

The Former Day Saints

by Ray C. Stedman

This closing chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans is a very personal one in which he simply commends his greetings to many of the saints, Christians that he knew in the city of Rome, yet it is a very instructive passage.

I jotted down the notes for this message while I was in Mexico City in my hotel room, and the paper that I was using was the letterhead of the Overseas Ambassadors group. I picked up the paper and saw the words "Overseas Ambassadors," then I wrote underneath it the heading for this study, *The Former Day Saints*. I was struck by the correspondence between the two titles. Here, indeed, Paul was writing to some "overseas ambassadors" in his day and generation.

Many of the names that appear in this chapter were friends of his whom he had met around the Roman Empire. The apostle was writing this letter from the city of Corinth, just south of Athens in Greece. Far across the sea to the west was the city of Rome, the great capital of the empire. Although he had never visited it, he had a great host of friends there because, among the Christians of that day, there were many who considered themselves "overseas ambassadors" and thus carried the gospel of Christ out to the far corners of the earth. It is some of these that Paul writes this letter as he addresses them in a personal way in this closing chapter. These are "the saints which are at Rome" to whom he addresses this letter.

They are called *saints* because they are sanctified people. Now, as Major Ian Thomas so beautifully taught us when he was here, the word *sanctify* simply means, "to put something to its intended and proper use." Here were people who,

- by coming to grips with Jesus Christ,
- by having received the fullness of his indwelling life, and
- by believing the message of the gospel,

had now entered into a relationship in which their whole lives were put to their proper and intended use. That is why they were saints. They were sanctified – being used, at last, in the right and proper way.

Among the many thrills of this week that I have just spent in Mexico City was an opportunity to visit with the Catholic bishop of the city of Cuernavaca, south of Mexico City. I went out there hardly knowing what I might find, but I was tremendously amazed to discover a bishop of the Catholic Church whose heart was as genuinely evangelical and committed to Christ as any Protestant that I have ever met. I was also amazed when I saw the church in which he ministered – an old Catholic cathedral in the city of Cuernavaca. It was built in 1576 and is one of the oldest cathedrals in the western world. When we went inside I was immediately struck by the difference between this and any other Catholic cathedral in which I have ever been:

- All the saints were gone from the walls.
- There was no Virgin Mary.
- All the rich and ornate gold trappings which are usually behind the altar were gone.

For the altar there was simply a plain marble slab around which the bishop and his priests gathered in celebration of the Lord's table. They had simple

stools around the table. There were Scripture verses everywhere.

I learned that this bishop had personally seen to it that copies of the Scriptures were distributed to every one of his people in the Spanish language, that they might read them. And he urged them to carry on worship in their homes. As several of us talked together, the entire subject of our conversation was our Lord Jesus Christ. What a wonderful time of fellowship we had there together!

I also noticed inside the church that there were none of the plaster saints around. I said to him, "Bishop, where are the saints?" He said, "Well, I have taken them down and locked them in the cupboard – now the saints come walking in through the door."

I thought that was a tremendous expression of exactly the truth that Paul is getting at here in Romans 16. Here are the saints at Rome. They were not plaster; they were common, ordinary, plain vanilla people like you and me, but they had been put to the proper use in their lives by an encounter with Jesus Christ. Therefore they were sanctified; therefore they were saints.

In this chapter there are three general divisions which we can briefly note. There is long list here of greetings to the saints at Rome, references to the saints who were with Paul at Corinth, and then it closes with a wonderful dedication from the apostle.

Paul begins the greetings **to the saints at Rome**, Verses 1-16, with a reference to one of the women who had been with him but who had gone to Rome:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well. {Rom 16:1-2 RSV}

We judge from this introduction that this lady was the bearer of this epistle to Rome. They didn't have post offices and mailing systems in those days; they sent letters by the best means possible, by private individuals who were traveling here and there, and this woman was entrusted with this priceless document – to deliver this letter from Paul to the Romans. She carried it from the church at

Cenchreae, a little village south of Corinth, over to the great capital of the Roman Empire.

