

A Picture of the Church

Romans 16:1-16

In some ways Romans 16 appears to be one of the least-interesting chapters of the New Testament. It consists mostly of Paul's greetings to a long list of people in Rome. At first glance that doesn't seem to offer much that would interest us today inasmuch as the names are hard to pronounce and even harder to spell. Paul sends greetings to people with strange names like Ampliatus, Urbanus, Tryphaena, Asyncritus, Stachys, Epaenetus and Phlegon. To make matters worse, we don't know who most of these people are because most of them are never mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament.

Everyone who has ever written a letter understands what Paul is doing in chapter 16. He's basically finished everything he wants to say to the Romans, but since he has lots of friends in the church, he scribbles off a few lines of greetings to as many people as he can fit onto the parchment. The chapter brims with personal relationships that reflect Paul's love for people and the love of Christ which permeates the church.

Seen in that light, this chapter offers us a rare snapshot of early Christianity. Behind this list of unpronounceable names stands a bedrock truth about the nature of the budding Christian movement and why it had the power to change the ancient world.

Beginning at Romans 15:14 we have come to the final section of this great epistle, and that here we are privileged to obtain a more intimate glimpse into the personal life of Paul. We are indeed reading Paul's mail in chapter 16 as well. Verses 1-2 are commendation of the one who would bring the letter to Rome, 3-16 constitute words of personal greeting; verses 17-20 are final words of warning; verses 21-24 contain the greetings of those with Paul; and verses 25-27 conclude with a benediction of praise.

What we have here in Romans 16 is a snapshot the church. If we examine it closely, it may teach us something about what our church ought to be like. And the individuals greeted here can motivate and encourage each of us to be the kind of church members that God wants us to be. Here in Romans 16 We learn that *he church is made up of ordinary, diverse people who know the Lord, who are growing in Him, who serve Him, and who love one another.*

Effective ministry begins and ends with people. In this section Paul rattles off a list of individuals and groups that have directly or indirectly impacted Paul.

1. Commendation of the Church's Servant (Rom. 16:1-2)

The apostle begins with a commendation in 16:1-2:

1 I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea,

2 that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.

Most scholars think that Phoebe was the one who carried the letter to Rome. This is why Paul commends her to the church at Rome, so that they would receive her and help her in her business there. She was probably a single, wealthy business woman (she was a “helper” or “patroness” or “benefactor” of many, including Paul). Her name comes from Greek mythology, and so she was probably saved out of a Gentile pagan background.

The real question in these first two verses which arises with the mention of this woman is the reference to her as a “**servant of the church.**” Some would see her as a deaconess holding a formal office of the church. In fact, this passage is one of a very few biblical texts which are sometimes employed to substantiate the church office of deaconess.

I don’t think that I could draw that conclusion from this text alone. The word here translated “**servant**” is the Greek word *diakonos*. And although it is the same word used in 1 Timothy 3 referring to the office of a deacon, the word itself is a very general term. It is used throughout the New Testament to refer to those who serve in many different ways. Out of approximately 30 occurrences of this term in the New Testament, 27 instances of *diakonos* are employed in the non-technical sense of a ‘servant’ or ‘minister’ or ‘one who serves.’ In only three instances does the technical sense emerge, and this with reference to the church office of a deacon (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8, 12).

Here in Romans 16 the context requires nothing more than a servant in a general sense. So the NKJV renders a good translation as “**a servant of the church in Cenchrea.**” In verse 2, she is referred to as a helper of many, and of Paul. This does not require her to be a formal church officer. And biblical principles that Paul taught in his other letters would prohibit a woman to fill any church office in which she would exercise authority over men (cf. 1 Timothy 2:12; 1 Corinthians 14:34-36). Historically we do find deaconesses in the post-apostolic church in the second century, sometime later than the New Testament period.

So I do not think that Paul is teaching here that there is a church office of a deaconess. What was Paul doing? **First**, Paul was honoring faithfulness in service. **Second**, he was honoring the service of a woman. **Third**, Paul was endorsing this woman and urging the church to come to her assistance, in whatever form that might need to take. Paul is hardly the chauvinist some today accuse him of being. He was a man who appreciated faithful service, who commended it, and who encouraged others in their service to the saints.

