

TO STRENGTHEN THE CHURCH

By SCOTT GRANT

So, why study the scriptures? Why devote 30 or so minutes to exposit the scriptures in a worship service? And why study and preach Romans, as dense a piece of writing you'll find anywhere in the canon?

It's always nice when the scriptures answer our questions. And it's even nicer when the scriptures answer our questions about the scriptures. The apostle Paul, inspired by God to write scripture, answers our questions. In Romans 16 he says he wrote this letter to the Roman church in order to strengthen it. There it is. If we want to be strengthened as a church, we must give ourselves to the scriptures. How might Romans strengthen us? Again, Paul answers our question. In Romans, Paul features, above all, the gospel, the story and announcement concerning the lordship of Jesus Christ. He says God uses the gospel to strengthen us. (Now you know why I've subjected you to a pulpit diet of Romans for the last 18 months!) So, we study and preach Romans, wrestling with its puzzles and embracing its challenges, applying our minds and opening our hearts.

The final chapter of Romans consists of a commendation of Phoebe, who is apparently delivering Paul's letter (verses 1-2), exhortations to greet each other in the church (verses 3-16), a final word of instruction (verses 17-20), greetings to the Romans from those in Corinth who are with Paul (verses 21-24) and a benediction (verses 25-27). Each of the sections at least partially relates to Paul's main exhortation in the letter to accept one another and glorify God with one voice.

Romans 16:

¹*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; ²that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.*

³*Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; ⁵also greet the church that is in their house. Greet Epaenetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia. ⁶Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.*

⁷*Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me. ⁸Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. ⁹Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys my beloved. ¹⁰Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus.*

¹¹*Greet Herodion, my kinsman. Greet those of the household of Narcissus, who are in the Lord. ¹²Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord. Greet Persis the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord. ¹³Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine. ¹⁴Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them. ¹⁵Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. ¹⁶Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.*

¹⁷Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. ¹⁸For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting. ¹⁹For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil. ²⁰The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

²¹Timothy my fellow worker greets you, and so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. ²²I, Tertius, who write this letter, greet you in the Lord. ²³Gaius, host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer greets you, and Quartus, the brother. ²⁴[The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.]

²⁵Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, ²⁶but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; ²⁷to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

Commendations and greetings

The list of names in verses 3-16 reflects Paul's purposes for writing the letter to the Romans. He wrote to the Roman believers about the gospel so that they would accept one another, particularly across ethnic lines, and that, as a unified church, they would be able to support him in his efforts to plant the gospel in Spain. He therefore encourages the people whom he knows or is aware of to greet each other. Although both Jewish and Gentile names are represented in the list, Paul is indiscriminate in his respect and affections for the people in the church. The exhortation to "greet one another with a holy kiss" is akin to the major exhortation of the letter, which we can never revisit too much: "Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us, to the glory of God" (Romans 15:7).

Verses 3-16 also reflect Paul's desire to establish a rapport with the church. He has relationships with many of them, who would be able to commend him and the gospel that he espouses. We must never forget that ministry is about people. If we're serving with people to bless people, we must not forget the people with whom we're serving. If we're simply using them to achieve a goal, we discredit the entire enterprise. One of my ministry principles is that good ministry comes out of good relationships. I have always made sure that the ministry teams I have led included a relational emphasis among the team members.

In reporting that "all the churches of Christ greet you," Paul wants the Romans to see themselves as part of the larger gospel movement, which is worthy of their support as he takes it westward. Peninsula Bible Church is an independent, non-denominational church. We're not the only game in town, or in the world. We're part of something larger than ourselves. A monthly meeting of local pastors from different traditions helps us stay connected to the larger church in our area. Outside our area, our partnership with Anglican Bishop Azad Marshall of Pakistan and his ministry is one of the more exciting connections to surface in recent years. We're neither Pakistani nor Anglican, but the gospel has advanced through our partnership with Azad.

