel, now revealed, is the ultimate glory.

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1 Romans 15:30–33 (NIV)

I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord's people there, so that I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen.

At first glance, this passage sounds normal, but it's not. This is the only place in the entire Bible where Paul asks for prayer in a worried tone. He mentions the prayers of others for himself in three other places, but the feeling is different.

as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. — 2 Corinthians 1:11 (NIV)

for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. — Philippians 1:19 (NIV)

And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. — Philemon 1:22 (NIV)

Those are all upbeat; this passage is anything but. Paul is already dreading his impending arrest. The concurrent account in Acts 20:23 is even more foreboding.

"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me." (NIV)

But what just knocks me out is that, despite the pressure this is putting on Paul, he also asks for prayer *that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord's people there*. That's like asking for prayer for your heart surgery, and that your grandson will like his new tricycle. Those two things can't be on the same level, right? How could a *contribution* possibly not *be favorably received*?

Because it's from gentiles. The people in Jerusalem may not have come around yet on expanding the gospel to gentiles. To Paul, this issue was easily as important as his personal safety. We like to think of first century Christians as model Christians, but many of them had been raised as bigots.

Becoming Christian is not an instant cure for things like that.

Being a Christian is frustrating. It's supposed to be frustrating. Our standards are rising, but our behavior can't keep up. Take heart; Paul was frustrated too. Frustration is OK, even healthy. Denial isn't.

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. — Romans 7:15 (NIV)

Be honest with yourself.

2 Romans 16:1–7 (NKJV)

I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchræa, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house.

Greet my beloved Epænetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ. Greet Mary, who labored much for us. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.

Wow, Phoebe must really be awesome. She gets top billing here and that means a lot. Order is a form of emphasis, even more so in Greek than in English.

She even gets put before *Priscilla and Aquila*, whom we know are leading saints from Acts 18, 1 Corinthians 16, and 2 Timothy 4. And Paul heaps great praise on them here saying that they, “*risked their own necks for my life.*”

Notice that Paul’s instruction about Phoebe is different than his instruction about everyone else. Instead of merely telling people to *greet* her, Paul says, “*I commend to you Phoebe our sister ... and assist her in whatever business she has need of you.*” We don’t know much about Phoebe—there’s no other mention of her in the Bible—but she’s obviously someone special. Many think she carried this letter to Rome.

But the larger point is the high place of women in this passage. Paul is sometimes thought of as being sexist but this passage counters that. There’s no bias here; women are given the prominence they deserve. Listing *Priscilla* before *Aquila* is noteworthy too.

Listing the wife first is rare even in modern US tax returns.

Humanity has a long history of sexism, but Christ torched it. In Matthew 28, the first witnesses to the resurrection were women—at a time when temple law didn’t even allow women to be witnesses in court.

But sexism, racism, and all the other things like that are just different facets of the root problem—sin. Our “long history” is a history of people taking advantage of other people. Who the “other people” are doesn’t matter. Christ calls us to love other people, be they friends, neighbors, fellow Christians, even enemies.

While this can be challenging, it does remove one tricky task from our in-basket.

We don’t need to judge who’s lovable and who’s not.

3 Romans 16:8–16 (NKJV)

Greet Amplias, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys, my beloved. Greet Apelles, approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my countryman. Greet those who are of the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.

Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, who have labored in the Lord. Greet the beloved Persis, who labored much in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren who are with them. Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.

Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you.

This list includes slaves. *Urbanus* and *Stachys* were both common slave names. *Those who are of the household of Aristobulus* and *those who are of the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord*, almost certainly included both family and servants.

Can you picture all these people greeting *one another with a holy kiss*? That sure doesn't fit with my image of slavery. But the slavery that existed thousands of years ago wasn't like the slavery that existed in the antebellum US.

Yes, slavery in Biblical times was often racial or national ("race" and "nation" were virtually synonyms back then anyway) but it still wasn't the same. If it had been, Joseph's rise to power in Egypt would have been impossible. Slavery was a normal part of life back then. Slaves and masters could live together as Christian brothers, giving and receiving holy kisses. Because everyone had grown up in that system no one saw anything wrong with it. They were used to it, so it didn't bother them. War often ended with the annihilation of the losers. Enslaving the losers was downright kind in comparison.