Even if she did not hold an official position of leadership in the church, the work of this woman Phoebe was a vital service to the body of Christ. Not only Paul and the church at Cenchrea, but all of us are indebted to her for her faithful service to the church. Without God using her faithful service we may not have this wonderful letter to the Romans.

So because of her service to the church, Paul includes in his epistle a personal word of commendation. He exhorts the saints in Rome to receive her and minister to her in a way which is befitting to those who name the name of Christ (v. 2).

2. Greetings to the Church (Rom. 16:3-16)

In 16:3-16 Paul moves from a commendation to a formal series of greetings. Who are all these people?

I thought you'd never ask! Actually, we know little about most of the names listed other than what can be pieced together historically. Some information is an assumption since single names are used, with many of the names common to the Roman world. Yet there's pretty good biblical, archaeological and historical evidence that clues us in on several of the characters listed. I will comment on them in these groups:

(1) Fellow workers in Christ (vv. 3, 6, 9, 12)

First, fellow workers in Christ. We begin with the notables.

3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,

4 who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.

We first encounter this married couple who lived in Rome but were expelled when the emperor Claudius kicked all the Jews out of the capital city in A. D. 49. They were tentmakers, so they decided to ply their trade in Corinth. While there, Paul had left Athens for Corinth and needing to replenish his resources, teamed up with these fellow tentmakers. In the process, Paul disciplined them while working and living with them.

Their living was mobile so they went to Ephesus with Paul, and while there, they teamed to further instruct the eloquent Apollos more accurately in the biblical gospel. At some point, they returned to Rome, establishing a church in their home just as they had done in Ephesus. No wonder Paul calls them "fellow workers!" Evidently, while in Ephesus when the whole city rioted over Paul's preaching of the gospel, this couple readily risked their lives for the apostle. The term he used, "risked their own necks," is taken from the common Roman execution by lopping one's head off at the neck with an axe. We don't know the circumstances but it was significant enough for Paul to call attention to it. He believed that apart from their putting their lives on the line for the apostle that he would have been stopped in his missionary work.

The other workers are mostly unknown to us:

6 Greet Mary, who labored much for us.

9 Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ

12 Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, who have labored in the Lord. Greet the beloved Persis, who labored much in the Lord.

Urbanus is a very Roman name, one common in the area. Tryphaena and Tryphosa are probably twin sisters whose names, ironically mean, "delicate and dainty." Isn't it fitting that delicate and dainty ladies are forever enshrined in Scripture as dependable workers in the Lord? Could that characteristic describe you?

Then there was also "**the beloved Persis, (another woman) who labored much in the Lord**" (v. 12). And "**Mary, who labored much for us**" (v. 6). The word "**labored**" is the kind of work that makes you weary but you keep pressing on.

Did they work to take the gospel throughout the city? Did they work to show hospitality to the saints? Did they work to provide resources for Paul's missionary labors? Did they work to care for the sick, bereaved, and those in prison for the sake of the gospel? Whatever they did, we now know them as Christian workers. The gospel calls us to work, not for our salvation but because of it.

I want you to notice that women are mentioned prominently in this chapter. More than one-third of those who are mentioned are women. It's especially interesting that the four people (Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis) described as **"laboring"** (*kopiaō*, "working hard to the point of weariness") are women. That should come as no surprise to those of us who serve in the church. Women have often been the most faithful church members and servants. Women are incredibly important in the community of faith. Regardless of your understanding of women in ministry, please honor and appreciate the women in the church.

(2) Beloved (vv. 5, 8-9)

5 ... Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ.

