

The passage Romans 16, 17.18. --recently the center of so much discussion and controversy-- must be understood in the context of the entire chapter, and the chapter must in turn be compared with the other endings of Paul's epistles. Beissman's and Julicher's theory that this chapter of salutations was directed to the congregation at Ephesus has been completely abandoned. It is an integral part of the letter which Paul addressed to the church in the capital city, to announce his forthcoming arrival there. The recommendation of the deaconess Phoebe introduces the long list of salutations that begins with the greeting addressed to Aquila and Priscilla and the church which regularly met in their house. The many names which then follow (names which are Greek and Latin, and which for the most part have been shown to be names of slaves) seem by their very order to point to other congregations that met in private houses, e.g. verse 15 ("Salute Philologus and Julia Nereus, and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints that are with them"). Zahn gives the details in his Commentary. Some commentators have spoken of a kind of migration ("Voelkerwanderung") which is supposed to have taken place in order to bring so many Christians to Rome. Actually, however, there was a very active movement between East and West also in the Church, as we know from the fact that the church of Rome was known for its hospitality (see Ignatius' Epistle to the Romans, the Abercius-Inscription etc). "All roads lead to Rome," even the ones on which Paul and Peter traveled. The long list shows that Paul was well briefed as to the Roman congregation. It furthermore shows that he possessed a list or lists of his congregations and of individual Christians, ostensibly for use in private intercession, a kind of beginning of the later diptychs (the lists of those for whom prayers were desired which were used in the individual congregations, and such as have also made their appearance in modern times since the German Kirchenkampf (the fight against the pro-Nazi "German Christians" inside the German State Church).

After these greetings there follows the exhortation to "greet with the holy kiss," such an exhortation as we find also at the end of 1 & 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians and 1 Peter. The "philema hagion" ("the holy kiss") still is practiced in the liturgies of the East and West. Thus the "missa fidelium" (the communion liturgy) in the Eastern church begins with the Creed, which is introduced with the exhortation to the "holy kiss" with these words: "Let us love one another (agapesoomen, here meaning: let us kiss one another) so that we may confess in the unity of faith..." In the Western liturgy the Pax (the greeting: "The Peace of the Lord be with you alway") follows the Agnus Dei before Communion. This holy kiss (which gave pagan enemies opportunity to raise the slander that immorality was practiced in the church's private service, that is, in the celebration of the Lord's Supper) -- the holy kiss is a part of the order of service of the liturgy. These specific exhortations make sense only if they were given to the assembled congregation before the celebration of communion; that means that in practice an apostolic epistle was read as the word of the Apostle of Jesus Christ before the celebration of the Sacrament. So these greetings addressed to the ~~xxxxxxx~~ congregations in question, --be they greetings of the apostle or of the other churches-- receive this meaning that by them the fellowship of all churches, of the entire Church, is expressed. The parallel that exists between Romans 16 and 1 Corinthians 16 makes that clear. This parallel, however, even goes farther. [Where the fellowship of the church is expressed, there also the boundaries of this fellowship are drawn. The "Pax" (the greeting: "The peace of the Lord be with you alway") is followed by the "Anathema", that is by the declaration that certain definite persons are not included (in that fellowship), that they should not commune, by the establishment of ex-communication*, by the warning to such as cannot partake of Christ's Body. And those are not addressed who stand "outside", that is, those who don't belong to the Church at all, but rather those are addressed who raise the claim of belonging to the Church without being recognized by the church.] The cry which one hears in the Eastern church

*Translator's note: by "ex-communication" Sasse evidently does not mean declaring the person a heathen and a publican but, etymologically, "un-fellowshipping", declaring the end of church fellowship, of communion.