As she come to Rome with this letter, the apostle urges that they receive her because, he says, she is a deaconess. Don't be confused by that – it doesn't mean that she was an officer of the church. A deacon or a deaconess in the Scripture is never an appointed officer holding office in the way we use the term today. It was, rather, simply a person who was selected to do a specific task – someone who had a job to do – one whom the church had asked to undertake a specific mission. Whoever they were, they were called "a servant" – that was the meaning of the word *deacon* or *deaconess*. She was the one who bore the letter to the church at Rome.

Then he moves on to greet Priscilla, or Prisca, and Aquila:

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks; {Rom 16:3-4 RSV}

If you have read the book of Acts, you know this couple. Priscilla and Aquila were tentmakers whom Paul had met when he came into the city of Corinth. They had been driven out of Rome by an edict of the emperor ordering that all the Jews must leave Rome, and they had come to Corinth and settled there.

When Paul came into the city of Athens, he arrived penniless, discouraged, temporarily defeated in spirit – as he tells us. As he went about this great heathen city, he realized that if he were going to preach he would have to eat. So he sought out the area of the city where the tentmakers lived and arranged to enter into a business relationship with some and made tents – which was his trade. While he was engaged in the business of making tents, he used his profession as his pulpit, and preached Christ. The fruit of that ministry was this couple, Priscilla and Aquila.

We don't know exactly what he refers to when he says they "risked their necks for my life," though later on they lived in the city of Ephesus and it was there that Paul went through the traumatic experience that he later refers to as "having fought with wild beasts in the city of Ephesus," {cf, 1 Cor 15:32}. It was at Ephesus,

you remember, that the whole city was brought to a riot and Paul and the other believers barely escaped with their lives. Perhaps it was at such a time that this couple had risked their lives for him.

They were a mighty influence for Christ wherever they went. Do you notice what Paul says about them here? Greet “also the church in their house.” I think that is remarkable. Wherever this couple went, they soon had a church meeting in their house. (This, by the way, is the proper place for the church to meet.)

In Mexico this week, after the Tuesday morning breakfast at which Ambassador Thomas Mann, the United States Ambassador to Mexico was present, he very graciously invited our entire team over to his house for tea one morning. We went over, and sat down with the ambassador, and talked about the problems of Mexico and the United States. Then he began telling us something about the church in Mexico. He spoke about how the church dominated the landscape and politics in certain areas, but how weak and ineffective it was in its ministry. I said to him,

“Mr. Ambassador, is it not true that when the church is confined to a building, and thinks only of services within a specific center, it is never anything or of any influence at all? But, when the church begins to move out into the homes, and when the gospel is preached in the homes, this is what makes for a powerful and effective ministry?”

And the ambassador said, “Exactly. Unless Christianity is lived in the heart and the home, it is of no use at all.”

This is what spread the gospel throughout the whole of the early world. Christians were not interested in trying to get people to come out to church, but, instead, invited them into their homes. In their homes they talked to them about Christ, and there it was that they won their neighbors to the Lord – and, so, there began to be churches meeting in the homes. In the city of Rome there were probably half a dozen churches meeting like this throughout the city. No doubt they all got together on occasion, perhaps on Sunday in meetings such as we have today, but the rest of the time the church was carried on in the home.

Now Paul goes on, and says:

Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. {Rom 16:5b RSV}

You know, there is something precious about a first baby when it comes into the home. All the preparations that are made for it and the expectation of weeks and months – everybody is holding their breath waiting for the baby to come. With the coming of the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth, it gets rather commonplace – but the first one is wonderful.

Here was the first convert that Paul won to Christ in the province of Asia, where the city of Ephesus is located, and he never forgot him because he was the first fruit of Asia for Christ.

Then we read:

Greet Mary, who has worked hard among you. {Rom 16:6 RSV}

That is all that is said about her, but what a testimony, and what a remarkable epitaph for her!

Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners; they are men of note among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. {Rom 16:7 RSV}

That is rather a wistful note, isn't it? We learn of these two, Andronicus and Junias, probably brothers, who were related to the Apostle Paul, and they had become notable Christians, but he says, “I will never forget when I was a young Pharisee, breathing out threatenings and slaughterings against these Christians, how angry, how terribly disturbed I was when I learned that my own kinsmen, Andronicus and Junias, had become members of this hateful thing.” Yet, it was probably the prayers of these faithful ones, praying for their brilliant kinsman, which was used of God to bring him to that position on the Damascus road whereby he came to know Jesus Christ, himself. Then his attitude toward Andronicus and Junias was tremendously changed.