Paul's list of names is noteworthy for three other reasons. First, it reflects the intense relationships that Paul had with believers in the Mediterranean world. Paul notes elsewhere how the gospel creates these kinds of relationships (Philippians 1:3-11). If you just focus on relationships, you may find them to be wanting. Serving with brothers and sisters in Christ is one way to deepen your relationships. Second, the Gentile names in the list were mostly used by slaves or slaves who had been freed. The gospel at this time in Rome is finding a hearing with the lower class. We must not forget the poor, and we must remember that they are often more receptive to the gospel than the rich. Third, women are well represented in the list and are noted for their leadership. In fact, more women than men are mentioned in connection with church leadership. The church, to its own diminishment, has not always appreciated the leadership gifts of women. I believe it is to our church's advantage that half of its pastors are women. As a pastor at this church, I have been enriched beyond measure by the women pastors with whom I have served.

Watch out for dissensions

Paul's general exhortation in verses 17-20 specifically echoes his instruction in Romans 14:1-15:6 that believers in the church accept each other. He urges them to look out for, and turn away from, false teachers of any kind. But a false teacher who exploits the tension between Jews and Gentiles, in particular, would be likely to cause "dissensions and hindrances."¹ Most Gentiles in the Roman church felt free to eat anything. Some Jews, in the interest of adherence to the Mosaic Law, abstained from some foods. Paul carefully navigated his way through this sensitive issue by essentially siding with the Gentiles but at the same time urging them to be sensitive to their more conservative brothers and sisters. In his discussion concerning tension in the church, Paul spoke of serving Christ through a willingness to sacrifice personal freedoms (Romans 14:18). Now he warns his readers about potential false teachers who are, literally, "serving" not Christ but their appetites, a description that fits someone who exploits differences concerning food.

The Romans, like all believers and every church of believers, should watch out for false teaching with an eye toward their particular vulnerabilities. Those who employ "smooth and flattering speech" are far more likely to win an audience with people who are already predisposed to believe what is being espoused.

Paul's exhortation to resist false teachers is rooted in the reputation of the gospel. Word has spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean about the Romans' obedience: their initial response to the gospel and their ongoing allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. If they were to succumb to false teaching, the reputation of the gospel would suffer. Until now, however, they have given Paul reason to rejoice, and he has already expressed confidence that they will continue in obedience (Romans 15:14).

Again, the exhortation to be "wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil" is a general one with specific echoes from the previous context. Goodness must embrace wisdom so that it resists false teaching and remains separate from evil; otherwise, evil may overcome good, at least in the short run, in contrast to Paul's appeal in Romans 12:21: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." The words "good" and "evil" found their way into Paul's teaching in Romans 14:1-15:13, so a specific application of his general advocacy of wisdom and innocence in verse 19 would be to the tension between Jews and Gentiles (14:16, 20, 21; 15:2). On the one hand, if we embrace

the wisdom and goodness of God, we will be able to ward off the influence of those who would create factions. On the other hand, we will be able to be peacemakers in the church when disagreements arise.

The gospel proclaims that God has defeated both evil and Satan, the chief perpetrator of evil, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Within his purposes, God allows Satan limited dominion. But the victory of God means that Satan's doom is sure. In fact, his doom was sure from the moment he appeared on the scene. After sin entered the world, God told Satan, represented by the serpent, that the seed of the first woman would "bruise you on the head" (Genesis 3:15). Now Paul tells this vulnerable little church, struggling for survival in the capital of the greatest superpower the world has ever known, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." This is gospel language. The seed, or descendant, of the woman is Christ and his people. The fighting is strong, but the end is in sight. When we overcome evil with good, and, more particularly, when we work at accepting each other for the sake of God's glory, we are anticipating the final victory of God.

