

ROMANS

Part 31: “The Great Mystery of the Church”

Romans 16:1–27

By David A. Ritchie

Sunday, November 6, 2022 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, 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. Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 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. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. 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. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you. Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.” (Rom 16:1–27).

Introduction

A few weeks ago, a construction worker discovered an unlikely treasure beneath the floorboards of an old school building in League City, Texas. It was an over-sixty-year-old purse [show image [1Purse](#)] belonging to a little girl named Beverly Williams, who was a student in the school in the 1950s. Inside the purse was a pink wallet that functioned as a time capsule of sorts [show image [2Wallet](#)]. It contained pictures, notes, a handkerchief, a miniature phone book, and even a miniature diary [show image [3Contents](#)].

Admittedly, the purse and its contents contained nothing of monetary value. In fact, for someone living in the 1950s, such a find would be utterly unremarkable. But more than sixty years later, the finding made national news and even captured the attention of the Smithsonian. Why? Because Beverly Williams's purse provides an uncommon view into the everyday life of a little girl growing up in the post-World War 2 United States. Something that would have once been easy to dismiss as inconsequential and unmemorable now became a window into the mysterious past.

I bring this story up because, today, we arrive at the final passage of our study of the New Testament book of Romans. It is a series of final farewells with a long list of names that would be all too easy to gloss over without much of a second thought. However, I want to intentionally avoid that temptation. Romans 16 is every bit as God-breathed as Romans 8, and here too, we find truth that is profitable for us today (cf. 2 Tim 3:16).

So I want to invite us to look into this passage the way a curator at the Smithsonian might look into Beverly Williams's purse. For I believe we, too, can find hidden treasure and unveiled mystery if we have eyes to see.

Romans 16 gives us a type of candid photograph of Paul and certain church members in Rome in the middle of the first century. It provides us with a window into the real lives of real Christians who have gone before us in the faith.

Yet, it is in and through the lives of ordinary Christians that the supernatural power of gospel of Jesus Christ has gone forth. For it is in the lives of ordinary Christians that we are able to behold **"The Great Mystery of the Church."**

As we walk through this final chapter of Romans, we will organize our discussion under three headings: **1.) Final greetings for the church, 2.) Final encouragements for the church, and 3.) Final blessings for the church.**

Exposition

1.) Final greetings for the church

Romans is a book filled with high and majestic theology that unfolds the doctrines of faith, justification, sanctification, and the hope of eternal glory. But we must remember Romans is not meant to be read as a book about abstract, systematic theology. Rather,

Romans is a letter to written to specific people in a specific church. And Romans 16 helps us remember that fact.

In Romans 16, Paul names twenty-nine specific individuals and references several more specific people without directly naming them. But who they?

Many of them are ministry workers and leaders. In this day and age, the church of Rome would not have had access to a room anywhere as large as our sanctuary. Thus, early Christians would meet within larger homes scattered throughout the neighborhoods of the city. In these homes, Christians would share meals together, pray together, study Scripture together, and even sing together. In other words, Paul seems to be naming those who are leading and participating in what our church would call Gospel Communities.

But when we stop to look even closer at these names and the clues that Paul associates with these names, we can see that the church of Rome was embodying a radical new way of life that would have amazed the ancient world.

Roman society was *stratified*, meaning that it had various layers that were distinguished by the amount of power one was able to hold. At the top of the food chain were Caesar and his household. Then came the upper-class aristocracy, who, by virtue of their birth, did not have any trade or vocation other than participating in political debate and social events. Upper-class Roman families were ruled by the *Pater Familias*. The *Pater Familias* was a male Roman citizen who possessed absolute control over his household, including his wife, children, and servants.

Free women had some margin of influence, but in general, women were so lowly valued that their testimony was not admissible in a court of law. Children were utilities, and in many cases, children could be sold into slavery if it was the father's desire to do so.