It took our extreme version of slavery to open everyone's eyes. Americans saw slavery's evils in full blossom and started thinking about its ethical foundations. The Church birthed the abolitionist movement.

Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice. Things refuse to be mismanaged long. Jefferson trembled when he thought of slavery and remembered that God is just. Ere long all America will tremble. — Theodore Parker, Ten Sermons of Religion, 1851

Is there some great evil we're not noticing now? This gets tricky. The bad things we don't object to might not just be things we're neutral to; it can be things we think are good. Not long ago we couldn't have imagined that hunting grey wolves to extinction was a bad thing. Now we can.

We think we're so smart, but we've got a lot to learn.

4 Romans 16:17–20 (NASB)

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting. For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

Sandwiched in between two concluding salutations, Paul inserts this warning. There are wolves among the sheep.

This jumps out because the surrounding passages include lists of “the good guys” that the church in Rome is supposed to greet. It feels like Paul is saying, “Beware of anyone not on these lists.”

But that’s not it. That can’t be it. Still, this warning’s placement gives it frightening emphasis. So, let’s do some profiling. The characteristics of the people Paul says to *keep your eye on* are: *those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned; slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites*; and people with *smooth and flattering speech*.

The first one is interesting because Paul doesn’t say that all *dissensions and hindrances* are bad, only the ones that are *contrary to the teaching which you learned*. Some *dissensions and hindrances* are fine, for example, if they are correcting false doctrine instead of promoting it.

But also notice that simple bad theology is not, by itself, a sign of someone who’s a problem. They need to cause *dissensions and hindrances* to be someone you need to *keep your eye on*.

That seems puzzling but it’s actually quite simple. Anyone can get things wrong, especially new Christians. That’s fine—as long as they’re acting like students instead of experts. But if someone is in the wrong, and also making a stink about it, then, Houston, we have a problem. This gives us two great takeaways. First is, don’t be “that guy.” If you feel compelled to raise a serious issue in the body, double-check your facts first. Quietly get some good advice before going public.

The other takeaway is Paul’s basic point. If you encounter a troublemaker, keep an eye on them—especially if that person fits Paul’s other profile points of being a *slave of their own appetites* or using *smooth and flattering speech*.

The cold truth is that there will always be troublemakers in the church. Fortunately, it’s not the job of most Christians to deal with them. Handling them gracefully takes training.

But it is the job of every Christian to keep an eye on them. That can mean informing someone.

5 Romans 16:21–27 (NKJV)

Timothy, my fellow worker, and Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater, my countrymen, greet you.

I, Tertius, who wrote this epistle, greet you in the Lord.

Gaius, my host and the host of the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the treasurer of the city, greets you, and Quartus, a brother. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith— to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.

What mystery? What exactly is *the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest*? This passage gives us some clues.

Whatever that mystery is, it was *by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations*, and this was *for obedience to the faith*. What could be the thing that was *made known to all nations*, especially *by the prophetic Scriptures*?

One possibility is the expansion of the covenant to all nations (the gentiles). That makes sense. It was definitely a surprise, and it's also one of Paul's favorite topics.

But that can't be it. You can't have the inclusion of all nations be the mystery that was made manifest but then add, "*and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations.*" Including all nations in the covenant involves them being taught. Thus, making it known to them can't also be done separately.

When a passage is hard to figure out, zoom out and look at it all together—especially if it's one long sentence (which is common in Greek). Notice the three times Paul says "*according to*" here.

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel ... according to the revelation of the mystery ... made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment ... for obedience to the faith— to God ... be glory.

This is an outline of the amazingly choreographed (and preplanned by God) sequence of events by which the recipients in Rome came to be "*established*" (included in the covenant).

The mystery is (was) the overall plan of salvation—which is plenty surprising too.

Some of the greatest inventions in history don't seem brilliant to us because we've known about them all our lives. Whoever invented screws was outrageously creative.

But nothing compares to the brilliance of God's plan of salvation. Never lose the awe in that. *To God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.*

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What's the most frustrating aspect of your walk with God?
2. What's prejudices do we still need to get rid of?
3. What evil does our society need to wake up to?
4. How/when does dissension damage a church?
5. Why would God keep that plan secret?

Items for prayer: