

The ministry to believers presented by the apostle Paul in his letter to the saints at Rome seems to have been completed by Chapter 15 verse 13. Then his rather personal description of his movements, his aspirations, underlying goals and his current plans give instructive insights into the components of a serious pursuit of God's will if devoted to Christ. He truly had presented his body a living sacrifice to God and had indeed proved what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Romans 12 1,2.).

### Letters of Commendation

The occasion for his letter to the saints at Rome was seemingly trivial. But it provides us a rich example of a normal interrelationship between believers otherwise unknown to each other, of different nationality and culture and widely separated geographically, but one in Christ. This commendation was an introduction of a woman, not some prominent leader in the assembly. She held no formal appointed position but was simply a devoted sister in Christ who had a reputation for serving others in her home assembly. She was not going on a mission for the assembly but had some personal reason to travel to Rome. Since she was going anyway, Paul took the opportunity to write a letter for her to carry to them, there being no reliable postal service then. He asks them to look after her and to assist her in carrying out her business if necessary. Other New Testament epistles also served as letters of commendation, some even for visitors known previously by the recipients. (1& 2 Corinthians, Colossians, Philippians, etc. On the other hand 3John documents an assembly's arrogant rejection of a letter of commendation from another assembly authored by an apostle. Consequences followed.)

The practice of sending letters of commendation protects the receiving assembly from those who would creep in unawares and defile and destroy the assembly, Galatians 2:4, 2Peter 2:1, Jude 4. Such letters not only help ensure against mischief but warmly reinforce the explicit inter-assembly unity of the body of Christ on earth. While each local assembly is indeed the body of Christ in that locale, all of the saints are built together into one house world wide the habitation of God through the Spirit, Ephesians 2:16-22. That unity is honored, celebrated and maintained by simple letters of commendation. Even today, in these last days with the sorrowful divided state of Christendom, the loving practical unity of assemblies of those who call upon the Lord out of a pure (undivided) heart (2Timothy 2:22) is upheld routinely but genuinely through simple letters of commendation.

Next he greeted the saints there, naming some of them, though having never met most of them personally. How did he know them? Of course Christ knows us each personally, but Paul's acquaintance with those he had never met must have come through normal channels, word of mouth and letters. While gossip is roundly condemned in scripture good reports are encouraged and welcomed. Bad reports about other

individuals and even one's own assembly are condoned in scripture only if part of a cry for help, or a warning against danger. Specific warnings were issued by Paul to Timothy and others, 1Timothy 1:20; 2Timothy 1:15; 2:17; 4:14,15. Cries for help were received by both Paul and later John who acted upon them, 1Corinthians 1:11; 3John. These were not malicious but earnest pleas for assistance. We have the responses of the apostles to these cries for help recorded in scripture as a resource for our guidance and use when we are confronted with similar circumstances. But busybodies who simply repeat and spread reports of bad or sinful things they know or hear about others, even if true, are not to be tolerated. (See Proverbs 11:13; 17:9; 18:8; 26:20,22; 2Thessalonians 3:10, 14, 15.) Those who spread such reports are to be admonished and avoided. They defile us and others who hear them and they defame the name of Christ. Sin is to be isolated and dealt with as privately and locally as possible, Matthew 18:15-18. Satan will see to as wide a publication of a believer's sin as possible. Do not help him out.

On the other hand, reports of God's blessings and encouraging reports of the godliness, faith, growth, and activities of others for the Lord are to be freely spread. Needs of those workers and of the ill, bereaved or destitute are to be shared as well. The book of the Acts and the epistles contain many examples of such appropriate communications between believers. Watch for these and adopt and practice them. But don't be a talebearer. Romans 16 is an example, then, of good encouraging reports. Paul gives personal recognition to the faith and works of others in such a way as to avoid inciting pride in one or envy in others. Study these examples.

Clearly the assembly at Rome was viewed as one body though they met in separate locations within the city, probably due to space and distance considerations. They simply met in homes of various believers (saints) there. No separate "church" buildings are mentioned, unnecessary and often impractical if persecution is a factor. Low profile seems to be the norm, as far as assembling the believers. On the other hand note examples of Gospel work in the New Testament. While the gospel might be preached in public meeting places such as Jewish synagogues, and on the street, it was more often through low key personal contacts in homes. In the New Testament we don't read of organized evangelical campaigns, much less use of worldly marketing methods to attract audiences. Yet we have the names here of saints we will meet in heaven, most of them saved through the work of those other than Paul. Some names of those in Corinth where he is writing

from are included as well. From slaves to city officials, men and women, all are saints gathered together unto the Lord's name at Rome, Corinth and Cenchrea. Phoebe was from a distinct assembly at Cenchrea, a small town near Corinth. While each represents the one Body of Christ, the local assemblies are separate entities even if nearby. Cenchrea was apparently near enough so Paul would hear of a sister's travel plans but not so close that a united gathering was practical on a daily basis.