There will be disagreements in any group setting, including a church. If the unity of the church is God's witness to the world, one would expect God's enemy, Satan, to foment disunity. Disagreements are normal, but we must beware of those people, either within or without, who would exploit disagreements in order to create factions. If we need to know our weaknesses, we must admit that we're vulnerable to such exploitation. Something powerful within us is drawn to conflict. We can be thankful for this, because we are in this world to fight Satan, whose name means "adversary." All you have to do is watch one episode of any of a dozen daytime television offerings to know that humans are easily drawn to the wrong kind of conflict. Even if we're not in the middle of a fight, we usually enjoy observing one and rooting for a party. We love a good fight. We may love a bad fight even more than a good fight. If we choose up sides and duke it out in the church, the reputation of the gospel suffers.

Not long after becoming a pastor, I accompanied two other pastors who were invited to mediate a dispute that had surfaced between two groups in another church. The living room where the meeting was to take place looked as if it were set up for a congressional inquiry. Microphones were positioned everywhere. The former friends who no longer trusted each other wanted to make sure every word was recorded. The apparent differences were theological, but as the meeting progressed, it became evident that the issues were deeply personal. The two visiting pastors valiantly tried to mediate a peace. One admonished them that the reputation of the gospel was at stake and told them, "You will make peace!" But it was not to be. The wounds, anger and mistrust were too deep. Perhaps the outcome would have been different if there had been perceptive men and women in the church who were able to bring the wisdom and goodness of God to bear when the disagreement was in its early stages. By the time the outsiders were called in, the sides were too entrenched.

Just as the Romans pleased Paul, our church, I think, would give him every reason to rejoice. Like all churches, we've had our issues. We have our issues. But the gospel, and the unity it inspires, has remained central. Paul, I think, would express every confidence that Peninsula Bible Church will continue in obedience. Nevertheless, we should still keep our eyes out for those who would cause dissensions and hindrances.

How God strengthens his church

Paul finishes his letter where he started, using many of the same words he employed in Romans 1:1-17. But he's not simply repeating himself. Between his introduction and conclusion, he has articulated his breathtaking vision of the gospel. So now his introductory words take on their full meaning.

In Romans 1:11, Paul expressed a desire to visit the Roman believers and impart to them his vision of the gospel so that their church would be strengthened. He sees his letter as a substitute for his presence. Whether he is present or absent, Paul recognizes that the strength of the church is dependent on God. But he knows that God is able to strengthen it.

He also knows what God uses to strengthen it: the gospel, further defined as "the preaching of Christ." The gospel, the story and announcement concerning the lordship of Christ, is the "power of God for salvation" (Romans 1:16). So, what has Paul done in this letter? He's preached the gospel. He's preached Jesus Christ. He's told the story. He's made the announcement. If Jesus is Lord and if he's returning to make all things right, then everything, no matter what we're going through in the present, is going to be fine. The knowledge that Jesus will make all things right should strengthen us for whatever we must endure until that day.

Furthermore, the gospel reveals "the mystery": the inclusion of the Gentiles and the coming together of Jews and Gentiles.² The Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the prophets, partially revealed the mystery. Now, in light of the gospel, even the Hebrew Scriptures reveal that the coming together of Jews and Gentiles was in God's plans from the beginning.³ Finally, the gospel commands the universal "obedience of faith": the obedience that consists of faith and the faith which issues in ongoing obedience.

This is the gospel that God uses to strengthen his church: the gospel which preaches Jesus Christ, which reveals the ancient plan of God to save and unite all people, and which commands universal obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The strength of our church is dependent on God. Nevertheless, I have to fight off the tendency to believe that it's dependent on me. On my worst days, when I think the church is dependent on me, I'm afraid I don't have what it takes. Thankfully, I don't have what it takes. No one does. The strength of the church is not dependent on me or on any other person. If it were, then it wouldn't be dependent on God, and it would be destined for dust.