Then we have a group that are individually characterized for us, in Verses 8-10. He says:

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. {Rom 16:8-10a RSV}

That is a remarkable word there. I think if I had a choice of something written on my tombstone after my death, it would be those words – “approved in Christ.” Think of that! And, for each one, he selects a special word concerning them that is characteristic of them.

Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. {Rom 16:10b RSV}

These ones that he speaks of were doubtless Christians, but what about Aristobulus? He doesn't send greetings to him, only to his family. Perhaps he was not yet a Christian.

And then he speaks of another relative of his:

Greet my kinsman Herodian. {Rom 16:11a RSV}

And that is all he says. It is suggestive here that this man is not yet a believer, and all Paul can say of him is that he is a relative.

Then:

Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. {Rom 16:11b RSV}

Again, here is a group of unnamed Christians whom he greets as a body, but the family head to whom they belong, Narcissus, is not included.

Then we have a delightful duo in Verse 12 that have always fascinated me:

Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. {Rom 16:12a RSV}

These are female names, and I always imagine these to be old-maidish twin sisters. Tryphena and Tryphosa (you'd never name anybody that but twins), who loved the Lord and labored for him, were among those who had never married and yet had devoted themselves wholeheartedly to Christ – and what workers they were for him!

Then he greets the beloved Persis, who is another lady who has worked hard in the Lord. You know, the interesting thing is that, as he goes through this letter, all the women he greets he characterizes as hard workers. I think this is very significant. What would we do without the ministry of women in the church? The men, you

know, are of the “executive” type, mostly. They love to plan. It is the women who do the work; and it was so in the early church. In the first century, these women labored hard carrying out the work of the Lord.

In Verse 13 is another interesting note:

Greet Rufus, eminent in the Lord, also his mother and mine. {Rom 16:13 RSV}

In the Gospel of Mark you will find a mention of this man, Rufus. As our Lord was carrying his cross down from Pilate's judgment hall to the scene of the crucifixion at Golgotha, he made his way through the streets of the city in the heat of the day, and, with the great burden of the cross on his back, he stumbled and fell. The soldiers impressed a man, a bystander, into the job of carrying the cross. His name was given to us as Simon of Cyrene, and this Simon became the father of Rufus. Most Bible scholars feel this is that Rufus mentioned here, the son of the man who bore the cross for Jesus. Simon never forgot that day. It drastically altered his life. Though it was but an incident on that morning, it was the transforming incident of all his life, and his children were raised in the Lord. Evidently Paul knew this home and had often visited it, and Rufus' mother, Simon's wife, had been like a mother to Paul.

Then you have a group of men together that sounds like a businessmen's association. They must have come from the islands of Greece because all their names are Greek. He says:

Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brethren who are with them. {Rom 16:14 RSV}

I don't know what this was. Perhaps it was another of those small churches in a home, or it may have been a business organization – the first Christian Businessmen's Committee, here in Rome!

Then he gives us another series of greetings:

Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. {Rom 16:15 RSV}

Here again is probably another small church in a home that contains both men and women, and it is headed very likely by this man named Philologus. I wonder if perhaps this was his true name. It may

have been a nickname because the meaning of his name is “a lover of the word.” Here is a man who loved the Word of God, and, as such, he has become the center of a group which constitutes a church in a home in Rome. Paul sends his greetings to them, and says,

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. {Rom 16:16 RSV}

Having just come from Mexico, I was struck by the difference in the way people greet one another there. You don’t just shake hands, you embrace. This is a carry-over from the custom that Paul refers to here, of “greeting one another with a holy kiss,” and, among the Christians of Mexico, this is very common. When two greet each other, they have an *abrazo* (embrace), and sometimes I think we have gotten too far away from this kind of greeting. It was such a wonderful expression of true Christian love.