Slaves were the lowest class of all, and in many cases, slaves came from people groups who had been conquered by the empire and brought into the city of Rome to serve the citizenry. Thus, differences in ethnicity often signaled differences in social class and power.

Within this environment, it is hard to overstate how the early church offered a watching world a new way of life and human community that was impossible and incomprehensible outside of Jesus Christ. Within the Christian community, women found a place of honor among men; Jews found fellowship among gentiles; slaves found a place of belonging and liberty among free citizens. The dividing lines and walls of hostility that define the kingdoms of this world were disrupted by the kingdom of God (cf. Eph 2:14). The church became a colony of heaven within the land of death.¹

Here in Romans 16, as Paul mentions individual names of individual Christians, we have clear evidence that the early church did not only *aspire to be* a radically different

¹ See: Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 12.

community from the world that surrounded it. The early church *was* a radically different community.

Of the twenty-nine names listed in Romans 16, ten are women, and several of these women are even commended as “workers” (κοπιώσας) as and co-laborers (συνεργούς) in the Lord. This means that they were actively ministering and serving within the congregation in a way that was openly acknowledged and appreciated.

Phoebe, the first person mentioned in this chapter, seems to be the very person entrusted to deliver this letter to the church of Rome. She is a servant—literally a “*diakonon*” (διάκονον) or deaconess—in the church of Cenchreae. Cenchreae was a community outside of the Greek city of Corinth, which is the place from which Paul wrote this letter. Yet, out of all the people he could have chosen to deliver this letter, he chooses a woman named Phoebe. And he directs that the Romans receive her with honor. He writes, *“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, 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”* (Rom 16:1–2).

Moreover, Paul also greets several husband-and-wife teams who seem to be engaged in ministry together. We find Prisca and Aquila, also known in the book of Acts as Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 16:1–3) . Paul writes, *“Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 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”* (Rom 16:3–4).

Paul had met Priscilla and Aquila a few years prior in the city of Corinth. They were early members of the Jewish Christian community in Rome, but they had been kicked out of Rome by the Emperor Claudius. They relocated to Corinth, where they met Paul and, together with Paul, started a tent-making business. Soon, they would work with Paul to plant the church in Corinth. And later, they would even help him minister in the church of Ephesus. Now, it appears that they have returned to their home church of Rome, where they even host a gathering of Christians in their own home along with a man named Epaenetus, who Paul says was the first gentile to convert to Christianity in Asia (or Asia Minor). Paul says in verse 5, *“Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia”* (Rom 16:5).

So, putting this all together, Priscilla and Aquila come to Corinth after getting kicked out of their home city. They come to start a business. But instead, they help plant a church. Then they help plant *another church* in Ephesus. And it is probably in Ephesus that they meet Epaenetus (a gentile), and they take him into their own home.

Andronicus and Junia are also listed as those who were “in the Christ” before Paul. In other words, Paul honors the fact that this husband and wife have walked with Jesus even longer than he has. They have even been imprisoned like Paul for the sake of Christ. Moreover, the fact that they are listed as Paul's “kinsmen” (συγγενεῖς) and that they are well known among the apostles shows that Andronicus and Junia came from

Judea, perhaps even the church of Jerusalem. They may have even be eyewitnesses themselves to the resurrected Christ (cf. 1 Cor 15:6)!

Rufus is listed in verse 13, and it is possible that this man is also named in the gospel of Mark, as the gospel of Mark was most likely written in Rome *for* the church of Rome. If this is the case, Rufus would be the son of Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross of Christ up the mount of Golgotha (Mark 15:21–22).

The Roman church also includes names of gentile or non-Jewish origin. Several of these names even come from the pagan, Greco-Roman religion; names like Hermes and Olympas. Yet, those who were once named for false gods are now "in Christ" and a part of God's people.