One of the strengths of this church is that it has always believed that its strength comes from God. One of the hallmarks of the ministry of Ray Steadman, the church's first pastor, was his insistence that we depend neither on him nor ourselves but on God. He refused to be the senior pastor. He shared the pulpit. He built into others who preached the word, both in this church and elsewhere. He built into Steve Zeisler, who has served here for some 35 years. He built into pastors who built into me. In two weeks, Paul Taylor, who was nurtured here as a college student and as a recent graduate, will preach for the first time since becoming our college pastor. And so it goes.

Dependence on God, of course, does not mean that we don't do anything. It means that we do what he wants us to do and trust him for the results. One of the things we do—one of the things we must do—is preach the gospel. I preach Christ. It doesn't matter whether I'm preaching from the Hebrew Scriptures or from the New Testament. Jesus told some of his countrymen who wanted to kill him, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, but it is these that speak of me" (John 5:39). I

preach the life, death, resurrection and reign of Christ. So I aspire to preach Christ into the church and into your lives. I can't strengthen the church. Only God can. And God strengthens the church through the preaching of the gospel.

We might think of the gospel as the recording that the church plays. The recording, though, is also like one of those discs that cleans your player. As a church, we play the gospel for all to hear, and the gospel also cleanses us and helps us to function well.

The gospel also reveals “the only wise God”—and that God, only, is wise. No one could have conceived of the gospel, let alone implemented it. The God of the gospel is worthy of worship. That's the point of the last three verses of Romans. Paul's conclusion echoes his introduction in order to remind us of all that he has written about the gospel, which reveals God's faithfulness to rescue the world through Jesus Christ. He thereby brings the force of the entire letter to bear in one final flurry so that we might worship the only wise God and no other.

God is worthy of “glory,” or worship. Worship is where humanity, both Jews and Gentiles, went wrong (Romans 1:18-3:20). The gospel restores us as worshipers. But individual worship, or even collective worship by similar people, is not the aim of Romans. Paul is aiming for Jew-plus-Gentile worship based on a common faith. If there is one God, he desires one family (Romans 3:29-30).⁴

To the only wise God

Do you see what the gospel does for us? Do you see how God uses the gospel to strengthen the church? The gospel—the story and announcement concerning the lordship of Jesus Christ—makes us worshipers, restores us as worshipers and unites us as worshipers. The gospel demonstrates more than anything else that God is worthy of worship. So we study it, teach it and preach it. We study, teach and preach Romans not simply to know more about the gospel but to worship the God of the gospel.

At the end of a performance that you enjoy, what do you do? You applaud. You praise the performers. What do you do when you get to the end of Romans, the letter that has changed the world more than any other? You do what the author did as he finished writing it. You praise God. To the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

June 3, 2007

Discovery Publishing © 2007, the publications ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. To receive additional copies of this message or a tape (a complete catalog is also available) contact: Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA 94306. Phone (650) 494-0623. Fax (650) 494-1268. www.pbc.org/dp. We suggest a 50-cent donation per printed message to help with this ministry. Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE (“NASB”), © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995, 1996 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

¹ The word translated “hindrances” would be literally translated “stumbling blocks.” Paul has already spoken about stumbling blocks in the context of Jew-Gentile tension in Romans 14:13, 21.

² Paul uses the word “mystery” elsewhere in speaking of the Gentile participation in the people of God (Romans 11:25, Ephesians 3:3-9, Colossians 1:26-27). When Paul uses “revelation” language in Romans 1:17 and 3:21, it's in the context of the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles.

³ The prophets promised the gospel (Romans 1:1-2). The righteousness of God—the saving activity of God in Christ, which the gospel reveals—was “witnessed by the Law and the Prophets” (Romans 3:21).

⁴ Romans 16:27 echoes the three key verses from the main exhortative section of the letter, Romans 14:1-15:13. Romans 16:27 reads: “to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever.” Paul employed the words “God,” “Jesus Christ,” “glorify” and “glory” in Romans 15:5-7: “Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.” God is glorified in the Roman church when he is worshiped by Jews and Gentiles together.