In Verses 17-20, there is a reference to “false saints” who were in Rome:

I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by fair and flattering words they deceive the hearts of the simpleminded. For while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, I would have you wise as to what is good and guileless as to what is evil; then the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. {Rom 16:17-20 RSV}

This is not a reference to Christian believers who had differences of opinion. You remember, he handled that when he wrote in Chapter 14: “Him that is weak in the faith, receive him, but not to the settling of his doubts for him,” {cf, Rom 14:1}. There was to be the manifestation of love despite the differences of background, outlook, and conviction over doubtful matters. They were to receive one another and love one another, even though differing.

But, in every Christian church, there are those who outwardly, and perhaps in many other ways,

appear to be Christians, but are not. They are counterfeit saints. Wherever you find the true, you always find the counterfeit; but Paul says that the counterfeit are evident by three remarkable distinctions:

- First of all, they are busy creating dissension and divisions contrary to doctrine (i.e., contrary to the Word of God). They are preaching and teaching things that are different from what you find in Scripture, or in addition to Scripture. This is always the mark of a counterfeit believer, or a false teacher. They were busy at Rome – as they have been busy in every church in every century since.
- Second, they could be recognized by speaking fair and flattering words:
 - They did not come and speak roughly or so boldly as to disturb people;
 - they came speaking very sweetly;
 - they seemed to be such lovely people;
 - they seemed to have such a desire to advance the knowledge and the welfare of believers;

but there was always something wrong about what they said; it didn’t quite ring true. Paul says that this is a mark of the false.

- The third mark was that they served their own appetites. If you look at what he says here in contrast with what he says about these true believers beforehand, you will notice one remarkable thing:
 - In the case of all those who were true believers, he speaks of their abundant labors for Christ and for one another – they love each other and they serve each other.
 - But the one who is counterfeit is only busy serving his own interests. He is not interested in doing something for someone else, in giving himself or herself completely

for the advancement of a cause for Christ's sake.

- They serve their own appetites and live for their own interests, whatever they may be.

This is the three-fold mark of a false believer – the counterfeit saint.

What did Paul say to do about them? Excommunicate them? Burn them at the stake? No, just avoid them. Don't listen to them. Don't pay any attention to them. Don't give them an audience. Don't let them take your time with their false ideas.

I think this applies well to those zealous cultists who come around so frequently to our doors with books under their arms that claim to be explanations of the Scriptures, but which are so contrary to it in teaching and doctrine. They usually require that you join some organization, or take your counsel from some inspired teacher or center somewhere else. Paul says avoid them – that is all.

As he puts it, I want you to be “wise as to what is good and guiltless as to what is evil” – that is, uninformed, simple-minded (almost), as to what is evil. Don't investigate it. Of course, this doesn't apply in every circumstance; God leads some to investigate some of these sects so that there may be answers given to some of their claims. But, for the usual Christian, he says just don't bother to waste your time with what they have to say. When you do so, the God of peace will crush them under your feet very shortly. God will take care of them.

Remember, when the disciples came to Jesus very disturbed because they had found somebody who was preaching in his name and didn't belong to their group, they asked, “What shall we do with him? Shall we call down fire on his head?” Jesus said to them, “Every plant that my Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone.” {cf. Matt 15:13-14}. Don't worry, God will take care of them. Be concerned with the positive affirmation of that which is true. Give yourself to that which is good in the Scriptures, and never mind these others. God will take care of them.

In Verses 21-23 we have the references **to the saints who were with Paul at Corinth:**

Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen.

I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord.

Gaius, who is host to me and the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you. {Rom 16:21-23 RSV}

This gives a little insight into how Paul wrote his letters. He evidently was dictating his letter to a man whose name was Tertius. Others were in the room as well, perhaps many of the church at Corinth were there with him. As Paul came to the close of his letter, they said, “Paul, will you send our greetings along with yours?” So Paul sends them here.

We see that Timothy, his fellow worker greets them. And there are three of Paul's family there. What an amazing impact the apostle had on his own family! How many of these did he win to Christ himself personally? He sends greetings from Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, all of them his relatives.

