

The power of greeting

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Romans 16.1-16

At first glance this long list of greetings towards the end of Paul's letter seems to make for dull reading, like the genealogies at the beginning of Matthew. But we can glean some important things from this passage, as I have discovered particularly from Ben Witherington's book on Romans. (Much of this talk comes from his *Paul's letter to the Romans: a socio-rhetorical commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

Witherington suggests that the people named in this passage are the Jewish Christians in Rome that are known to Paul. Witherington describes the evidence for this carefully in his book. Other scholars, such as Lampe, agree.

Because of an edict of the emperor Claudius, Jews including Jewish Christians, had been exiled from Rome and most likely would have headed east. Paul may well have met the people he greets here, in Corinth and elsewhere in his missionary travels in the east. For example, Epaenetus (v.5) is described as the first convert in Asia.

Claudius, the emperor who had expelled the Jews from Rome, died on 13 October in the year 54 and the Jewish Christians had begun to return to Rome. Paul needed to bring together the Gentile Christians who had stayed in Rome and the Jewish Christians who were returning after Claudius's death.

This part of Romans is addressed mostly to the Gentile majority in the church Rome. It urges them to welcome, to be hospitable to, to build fellowship with, the Jewish Christians in Rome, many of whom were in an uncertain, difficult situation. Paul's wants to help bring about reconciliation or unity among the Christians in Rome before he arrives there. He wants the marginalised Jewish Christians, many of them newly back in Rome from exile, to be embraced.

As this part of Paul's letter was read aloud to a mixed audience of Gentile and Jewish Christians, perhaps those named in verses 3 to 16 were present and were acknowledged.

The word, 'greet' that Paul uses repeatedly this passage, is the verb *aspazomai*. It's a strong word. It means to wrap one's arms around and embrace someone. With the command also to offer the holy kiss (v.16), it treats those named as family.

Paul wants to break down the social classes in the Roman church, as all are debtors to the grace and mercy of God, so that the Gentile majority will treat the Jewish Christian minority as equals and with respect. The righteousness of God is to be mirrored in the righteous and fair conduct of all believers.

The people mentioned are not people the Gentile majority in Rome can ignore, dismiss, minimise, or treat in a condescending fashion. They are important Christians in Rome and are to be fully welcomed, supported, and bonded with in fellowship and mission.

The list shows that Paul himself already has quite a social network established in Rome among these people. Paul himself and his special emissary Phoebe must be received. His authority and teaching cannot be ignored or dismissed.

There are special descriptions of some sixteen of the people, insisting that they are devout hardworking Christians, to whom Roman Christians owe a debt. The number and role of the women is important.

The greeting “all the assemblies of Christ” in the east (v.16) signals their concern for Rome as Paul plans to go there.

Paul encourages practical action to bring together differing groups of people in the church, to acknowledge the authority, gifts and value of all. We must do the same.