8 Greet Amplias, my beloved in the Lord.

9 Greet ... Stachys, my beloved.

"Beloved" is a term of affection, expressing that such a one is much loved and appreciated. Epaphroditus was loved by Paul as the first convert to Christ from his area. Amplias was loved in the Lord. This name has been found on an elaborate monument in the oldest catacomb, the cemetery of Domatilla in Rome. Scholars point out that since there was only a single name on the monument, Amplias or Ampliatius was probably a slave. But since he is buried in Domatilla's cemetery, there is additional significance since she was a woman of great rank in the city. Maybe he rose up, in spite of being a slave, to serve as a leader in the church at Rome. He could have laid down his life for the gospel in the time of Nero. We don't know the details but only that Paul considered him beloved in the Lord, just as he did **"Stachys my beloved,"** about whom we know nothing. Do you hold dear others in the body of Christ? Does your affection continue to grow as you get more involved with others in our church?

(3) Fellow prisoners (v. 7)

7 Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.

Paul tells us several things about this couple. First, they were Jewish believers living in the capital of the Gentile world, so Paul called them **"countrymen"** or "kinsmen." As **"fellow prisoners"** it means that they suffered the same fate as Paul in being imprisoned for the gospel, although we don't know where or when this took place. These believers were willing to be imprisoned for the gospel of Christ. Do we have that kind of devotion to Christ and His gospel? Paul also says they were **"of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me."** That can mean they were notable to the apostles or that they were notable as apostles, with the use of apostle not referring to the Twelve but to a broader use of the word for those blazing a trail for the gospel in planting churches. Perhaps

they were even relatives of Paul who believed in Christ before him and were known to the apostles in Jerusalem.

I want you to notice how couples served the Lord together. Priscilla and Aquila (16:3-4) were willing to risk their necks for Paul. Andronicus and Junias served in prison with Paul (16:7). Both of these couples ministered together as dynamic duos (notice the emphasis on the word “fellow”). Their marriages were for the purpose of ministry. If you are married, is your marriage a ministry? What will you do to ensure that you and your spouse are focused on Christ and serving Him together? If you’re single, I urge you not to get married unless your future spouse will be a complement to you spiritually. If he or she doesn’t share your passion for Christ and your desire to serve Him, don’t marry that person. Continue to wait on God.

(4) Singled out (vv. 10, 13)

Two figures are singled out in an unusual way.

10 Greet Apelles, approved in Christ. ...

The term “approved” means that after being tested or tried the individual is found approved. It was the same term used for determining the genuineness of gold. If, after testing the metal, it proved to be the real thing, it was stamped with a ‘Delta’ for dokimos or approved. So this brother encountered some kind of trial and came through with a clear testimony of dependence upon the Lord. He serves as an example of perseverance in the faith.

Verse 13 brings us to a man that likely was more widely known in Christian circles.

13 Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine.

Though the name was not uncommon in the Roman world, the fact that Rufus is identified in Mark 15:21 is significant. In that passage, Mark explains that Simon of Cyrene who was compelled to bear the cross of Christ was the father of Alexander and Rufus. Mark penned his gospel particularly for people around the city of Rome, which seems to be the primary rationale for identifying the sons of Simon of Cyrene.

Paul calls him “**chosen in the Lord**,” Simon of Cyrene, his father, was chosen from the hundreds that lined the street watching Jesus that day in Jerusalem. Yet God had him chosen. Perhaps it was seeing Christ crucified and later learning about his resurrection that brought Simon to faith. In the process, Rufus also came to faith in Christ, as did his mother, whom Paul cherished as his own mother. Some scholars think that the Alexander identified in Acts 20:33 as standing up for Paul against the mob, may have been the other son of Simon. If so, Paul would have received care from the kindness of Alexander and Rufus’ mother while in Ephesus.

Rufus’ mother (16:13) served as a mother to the apostle Paul. You may be a widow or a woman who is unable to have children of your own, yet that doesn’t mean that you can’t be a mother. There are many children and even adults that need a mother’s care. Please consider pouring your time, energy, and wisdom into the next generation of believers.

(5) Slaves in royal circles (vv. 10-11)

Two households and one interesting name likely point to those still in slavery but faithful to Christ.

10 ... Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus.