Paul closes his greeting urging an affectionate relationship among them witnessed by a holy kiss (perhaps the equivalent of a warm hearty handshake and greeting in our northern culture). Then he makes a remarkable statement. The churches of Christ salute you. Not just those at Corinth and Cenchrea but worldwide. Can you or I say that? Could I say it even if there were no divisions among the saints today? Paul asserts his apostolic authority and position here. Only apostles could say that. No one can now.

Before closing Paul inserts an urgent admonition. It was not the primary focus of his letter, but the Spirit moved him to warn them of danger. Even while he was sending them this comprehensive ministry of the Gospel the enemy was attempting to make inroads into their unity and faith. These were not introducing immorality but subverting the teaching, the doctrine that had been received by the saints at Rome. The warning is brief and pointed. The action needed is clear, precise and forthright.

Mark them (take heed of)

Avoid them (shun, walk around)

Be wise unto that which is good.

Be simple concerning evil. This warning steers us away from curious inquiry into various non-Christian religions of the world as well as from curious inquiry into deviant immoral behaviors practiced in darkness around us in this present evil world. God spare us from them and the media and entertainment world that publicizes and promotes uncleanness.

We have more comprehensive and detailed ministry on avoiding divisiveness and dealing with schismatic people in the very next epistle in our Bibles, 1 and 2 Corinthians. More is given in Galatians and most of the other epistles.. Satan is the instigator and backer of those who intentionally set out to cause divisions among believers. They are still busy today. They are not the same as those in chapter 14 who seek to walk before the Lord. There we are warned against unintentionally causing division. Here we are warned against those who set out intentionally to destroy.

The God of peace will bruise (crush completely) Satan under our feet shortly. The heel bruiser has already bruised the heel of the Christ, the Son of Man. The head of the heel bruiser will be bruised under our OUR feet? The SEED of the woman is to bruise the serpent's head, Genesis 3:15. Will we also? We also. We will join our Lord and Savior in trampling the enemy under His feet. What a wonderful assurance of victory

over our age old foe. Summing up, we have been saved from the wrath to come. We have been delivered from the power of sin in the flesh. That sin nature will be removed from us and we ourselves removed from this very scene of sin when the Savior returns. The god of this world is the one who rules and uses this world in attempts to woo us from our walk with the Lord. He is the one who plays games with our sinful Adamic nature tempting us to sin. God will bruise him under our feet. If that is true, how can we let him have any influence upon our thinking, our lives now? We don't have to. The victory of the cross is complete. Sins, Sin and Satan all vanquished by the cross. Victory indeed Lay hold of this fact. Worship God! Praise the Lord! Amen!

Paul almost incidently holds out one more tantalizing thought as he closes. There is more! More than he has given them in this letter? Yes, much more. The Spirit here opens the door for the revealing and unfolding of something Paul calls "the mystery." Something kept secret, secret since the world began. Clearly unknown to all who lived from Adam to Christ, unmentioned in the Old Testament and even held secret by the Lord while here, except for two instances after His rejection is assured, documented in Matthew. He then promises to build "my Assembly," 16:18. He also assigns responsibility and the heavenly authority of His name to each local assembly to bind and loose personal sins of those who claim to be Christians, Matthew 18:17-20. (That is, to receive or refuse them at the Lord's table based upon their moral life and doctrinal beliefs.)

The truth of the Assembly has now been revealed and recorded by the New Testament prophets for obedience of faith, by the commandment of no less than the Everlasting God. Do we have an option to accept and obey the truth of this mystery now revealed in the New Testament, particularly in the epistles of Paul? No. Check it out earnestly and persistently. Believe, obey and walk in it together with others who have found the same truth and are seeking to walk in it too. This is Paul's Gospel, made known to all nations, not the Jews only and not to the Gentiles only. All are welcomed through the obedience of faith. The full revelation of the secret is presented in the rest of Paul's epistles. He was singled out by God to be the apostle to the Gentiles and to therefore be the channel for revelation of this mystery to all. Yet he says in his closing hours, "all in Asia have forsaken me," that is, forsaken His Gospel. Don't be one of them.

To God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ for ever!!!! Amen!!!