

Unity and Diversity

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[0 : 01] And we want to look at this chapter, the main feature shot at this evening, and to see some of the main points that we need to bring out and follow through for ourselves.

I'm sure chapter 16, if we were to ask the question which chapter of Romans would we most readily go to, it would not probably be chapter 16, because it does seem pretty much like a list of names, apart from a few bits on either side of that list of names.

But then when you look into it, as we hope to do this evening, you can see that some of the references that Paul makes to these names, and indeed some of the names themselves, actually tell us a lot about Paul's view of what the church in Rome should be, how they should act towards one another, what sort of quality of fellowship there should be in that church in Rome.

So all things that come across as you just spend a bit of time looking at what he says about some of these individuals and some of the names that he mentions. And then of course also you find at the end there's this doxology, this final ascription of praise to God, but as Paul also often does, he builds into that doxology such a lot of theology, where he brings in the whole issue of God strengthening them through the preaching of the gospel and through Jesus Christ.

So three things really, firstly, the composition of the church, which really takes in verses 1 to 16, and then secondly the vigilance of the church, verses 17 to 20, where he talks there of, and he appeals to them really to be careful and to be on that guard against certain people who would cause division amongst them.

[1 : 46] And then thirdly, the strengthening of the church from verses 25 through to the end of the chapter. So first of all, the composition of the church, and here we come to this list of names, very interesting names actually, because you can divide that list of names again into two subheadings, because what Paul is setting out for us there in the compositions of the church is, firstly it's diversity, but then secondly it's unity.

And when we think about unity of the church, we have to be very careful not to confuse that with a uniformity. Uniformity means everyone the same, or everything the same.

Unity means that you take people who are different, with different gifts and different qualities, different backgrounds, different ages, and by the grace of God they're put together and they are in unity.

They are one in Christ, they are one together, they serve the Lord with that unity of purpose, with that unity of mind, which is why really he's saying, in the second part as we see, the church has to be vigilant about its unity and in its unity against the things which would actually break that unity and lead to dissension and division.

The unity of the unity of the church, the unity of the unity of the church, and the composition of the church in terms of its diversity first of all, just look at the names that are there, let me just point out some of the features of that diversity.

[3 : 13] It's a racial diversity first of all, because he mentions some names that are obviously Jewish names, and then he mentions most of the names there are actually Gentile names. So you have a diversity which to Paul was exceedingly important, as you find from his writings, where the Jewish people were the people of Israel, as they had come to inherit all the Old Testament scriptures, and now that the Gentile world had come to know the gospel, and Gentiles had been incorporated into the church, it's absolutely crucial to the church, it's absolutely crucial to the apostle, that they formed the one church, that they have that diversity, and yet have that unity, even though they are racially distinct and different.

And as well as that you have social diversity as well. You've got names here that are actually slaves. You've got names here that are among the aristocracy, that name Aristobulus, for example.

I'm not going to go through these names, it's difficult enough reading them at one time, but look at verse 10, there are aristobulus, that was a aristocratic name, it appears, from those who know those sort of things.

And so alongside of some who were slaves, some who were servants of others, you have the likes of Aristobulus, who would have been employing people to work for him.

And yet in this list, they are actually placed side by side. There's a wonderful thing that you find in the New Testament. As you find people described by the apostle, and not just Paul, but Peter as well, who are servants and masters, he's a picture of masters, are employers and employees.

[4 : 59] Those who are slaves, and no help not to employ them, and yet when they come to the Lord, they're the same. When they're in the Lord, they're on the same level. When they come to the Lord's table, they sit beside each other. The one doesn't look down on the other, or the other one up to the other, they sit together as equal in Christ.

There is that social diversity, and that's something, of course, that we have to be ourselves aware of. Like I mentioned some time recently, that are we really prepared to have our prayers answered? Are we waiting for our prayers to be answered as we pray to God for people to come into the church? But are we expecting them to be just like ourselves in every way? Are we actually prepared for those who are maybe not in the same social category as ourselves?

Are we prepared for that diversity? Because that's what you have here. That's what you have in this church and home. They are to greet these certain people. They are actually to regard them as equal in Christ.

They are to regard them as having that racial and social diversity, and yet they are together as one in Jesus. And then you've got gender diversity as well.

[6 : 10] Well, gender diversity at least in the sense of male and female. I know that nowadays we're facing a huge challenge when that's been extended into all other kinds of so-called gender variations.

And that we understand and know. I'm sure that it is contrary to the teaching of Scripture. There are just the two, male and female. That's what we are created as.

Whatever other psychological opinions people may have of themselves or of others, physiologically and biologically, that's what we are as human beings. And that's what you find throughout this list of names as well.