before Communion: "The holy for those who are holy" (the oldest form of which is referred to in the Didache 10,6: "Whoever is holy, let him approach, but whoever is not holy, let him repent.") --that cry is the positive form of the (negative) Anathema. [The Anathema of 1 Cor 16,22 addresses itself against such who do not love the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, certainly against those who love themselves more than the Lord and who by their lovelessness are splitting the church, as it happened in Corinth. Romans 16,17f is the exact parallel to this with only this exception that in Romans "divisions and offenses" that have arisen because of false doctrine are referred to. Who the heretical people were, the Romans congregation certainly knew.] The great anxiety which Paul expresses in 15,31 ("that I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judea and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints") point to the fact that the heresy has to do with those Jews who were seeking after his life. On all of his mission fields the Judaists followed him; they wanted at the same time to be Jews and Christians, who indeed saw in Christ the Messiah that was to come, but demanded the keeping of the Law besides. One must understand the unbounded rage of the Jews whose synagogues Paul and the rest of the Apostles had decimated, in order to completely understand Paul's anxiety of Romans 15,30ff. And remember: many of the names mentioned in Romans 16 are at the same time names of martyrs who fell in the persecution under Nero, a persecution which was instigated by the Jewish synagogues. But the Judaists who play such a great role in the Epistle to the Galatians, as well as in Philippians 3,18ff and Colossians 2,8ff the "enemies of Christ", who destroy the Gospel of sola fide (by faith alone) and sola gratia (by grace alone). The Judaists in the Epistle to the Colossians appear to have the characteristics of Asia Minor gnosticism, while Paul in his Pastoral Epistles must indeed attack "knowledge falsely so called" (1 Tim. 6,20: gnoosis) and its "antitheseis:oppositions" (the title of a book which seems to have been used before Marcion); and this is the same heresy against which John had to fight, the docetic denial of the Incarnation, which not only is ejected from the church but which puts an end to even personal association and even greeting (similar to the synagogue's "greater ban"; for details see the excursus in Gillerbeck's "Commentary on the New Testament From the Midrash and Talmud", Vol IV and John 9,12). One should compare Romans 16,17f's "avoid" (or, to translate it better, "go out of their way") with 2 John 10ff ("If there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed, for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds").

The Judaistic heresy and the Gnostic heresy are the two big heresies of the New Testament era. Both are a denial of Christ under the guise of honoring Him. Both appear also outside of the New Testament in significant connections. The people who later influenced Mohammed were, it seems, very probably Jewish Christian sects of gnostic tendencies. Therefore there isn't much point in asking: Which "doctrine" then did Paul have in mind? Whatever it was that these heretics that he is talking about taught -- in any case it was a denial of the Gospel; whether it was now the Judaistic denial of Christ's work, which easily goes hand in hand with an adoptionist, Ebionitic Christology, and thus includes the denial of the Incarnation -- or whether a further development must be thought of: in any case heresy is always a denial of Christ, even if the heretic doesn't want that; and the heretic is always one who does not serve God but rather his own belly (Romans 16,18; Phil 3,19) which serving-of-one's-own-belly can be done in a gross manner or in a fine manner: in a gross manner, when, for example it happened in Germany that a theologian who received two calls to different faculties drove from one church headquarters to another, in order to, so to say, make them "up the anti" -- or "serving-one's-own-belly can be done in a less conspicuous, fine manner, when, for instance, it is universally the case that the "Holy Ghost" calls men always into better-paying positions. This "serving-one's belly" is the danger not only of the out and out heretic, but of all preachers of the Word (as the commissioning sermon of our Savior in Mt 10 already shows) but especially this serving-of-one's-belly is the danger of the smooth-talking, false teachers whose teaching and life stand under the power of Satan (Consult Romans 16,20 and compare the Antichrist in 1 & 2 John).

What is said in Romans 16,17f is, first of all, said to the congregation in Rome, but it applies to the whole Church which reads the Epistle to the Romans. It is nothing else than the warning against heresy which endangers the Gospel and denies Christ which is and ever must be ejected from the church. Romans 16,17f is the ex-communication which formally follows in the Communion liturgy where it is made clear who belongs to the Body of Christ and so has fellowship with the Church (such to whom the Pax-greeting is addressed) and who does not (such to whom the anathema is addressed). The fact that the ex-communication stands at this point has deep significance. We are actually dealing with the oldest traces or beginnings of the Communion Liturgy. This is shown by the liturgical formulae with which the letters which Paul addressed to the congregations close: such greetings as "the grace of our Lord Jesus be with you!" or in its trinitarian form in 2 Cor 13,13 ("The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost be with you all!"). Even today in the liturgy of the Eastern churches the dialogue between people and liturgists before the Preface begins with this "apostolic greeting" instead of with our familiar "The LORD be with you." It is very noteworthy that the "Marana tha; the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (1 Cor 16,22ff) is repeated exactly at the end of the Apocalypse where we read: "Come, Lord Jesus; the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." That the Marana tha belongs to the Communion liturgy is attested to by the liturgy of the Didache (10,6).