Then we have the writer of the letter, the secretary, who, after all has been said, takes his pen and writes, “I Tertius, the writer of this letter, the secretary, greet you too.” The word “Tertius” simply means, “the third.” His brother was there, Quartus, which means, “the fourth.” They had a very simple way of solving the problem of names in those days. The first one that arrived, they called him Primus; the second one, Secundus; the third, Tertius; and the fourth, Quartus; and so it went. They were probably slaves, because this is the way people referred to slaves – they just numbered them.

Then we have Erastus, the city treasurer of Corinth, a man of high position and one who had been won to Christ. He sends his greetings too.

The letter closes in Verses 25-27 with a **wonderful dedication from the apostle:**

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 which was kept

secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about obedience to the faith – to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ. Amen. {Rom 16:25-27 RSV}

Very likely this was written in Paul's own hand. It was his custom, when he came to the end of dictating a letter, to take the pen and write the final words in his own hand. Because he was troubled with dim eyesight, he wrote in large letters, as he tells us in the letter to the Galatians. So he scrawls across the bottom of the letter this beautiful dedication to the only wise God who can strengthen them.

It is God who does the strengthening in our lives, and, Paul says, it will always be along three lines, or by three particular means:

- First, “according to my gospel,” Paul says, “and the preaching of Jesus Christ.” That is, it will be right along the lines that the Holy Spirit has led me to set before you, and no other way. God will not move in different ways in your life than he has recorded in the Scriptures. If you want to know how God will work for you, study your Bible – that is how he will work with you. It is according to the gospel, and along these lines, and above all, “according to the preaching of Jesus Christ, because he is the one whose life, indwelling us, makes possible strength in our experience.
- Then, too, strengthening will be “according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret.” What was the mystery? Simply the mystery that God would call out from Jew and Gentile alike the people who would belong to him and to each other. This is important because, if you are going to be strengthened in your Christian life, it means that it will be in connection with other believers as well. It is impossible for a Christian to grow strong all by himself. We need each other, and we need all the others who belong to the body of Christ. This is the great mystery – as we share together in the life of our Lord Jesus and in each other, we grow strong in the Lord.
- The third principle of strengthening is “according to the command of God to bring about obedience to the faith,” i.e., the final great foundation upon which all our Christian growth and strength rests is the fact that God has set about a task which he will perform. As Paul writes to the Philippians, “being confident that he who has begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ,” {cf, Phil 1:6}.

Yesterday morning in Mexico City we gathered as a team together and asked dear old Dr. F. J. Huegel, well-known author, to bring us a Bible study. Dr. Huegel brought us a masterful summing up of Romans, Chapters 5, 6, 7, & 8, all in the course of about 45 minutes. When he finished, he was commenting upon the closing words of Chapter 8: “We are more than conquerors through Christ.”

Lt. Gen. Silverthorn of the U. S. Marine Corp in Washington was a member of our team during the week, and was sitting just a few places down the table from Dr. Huegel. Dr. Huegel turned to him, and said, “General, perhaps you can give us a little help on what this means – to be more than conquerors. To me it means:

- That, in Christ, we triumph despite everything,
- That even though we fail and stumble, and
- Though there is much of folly and weakness in our experience, nevertheless God has set about the task, and
- That He will bring us through to the place where we are indeed more than conquerors in Christ!

Now, General, can you help us with that?”

I had been watching General Silverthorn as he had been listening to this, and watched his face light up as these truths came home to him, and he just said: “Help you? No, I can't help you. I just want to shout, **Hallelujah!**”

That is what it means to be more than conquerors, because, you see, after all, the work that God has begun does not rest upon our feeble efforts to carry it through successfully, but upon

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his unchanging grace and his eternal commands that he has set about to bring together those who fulfill all the desires of his heart.

Prayer:

How we thank you, our Father, for this word which renews our confidence in you, and reminds us again how wonderfully adequate you are to fulfill in us all that we

long to see and all that you long to have. We thank you for the Lord Jesus who indwells us and imparts to us all that he is. We pray that we may be reminded anew of the love which he has shed abroad over us, and of the blood that he has shed for us, all as a guarantee that he will perform all that he has promised in our lives. May we enter into it, Lord, and experience this in Jesus Christ. Amen.

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