There is a gender diversity. There are some who are male, obviously. But then it's very interesting. There are at least nine prominent, influential women in that list.

And that should fill all you women here this evening. But these are actually mentioned specifically as being so valuable to the church. And so valuable in the apostle's esteem.

[7 : 16] Look at how he begins. I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Kenchera. That was near Corinth. That was one of the ports near Corinth.

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.

That's his opening line in this concluding chapter. To welcome this Phoebe. And many people feel from that, reliable commentators feel from that, that this letter was actually carried by Phoebe to the church in Rome.

Which is why he's saying here, I commend this to you too. I commend her to you. And very often in those days, if you carried a letter from one church to another, especially in days when it was so important that Christians protect one another, in order to absolutely be sure that this woman was trustworthy, she would come with a letter of commendation.

And this is Paul's note of commendation. I commend to you our sister Phoebe. But notice what he says about her. She has been a patron of many of myself as well.

[8 : 32] Greek, Prisca, and Aquila. There you find a couple together. I mentioned elsewhere in the Bible as being significant in those days. In the establishment of the church at that time of the apostles.

What is he saying about them? My fellow workers in Christ Jesus. You women here tonight, you may not have the position of being a minister in a pulpit to preach the gospel, but you are fellow labourers for those of us who are.

You are fellow workers in Christ, in the gospel. You have that particular assignation given to you by the Lord himself. That's what he's saying about these people, Greek, Prisca, and Aquila, who risk

their necks for my life.

They are my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. We're not a church that actually just keeps women in a distance, that wants to keep them just doing a menial task. That's obvious from this congregation itself already.

And over the years. And that's something that we have to maintain and build upon. Because not only is he commending Fabie and now Prisa and Aquila, he's saying to them, it's not only I who give thanks for them, but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well.

[9 : 47] You see, what a wide influence they've already had, even in these early days of the church and the time of the apostles, this couple, he's giving thanks for them, along with all the churches that have come to know them.

And he also says, greet the church, also the church in their house. Their house was used as other houses of Christians in those times, where they were used, in fact, for the church to meet there. And this is something that is commendable. And that's, of course, something that while we have no church buildings and are able to meet in church buildings, and, of course, there's nothing wrong with that, although somebody even said to me recently, you know, you just shouldn't really bother with church buildings.

They're far too expensive to maintain. You should just meet in one another's houses. Well, I said, you'll have a problem if you're really going to put everybody in the stormy, if you church into a house. I don't know any houses in the stormy that can accommodate it.

Of course, they meant there are smaller groups in houses, in house church types of situations. That's wrong with having specifically built buildings in order to accommodate the gospel and the people of the Lord in their worship.

[10 : 58] But here are, in those days, people who gave their house. And there would have been many such houses, even in Rome. This is not an idea that the church in Rome was just so small, or whatever, Prisa and Aquila were, so small that they could all fit into their living room or into their house.

What this is really saying to us is that there were lots of these houses when they weren't buildings specifically built for the church. This is how the Lord set about his people gathering together to worship.

That they used their own personal homes for the church to meet in different homes at different times. So you have a racial diversity and a social diversity, and you have a gender diversity.

And you notice, as you go through this, that you see the emphasis a number of times on how they've worked hard. Some of these are mentioned as really how they've worked so hard. And Prisa and Aquila, they risked their necks all my life.

And we're not given any insight as to when that was, or where that was, or how that was, but we know what it means. We know that they put their lives in danger for the apostle.

[12 : 12] For my sake, he said. For me, they did this. For my life. Protect me. They put their own lives on the rest. In other words, these were people who had diverse experiences, and yet they were all committed in their own different ways in the diversity of the church to the gospels.

But then you come to the unity of this, the unity of which Paul really speaks in terms of how he presents this to us. Look at the terms that are used throughout the passage.

For example, he talks about being in Christ, being in the Lord. He speaks about brothers, he speaks about sisters, he speaks about beloved, he speaks about fellow workers, he even speaks about prisoners.

He knows what it's like. But he's actually identifying with these people and they with him. So that they are unified by their various experiences, they are unified by their common purpose in serving the Lord, they are unified especially by their status in Christ.

Every single person in here tonight who is in Christ has the same status of being children of God, of being equally accepted and acceptable to God in Christ.

[13 : 33] Nobody here can say, I've actually been made more acceptable to God than such and such a person is. I can say that and you can say that. We all have that same wonderful level of acceptance of righteousness in Christ, of justification, of adoption, of being given that right to be known as the children of God in God's eyes.

And whatever diversity there is, as there are, as we've seen already, just very briefly, whatever diversity of functions there are in the church, whatever diversity in terms of some having office and

some not having office.