Paul also names several of the key leaders of the church of Corinth who send their greetings to Rome . Among these names of those with Paul include Paul's disciple and ministry assistant, Timothy. And in another verse, we even hear the voice of one who is not Paul. Look at verse 22: **"I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord" (Rom 16:22).**

Who is Tertius? Tertius is what we would call Paul's *amanuensis*. He is the scribe who writes down clearly and exactly what Paul speaks out loud. But, even more interesting, is the name Tertius. Tertius is a Latin word that means "Third."

Likely, Tertius was born into slavery. His social class was so low that he did not receive a proper name at birth. He received a number, likely based on his birth order. In fact, the man named Quartus referred to in the next verse is likely his little brother (Rom 16:23).

Those who were not deemed worthy of a name according to the standards of the world are now named among the saints of God. And Tertius, the likely former slave, becomes the one to pen one of the most important and influential works of literature ever authored.

The churches of Rome and Corinth were filled with real people like you and me. They were young and old, Jew and gentile, slave and free, rich and poor. Yet, it is through such people the power of God flows and creates something much larger than anyone could imagine.

When I think of Redeemer and our story, I don't think of a building or an organization, I think of names. I think of Seth and Katie Wieck, who hosted the core team of people interested in a new church in their home. I think of people like Andrew Merker and Aaron Reyes, who I met when they were college students and who now are key leaders in this congregation. I think of faithful friends and co-laborers like Jon Michael and Rebecca Jones; Josh and Celia Davis. I think of Kevin and Lisa Mitchell, who risked so much to boldly lead this church through transition and change. I think of Gary and Diann Wilcox and Melvin and Pam Fowler, who faithfully and humbly served this church in the darkest of times. I think of Clyde Israel, who was a Christian and leader in this church, before I was even born. I think of my wife Kate, who has been a consistent

voice of encouragement, wisdom, humility, and compassion for so many for as long as she has been my helpmate in ministry.

I think of Ramona, our first female deaconess in decades, and I think of Wilson Lemiux, the first person to come to faith and be baptized after we became Redeemer Christian Church. I think of Jacob and Becca Cates, who championed our church, prayed for our church, and invited people to this church back when they lived in Albuquerque, New Mexico, well before Jacob became one of our pastors. I think of Velma Douglass, Jim Kendall, and Shelia May who were pillars of this church and are now with Christ.

I think of people outside of this local church, like Pastor Jim Shelbourne of Washington Avenue, who encouraged what was once West Amarillo Christian Church to become Redeemer. I think of pastors like Dusty Thompson of Lubbock, Jeremy Buck of Pampa, and Jordan Elder of Round Rock, who encouraged me and gave me wisdom in my early days of pastoral ministry. I think of J.R. and Megan Favela, who we sent from this church to plant CityLight Church.

Time would fail me to name all the names of those that make us who we are today. But I did name twenty-nine names, and most were from our very first year as Redeemer. And they remind us that through the small acts of humble, faithful people, God has moved and is moving among us. Likewise, it has always been through the small acts of humble, faithful people that the gospel of Jesus Christ has gone forth and reshaped communities, nations, and the fabric of history itself.

2.) Final encouragements for the church

Paul also gives a few brief encouragements and exhortations in this final passage. He encourages the Christians of Rome: *“Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you”* (Rom 16:16).

In Mediterranean culture, both then and now, it is common to greet someone that you know and love with a kiss on the cheek. The heart of his statement is not about the specific manner of greeting. His point is that Christians should remember to treat each other with sincere warmth and affection.

The blood of Christ is more binding than the blood of man. Those who are in Christ and have trusted in the redeeming work of Christ share more than the same beliefs. We are a family of adopted brothers and sisters.

We are to rejoice with one another, grieve with one another, help one another, pray with one another, and support one another with genuine compassion and solidarity. We are to build one another up in love and unity.

For this reason, Paul also pleads, *“I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own*

appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive” (Rom 16:17–18).

In light of what has been accomplished, turn away from anything that would take your focus off the absolute centrality of the gospel. Avoid drama like the plague. Refuse to get swept up into contrive controversies about pet issues, political wars, and the pride of men.