If these observations are true --and it can hardly be contradicted that Romans 16,17f belongs to the context which has just been explained--, then the word of Paul can only be applied in the sense in which the Apostle used it. It is a word which is directed against heretics, against every heresy which destroys the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Such heresies are the great heresies of The Ancient Church; and also the great heresies which are rejected by the "condemnations" of the Book of Concord are meant as well as the false teachings of our day such as rationalism, liberalism and the great sects of the present. It is a very earnest question whether one can use this passage to bolster the breaking of church fellowship with Lutheran churches. Certainly it can be used if a church has either in theory or in practice voided our Lutheran confessions. A church which calls itself Lutheran and yet has fellowship with the false doctrines that are rejected in our confessions would cease to be an orthodox church. That is the case, as far as I can see, with the churches which have joined in church fellowship with the United (Unitierte; united Lutherans & Reformed, as in Prussia), the Reformed and Anglicans, or with those who have made common cause with the World Council of Churches in its present-day form --where it has become the main tool in unionism, because the recognition of groups like the Quakers and Baptists as Christian brothers contradicts the concept of the Church which is taught in the New Testament (in Ephesians 4) and therewith also the Seventh Article of the Augsburg Confession. In such cases the heresy is a proved fact. But there are also other Lutheran churches, in which the case of heresy is not yet so clear, where one must practice Christian patience until the heresy is clear. The Lutheran territorial churches and national churches of Europe have become guilty of heresy in this way that they tolerate false doctrine both as a matter of principle and as a matter of practice. No Lutheran pastor in the VELKD (the smaller, Lutheran group inside the larger, Reformed-Lutheran federation called the EKiB) can be brought to account, if he teaches calvinistically. In such cases the word applies: "Avoid them."

As far as I can see, inside the Church of the Synodical Conference one cannot speak of the toleration of such heresy. The charge which Wisconsin makes against Missouri is then also surely not a charge of heresy, but rather of lax doctrinal discipline and of difference in church practice, which may well lead to heresy. It is always a very earnest question for every church, how it will deal with any heresy that breaks out in its midst. That applies to every church, including Wisconsin, for in every church false doctrine ever again breaks forth. It would have served the cause of making the situation clear if Missouri had declared what one should think about certain Romanizing tendencies of high-church minded pastors, whether perhaps here the limits of legitimate restoration of the Old Lutheran Divine Service had been overstepped and what the church had done to recall the erring before a real application of church discipline would

without the earnest attempt at reclaiming the erring brethren or at -in an orderly manner- putting them in church discipline, could justify the charge of heresy. The charges which Wisconsin feels itself justified in making against her sister church lie (if I see this correctly) not in the realm of doctrine but in the practical application of doctrine. It can be that two churches which otherwise stood in fellowship cannot see eye to eye in questions of practice. Then it is possible to suspend the fellowship*. But the final decision that the other church has become heretical, can only be announced when the practice which is looked upon as false has actually led to the toleration of heresy and this heresy can be clearly defined.

Such a suspension is the only possibility as long as the other church has not ~~been~~ been convicted of ~~the~~ false doctrine (solange die andere Kirche nicht der Irrlehre ueberfuehrt worden ist). The application of Romans 16,17 would be a formal ex-communication and would place the church which it strikes on the same level with the great heresies of church history. If such a declaration of ex-communication proves false, even though it was made in good faith, then the church in question makes itself guilty of the græevous sin of causing schism, of ~~tearing~~ tearing the church apart out of lack of love. If one only ponders how carefully the Ancient Church and the Church of the Reformation, yea even the orthodoxy-period church of a Calov handled such declarations, then that must be an earnest admonition to us today not to overhastily apply Romans 16. For God will not leave the church which commits this sin of causing a schism without its punishment. Certainly finally it will be a matter of decisions of conscience. But as Lutherans we should remember that such a decision must be based on a clear word of God and not on perhaps a false interpretation of a Scripture passage. More than that, we should remember what a danger there is in this that we perhaps forget that we see the mote in our brother's eye and do not see the beam in our own eye. Every decision of this sort can only be made in the spirit of repentance to which the Spirit in Revelation 2 & 3 calls the 7 churches of Asia and therewith also the entire Church.

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*Translator's note: What Sasse envisions seems to be indicated by a parallel expression: "suspend the Synodical Conference", that is, because of the great differences only go so far as to stop the organizational working-together, but not necessarily halting all church fellowship, i.e. all joint use of the means of grace at altar and pulpit, transfers, baptism sponsorships etc.