There is no inequality in terms of being in Christ, in being brothers, in being sisters in the Lord, in being beloved to one another, in being fellow workers even with those who are at the forefront or in the preaching of the gospel.

It's all there as a unity. And that's something that's sometimes very difficult to follow through because we all have our own natural tendencies for groupings of different kinds and that's absolutely fine.

There will be groupings of different kinds. There will be young people meeting together. There will be young families meeting together. There will be mothers meeting together. There's all that sort of stuff already in the congregation as you have it in stormy.

[15:01] And there's nothing absolutely wrong with that at all. But nevertheless, it's important to show that the gospel breaks down by the gospel. The gospel brings by the grace of God what is broken to be mended.

And if God, if we're convinced that God is setting about mending broken things, broken people and broken relationships, then that brokenness as it's mended comes to be dealt with in the unity of the people of God together in Christ in the Lord.

And that's actually shown incidentally as he closes that part of the chapter in verse 16. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

And he's saying there all the churches of Christ are greeting you to his own. How important is that to these people in Rome who are really right at the very center of the attention of the Roman authorities.

They're right in the capital of the Roman Empire. They are likely to be very prominent in terms of their Christian standing, prominent at least to the authorities who might want to persecute them and make an example of them.

[16:18] Here's their encouragement. All the churches of Christ greet you. All those known to the apostles are sending you their greetings. Why? Because they're one with you. Because they're unified with you.

Because in Christ they also are with you on that same level of being the people of God. And greet one another with a holy kiss.

He means that literally. It's not just symbolic language. And that's why the likes of what Judas did with the Lord is aggravated by the fact that it was done with what ought to have been a sign of Christian love, of believing love.

Instead, it was hypocrisy. Judas, and he came and betrayed the Lord with a kiss. That's why the Lord said to him, Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?

Are you taking what is the special property of my people in showing their love for one another and are you using that in the deceitful way that you are to betray me? That's what he was doing, getting through to Judas' conscience.

[17:38] conscience. And while many people would disagree with that, we have to be careful in how we set about things, John Murray in his commentary of Romans says that it is not to the praise of the Western Church that this has fallen into neglect.

we show our love for one another with an outward sign of affection. There is nothing sexual in that. There is nothing erotic in that.

There is not that type of thing. It's there to show that together we value one another and we actually have no embarrassment in showing that this is who we are, that we do value each other.

We greet one another with a holy kiss, with a sanctified kiss, with an outward show of affection that the Lord himself approves of.

The diversity and the unity as that exists together. That's what we aim at. That's what we ourselves pray for. That's to a great extent what we enjoy and what we have.

[18:59] But that's why secondly, Paul goes on to speak about the vigilance of the church. I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine you have been taught.

Avoid them. So it's a vigilance of the church against those who would cause division. Verses 17 18 and 18 especially.

Such persons do not serve our Lord Christ but their own appetites and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïves. Maybe not the best word, naive, the innocent, would possibly

be a better word.

what it means is those who are not themselves prone to using guile or that sort of method in their lives and therefore are not really in a position to meet with it in others.

They're caught out if you like because they themselves are not given to using such deceptive methods that use the likes of guile or deception.

[20 : 02] because they've lived their life that way, they are sort of naive in a sense. I'm sure that's why translators use the word, but what it means is that when they meet with something like that in others they're taken aback or they're taken in.

But those who cause divisions, then who are they? Who are these people who cause divisions? And again there's a difference of opinion and commentation over that. It's very useful again to follow John Murray because he says they could have been Judaizers, zealous Judaizers who really wanted as another false epistles as he met with them and as he opposed his apostleship and his ministry that they wanted really to have certain things from the Old Testament reestablished, things like circumcision.

Or they could have been just antinomians, people who just said well the law doesn't count anymore, we don't need to abide by the law, we're free, we're free in Christ, we can do what we please to a great extent.

Well, John Murray says the following, in actual fact both of these views come to pretty much the same thing as summarized there in verse 18, this is what he says, the person jealous for what God has not commanded, soon sets worse store by his own ordinances than by those of God.

That's a really important point. those who would insist on things that God has not insisted upon, those who are jealous of what God has not commanded, soon set more store banning their own ordinances than by what God, than by those of God himself.

[21 : 43] In other words, if we were to insist that things had to be done that God himself does not insist upon and seek to press that upon any congregation or any fellowship or any person, we would be acting destructively, we would be acting divisively, we would be acting in a way as Paul is saying here, causing divisions and creating obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught.

And that's where he says, be on your guard, watch out for such, because not only does he say watch out for them, but he says, avoid them.

