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Q&A#139 What Spiritual Nutrients are in the Tops and Tails of Paul's Letters?

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Today's question: "Do you have any broader comments on the personal greetings and instructions at the end of Paul's letters and their significance? Of course each one is unique, but I wondered if there's anything we can draw more generally from their presence and recurring patterns."

I reference an essay from Richard Bauckham's 'The Gospel for All Christians' in this episode: <https://amzn.to/2YaqNQo>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, do you have any broader comments on the personal greetings and instructions at the end of Paul's letters and their significance? Of course, each one is unique, but I wondered if there's anything we can draw more generally from their presence and recurring patterns. I think there definitely is, and there are a few

lessons that could be brought to mind by these passages.

I'll list just a few here. Perhaps the first and most important thing is the connection between Paul's teaching and a theologically informed practice. When Paul writes at the end of his letters about gathering a gift for the saints in Jerusalem, for instance in Romans when he's on his way to Jerusalem to bring a gift that he's collected for them, there is a connection with his theology.

That practice is informed by his conviction that the Gentile Church owes a debt of love and gratitude to the Jerusalem and the Judean Church more generally. Reading that, it helps us to understand that his teaching about Jews and Gentiles within that book of Romans is not just abstract theologizing, but it's something that's informing a very practical mission. The practice of collecting this gift for the saints in Jerusalem is a means by which he is expressing the unity of the church in the gospel, a unity that is theologically grounded in all the teaching that he has in Romans, and then practically expressed and formed, forged through such practices as gathering gifts from Gentile churches for Jewish churches in need.

The theological teaching that he has then is not detached from a very concrete practical approach to creating the united church that he speaks about theologically within his letters. It's very easy to think about Paul's theology as this very abstract theoretical thing when we detach it from the practical mission work that he's engaged in in the final chapters of his epistles, where it reveals that often he's teaching these things to spur people on to a practical end. Gathering a gift for the saints in Jerusalem or preparing for a mission to Spain.

These theological teachings are the groundwork for practical mission. And if we detach those two things, as we're often tempted to do when we top and tail the gospels as if they were vegetables to be placed in a stew and you don't want the top or the bottoms, that's missing a lot of the force of Paul's teaching, which is always practically driven. Another thing that we can see is the shape of the churches in the early church, that these churches are part of a network of churches.

When you read the end of Paul's letters, you see the fact that these churches are so deeply connected with each other. Paul has not been to Rome, but he already knows many, many people in Rome because the church is this tightly connected body of different communities. Michael B. Thompson, in an article called *The Holy Internet*, in a book, *The Gospel for All Christians*, edited by Richard Borkham, talks about the way that the church is bound up in these large networks where people are constantly moving to and fro on business trips, on mission trips, whatever it is.

But there's a lot of travel within the ancient world, the Roman roads, the Roman Empire and the security that that provided for. That allows for a lot of movement between these churches within the empire. And the communication that exists also bolsters its mission

because it's a mission of witness.

When you consider just how closely connected these churches are, it helps you to understand the strength of the apostolic witness and mission. Because no person in any church would be more than two steps removed from one of the original witnesses of the resurrected Christ. It helps you to understand why these communities were not very detached communities that grew up in their own corners.

Rather, they were highly integrated movements. It was a highly integrated early Christian movement with people moving to and fro all the time. And when you consider that, it also helps you to think a bit more about questions of ecclesiology.

Very often when we think about the church, we can focus upon the local church and lose sight of this large integrated network of churches beyond that. The outward looking face of each local church as it relates to its neighbours, as it relates to other churches within the region and then as it relates to other churches beyond. It can also help us to stop thinking merely of the epistles as texts.

The epistles aren't just texts, they're material objects. They were letters. They were letters written to specific recipients.

And again, this is connected to Paul's theology. When Paul writes a letter to a particular church, he does not intend that that letter would remain with that church alone. Rather, he expects that that letter would be passed on to other churches along with ministers of that church.

So the church, one church will send Phoebe and Phoebe will bear the letter to Rome and she will deliver that to the various churches in Rome and maybe perform the letter before them. And then he'll send the letter with someone else, some minister that he's going to send to work in a group of churches, maybe Timothy or Paphroditus or some other character that's being commissioned with this task of bearing this letter. But it's also bringing news of the wider movement within the city from which they've been sent, being an expression of the love of the church that has sent the minister with the letter and helping to build a movement that's connected.

That isn't just lots of isolated churches, but the letter writing and letter sending with ministers encourages lots of movement to and fro between these churches. These churches are not isolated then, nor are they unknown to each other. Rather, they are sending ministers to each other and sharing the good gifts that God has given to them.

They're also sharing their own example. When Paul writes to the Corinthians, he is writing to the Corinthians about all their problems, about all their gifts, about all the ways that God has blessed them as a particular church. And he's writing to them, expecting them that they will share that letter with others.

All the dirty laundry that is brought out in that letter is something that other churches are expected to read. The churches in Galatia, the churches in Rome, the churches in all these various parts of the world are going to be reading the letter that has been sent to the Corinthians. And they'll see all the problems that they have with the misuse of spiritual gifts, with sexual immorality in their congregation, and how Paul teaches them to deal with those issues.