11 Greet Herodion, my countryman. Greet those who are of the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.

Aristobulus was the name of Herod the Great's grandson, the brother of Agrippa and Herod, and friend of emperor Claudius. Commonly, when someone died and left his servants to another, particularly to the emperor, they would have been known by their original owner's name. So in this case, the household of Aristobulus may have been the slaves that belonged to Aristobulus but left to Claudius upon his death. Herodian identifies with the family of Herod as well. Narcissus, was significant as a wealthy, powerful freedman who had great influence with emperor Claudius. Due to his power, when Claudius died, Agrippina had him put to death before her son Nero ascended to the throne. In this case, his slaves or household would have retained Narcissus' name and be passed to the emperor.

In other words, through those in slavery the gospel began to penetrate the household of Caesar. When Paul sends his epistle to Philippi from his Roman prison, "**those of Caesar's household**" especially sent their greetings (Phil 4:22). The gospel penetrates from slaves to aristocracy.

(6) Those in union with Christ (vv. 3, 7-13)

I'm not going to read these names again but just want to point out that Paul did not tire of identifying his fellow believers as those "in Christ Jesus . . . in Christ . . . in the Lord." Jesus Christ was at the center of these relationships, and due to this centering of all in Him, every believer is special to one another.

(7) Churches meeting in homes (vv. 5, 10-11, 14-15)

A church met in Prisca and Aquila's home, also (implied) in the homes of Aristobulus and Narcissus, as well as in the homes of those listed in vv. 14-15. Scholars point out that ancient homes could handle upward of 30-50 people in their homes for the church gathering to worship, pray, exhort, hear the Word expounded, fellowship, and break bread together. They had no church buildings, but they faithfully gathered and dispersed as witnesses to the gospel of Christ.

Why did God inspire Paul to write down all these greetings? There are at least four reasons:

1. ***To show us that God cares about individuals and knows them by name.*** God loves people deeply. Jesus Himself is the Good Shepherd of His sheep, whose "**sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out**" (John 10:3). If Jesus cares so much about people, we should as well. This week why not memorize the names of ten people in your church family?

2. ***To demonstrate that God keeps records on His people, noting the areas in which they have given faithful service.*** Many of us have visited the Pearl Harbor memorial, the Vietnam Memorial, or the memorial for the 9/11 victims. We

often honor people for their sacrifices by including them in earthly memorials. Well, God honors faithful people by including them in His Word, which will never pass away (Matt 5:18).

3. To show us that people of all backgrounds, race, social status, and education are of equal importance to God and to His church. In this list of people Paul includes singles, married couples, widows, and widowers. He greets men and women, slaves and social elites, new Christians and mature believers, Greeks, Romans, and Jews. He has met some in prisons, some in synagogues, some in marketplaces, and some in churches. This list depicts God's diverse heart for His church. It depicts a taste of heaven!

4. To highlight the importance of family affection. Paul urges the believers to **"greet one another with a holy kiss"** (16:16). This command is mentioned four times in his letters. However, it was not the cultural custom of the Greeks or Romans to be physically affectionate. Instead, a Roman greeting would be to clasp forearms with a stranger or friend. Paul's implied expectation seems to be that believers should be more affection with one another than with those outside God's family. On any given Sunday there are people in our midst who are devastated by life's trials, are feeling lonely and beaten down by the world. We need to show them Christ's love.

None of the people listed in Romans 16 were famous or powerful in the world's eyes. None of them knew that their names would be enshrined in Scripture for millions of Christians down through the ages to read. Even though our names will never be in Scripture and none of us will probably be recognized or remembered by the world, God knows your name and you are important to Him. He sent His Son to rescue you from sin and judgment. He has given you an important role to play in His kingdom purposes. It may be to be a loving homemaker and to rear your children to love and follow Christ. It may be to set a godly example as a loving husband and father. It may include serving in some capacity in the local church or in the cause of world missions. It may be to tell your neighbor the good news of Jesus Christ and to explain to him (or her) how he can have his sins forgiven and go to heaven.

Whatever your gifts and calling, the most important thing is that you know that Christ has saved you from eternal judgment because you have put your trust in Him as Savior and Lord. Then look for ways that you can serve the Lord, as these people did.

William Barclay observes (*The Letter to the Romans* [Westminster, rev. ed.], p. 220), "It is a great thing to go down to history as the man with the open house or as the man with the brotherly heart. Some day people will sum us up in one sentence. What will that sentence be?"