Because they're dangerous. For one thing he says, they don't serve the Lord, their own appetites at what they say. That's severe language. Very similar to what he says in Philippians chapter 3, you can check that passage up, Philippians chapter 3 and around verse 18, 19 I think it is, where he says the same sort of thing, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, their God is destruction, their God is their belly, their own sensual appetites, whose end is destruction.

As you find in this same similar sort of language, there's such persons serve their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery, they receive the hearts of the naive against.

things. Now that too is a very important point. You might say tonight, and I'm certainly concerned to say this to you, I'm not dealing with this tonight because I'm aware of any such thing among yourselves, thankfully.

[23 : 19] But then you see that's the danger. When we know that that's not the case, when we know that there's not that sort of pressure in our midst where people want to insist upon what God has not insisted upon, it's actually by smooth talk and flattery that they deceive hearts of naive.

Because error and false teaching doesn't certainly jump out at you and say, here am I in all my glory, here I am, and deal with me.

It comes about very subtly, very craftily, and of course he mentions Satan here, which is very significant, the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. Because that's how false teaching operates, it comes with smooth talk and flattery, and it's particularly so for those who are perhaps unexpectedly facing that sort of thing and are not used to it in their lives.

And this is one of the places, of course, we're very conscious of, places in scripture, we're very conscious of in the diversity and unity that we do enjoy in Christ. That within that diversity you've got people young in the faith, who have just started following Christ, or showing an interest in Christ, showing an interest in the gospel, and coming to attend the gospel, and even coming to a new expression of their faith, and coming to profess their faith for the first time, or just short time.

All of that means that Jesus will see in a minute need strengthening, and we appear surely for that purpose, that sort of purpose as a fellowship. The diversity and the unity that we enjoy are there so

as to guard against division, and to make sure that those who need the support actually get the support, and we nurture, and we direct, and we encourage, and we give positive support to those who need it.

[25 : 22] So it's against those that cause division, but it's also vigilance towards growth and holiness, and that is really important as well. It doesn't just say here, be watchful against false teaching, that's certainly the point he's saying, but he says, 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. What he's saying there basically is that you have to watch towards growing in holiness, just as you have to watch against false teaching and regression.

Verses 19 and 20, he wants to make it clear, just as it is with yourselves. We're not dealing with this in a way that suggests that there's a disobedient lobbying group here that want others to follow, and that's not what it's about.

That's not why Paul is writing in these terms to the Romans. He's saying, your obedience is known to all. You are already this. But he's saying, develop that obedience.

Let that obedience be something that leads to further growth in your part, and that leads you into further holiness and obedience and commitment to Christ. He's saying, I want you to be wise as to what is good, and innocent as to what is evil.

[26 : 50] evil. In other words, be wise in regard to appreciating and having an insight into what is good for you, but also, at the same time, be innocent as to what is evil.

In other words, have no truck with it. Don't actually seek to get as close to it as you can. Maintain the most distance between yourself and it. And Paul, as he says elsewhere, every appearance of evil.

That doesn't mean, of course, no contact with people of the world, otherwise we wouldn't evangelize, otherwise we wouldn't do outreach, we wouldn't have witness. But he is saying, make your association with what is evil one where you maintain your integrity, and where you keep that distance, that innocence with the Lord.

And you can see there, it's interesting, isn't it, that we could do it more fully, but the time's gone. He's mentioning that the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet, and it mentions he good and innocent as well.

And really that's taking your mind back to Genesis 3, where the serpent, where the devil in the form of the serpent attacked and successfully led to the fall of man.

[28 : 13] And the innocence, that they had the innocence toward evil, that lack of any relationship with evil was soon at an end, and they came to know good and evil, which is what the tree was called, the knowledge of good and evil.

And this is really a wonderful reversal of that fall, of that sinfulness into which we fell. Because what he's saying is the God of peace will crush Satan.

that seems, in some ways, people might think, how can that actually fit together? There's the God of peace, and yet he's talking about crushing Satan under your feet. Yes, that's what God is about. When God establishes his people, it's at the expense of evil.

That's at the overthrow of evil. When the world was flooded in the time of Noah, the safety of those in the ark, is something that is accompanied by the destruction of those who are not.

The salvation of those in the ark has, along with it, accompanied it, the destruction of those who are not. You cannot have the salvation of God, of which the Bible mentions, without also carrying with it the judgment of God upon evil, upon sin.

[29 : 36] And he's saying, the God of peace will soon crush Satan, under your feet. He's in the business, he's saying, of reversing what happened in the fall in the Garden of Eden.

Grace is in the business of reversing that, of dealing with it, of correcting it, but doing it in a way that crushes Satan, under your feet.