And what the Corinthian church does as they share that letter, they will send on one of their ministers with the letter and they'll be sharing some of the gifts of ministry that God has given to them. They'll be forging a bond with particular other churches that they have sent their letter to. But they'll also be sharing their own example, their own example for good or ill.

They have certain lessons that they need to learn. And those lessons are not just lessons that the Corinthians need to learn. They're lessons for churches in other parts of the world too.

The Galatian churches need to learn these lessons too. And so they can take the Corinthian example and learn from that. When we think about Paul's theology again, we should not see it to be detached from his practice.

Paul as a letter writer is connected to Paul the missionary who's trying to bind together this early network of churches. In the same way, Paul the theologian about God's work in this culmination of all these promises and this bringing in of the Gentiles into the commonwealth of God's people, is not detached from Paul as the guy who's gathering together a gift for the Jerusalem church from Gentile Christians. These things are all connected.

In the same way, the Paul who teaches about the members of the body and their respective gifts, and the way that God gives through specific members of the body to the whole body, and that one body, one member of the body, their gift is a representation of the one gift of the Spirit to the whole body. That's the same principle that drives Paul's letter writing. So he writes for the Corinthians so that the Corinthians can give their particular experience, their particular gifts, their particular example, as a witness and a gift to the rest of the churches.

And through that to form a body of various churches that are connected at a level that's beyond just the local level. So you don't just have a network of churches in Corinth itself, a network of house churches and groups of Christians meeting together in private locations. Rather, you have this broader network of churches across the Roman Empire who are in communication with each other and giving their example to each other, expressing their love for each other in material support and sending missionaries and various gifted members to various parts of the world.

So there's a sense that we can learn an ecclesiology from these texts, a way of seeing the message bound up in practical action and also bound up in the organisation of a body of Christians, that this is not just a network of people who are rooted in a local location, a certain locality, but they are in contact with Christians across the world. And other Christians are rejoicing when the Thessalonians, for instance, their church is thriving. Other churches can hear that news and praise God for what he's doing in that place.

There is a way in which we all rejoice as one member of the body prospers and all mourn and weep and suffer when a member of the body is suffering. And that applies not just as individuals within specific bodies of Christians, but as churches, as part of a wider worldwide or empire wide communion. This is, again, something that I think we see in the conclusion of Paul's letters.

We also have a window into a movement with lots of different social networks, people moving to and fro. I know I've mentioned this already, but different types of contacts. So people who have status within the society, influence, business people who are moving from city to city, people who have a particular family that hosts the church, patrons of the church, people who have positions within ruling houses, people who are gifted men and women within the church that we have a sense that this is not just a movement of the big apostles, but there are people working on the ground and gifted people who are both men and women working in domestic, working in, working in public and other sorts of positions and offices and contexts.

And this is not just a movement that's defined by the 12 apostles and characters like Paul who are moving from place to place. There are people who are rooted in specific locations and God has chosen to record their names in Scripture too. There's also the way in which these ends of books will often include benedictions and blessings and doxologies that we will repeat at the end of our services.

You have that at the end of places like Romans will have this great doxology praising God for all that he has done, praising God for his character in these truths that have been revealed. So I think there is a great deal that we can gain from these thinking about books as more than just texts, recognising that the material form in which Paul gives his teaching as letters that are sent from church to church by messengers, that that practice, that particular form of medium is one that is chosen in part because it serves the purpose of forming a body of churches that are connected together. This is not just an abstract culture of texts in ivory towers where people pour over these texts.

These are urgent letters that are written into specific occasions and they are giving the examples of specific churches as examples for the churches more generally. Paul speaks of his own example being given to the Corinthians, an example that as he follows Christ that other people will be benefited by his example. Likewise, both in negative and

positive senses, we have the examples of the Corinthian church, the Galatian church, the Ephesian church, etc.

And each of these characters, each of these groups, as they learn their lessons, others can learn lessons through them. This, then, is one of the many things that I think we can learn from the end of those books of Paul. I would also recommend that we consider the implicit ecclesiology that this might encourage us to, of churches that relate in formal, at least very strong, informal bonds to other churches beyond them.

That as churches, we need to have a sense of belonging to a wider movement than just our locality. And that's one of the ways in which, for instance, certain forms of polity that have an episcopal structure or some sort of Presbyterian structure, they'll try and have some structure that connects churches to churches beyond just the immediate locality. There's an outward looking emphasis to their ecclesiology.

So we're not just focusing upon the local congregation. Within other churches, they'll have different means of doing that. So if you go to a Baptist church, often they'll have various confederations or they'll have some sort of fellowship that they're bound up in, in either regional location or more broadly throughout the world.

This is an important part of our ecclesiology. And I think we do see some of that within these final chapters of Paul's epistles. It gives us a window into a church that is connected across localities, not just in a specific location.

Thank you very much for listening. There's a lot more that could be said on this. If you have any comments, please leave them in the comments on YouTube or in the comments beneath my SoundCloud account.

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