Division is easy, and the world already has enough of it without needing help from Christians. But unity among those whom the world would pit against one another as enemies is a supernatural display of the victory of God over the powers of darkness (cf. Eph 3:10).

This is why Paul will also encourage Christians to know and recognize the supernatural power and hope that flows in and through and among us. He states, *“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. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (Rom 16:19–20).*

There is a supernatural power within the local church and a supernatural hope that we have been given. God's work of redemption is the greatest happening in history is unfolding among us. The serpent that once deceived humankind through the power of sin will be vanquished (cf. Gen 3:15; Rev 12:9). Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ is coming again—and his people will share in his victory.

3.) Final blessing for the church

Paul often ends his letters with a word of blessing and benediction. But here we get something even more. It is what we call a doxology. A doxology is a declaration of God's glory and an exclamation of praise and worship.

The Apostle proclaims, *“Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen” (Rom 16:25–27).*

Here we encounter one of the most interesting words in Paul's vocabulary—the word “mystery” (μυστηρίου). Mystery is a term Paul uses to describe a miraculous union between two opposed and seemingly irreconcilable parties. The two becoming one in marriage is a mystery, as is the union of Christ and his people (Eph 5:32). But here, we find the most common way that Paul uses the word mystery—and that is of the church itself (Eph 3:4, 6, 9). God has revealed himself not only as the God of Israel. He is the savior of all nations! Through the blood of Christ, the promise made to Abraham has been realized. Christ is God's blessing to all peoples of all nations who simply place their trust—their faith—in what Christ has accomplished.

In Christ, gentiles now share union with Jews. In Christ, the church of Rome shares union with the church of Corinth. And two-thousand years later, in Christ, we today share that same sense of mystical union with one another, with our fellow brothers and sisters across the world, and even throughout the ages.

We are a part of the same people as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; as Moses, David, and Elijah; as Peter, James, and John; as Paul, Phoebe, and Tertius. We are participants in the great miracle and mystery that is the church.

Likewise, this doxology reminds us of the divine origin of the gospel itself.

The gospel is *the* apocalyptic “revelation” (ἀποκάλυψιν) of all revelations. It reveals to us the true nature of ourselves, the world, and the purpose of history. The gospel is the intrusion of the eternal God into time—of the Creator into his creation—for the sake of our redemption.

The gospel is not about what we can do to save ourselves—it is the announcement of what Christ has done to save us. That is why the name Jesus Christ is repeated over and over in this chapter and over and over again throughout this book.

For those who have faith in Christ, his righteous life has been imputed to us. His death has removed condemnation. His resurrection and ascension declare our freedom from sin and death. And his promised return is our hope of glory and ultimate redemption.

The God who has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ is the only God who is able to save. He is the God of eternal, transcendent, incomprehensible mystery, yet, in Christ, he has made himself known. He is the author of our redemption, the only wise God, and all things are in him and through him unto him. To him belongs “*glory forevermore.*”

In this final paragraph, Paul is modeling for us the only correct response to all the rich doctrines he has taught us throughout this book. The end of all that has been revealed about God through Jesus is *worship*.

The end of all theology is doxology.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we have eyes to see Christ for who he is, the glory of who he has been revealed to be. May we see the church for who we are and are called to be. May we embrace the privilege of the mission we’ve been given, rejoice in the power of our hope, and evermore worship the God who is our Redeemer.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. *Read Romans 16 as a group. In total, twenty-nine unique names are referenced. These people belong to the church and Rome, and some of them belong to the church of Corinth. Make a list and discuss of some of the names of Christians that have influenced, blessed, and shaped your faith in Christ.*
2. *As you read the final encouragements of Romans 16:17–20, how would you apply these verses to Christians today?*
3. *The final paragraph of Romans is a doxology—a declaration of worship. The end of knowing Christ should be worship. The end of all theology is doxology. What are some of the most important truths you have taken away from this journey through the book of Romans, and how should those truths lead you to worship God in a deeper way?*